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Digital Unionism and Mental Health of Young Workers: Reconnecting Collective Participation and Occupational Safety and Health in Labour Law

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Abstract

The digitalisation of work is transforming not only working conditions but also the ways in which workers exercise collective voice and participate in workplace decision-making. The article examines whether digital unionism can strengthen young workers' participation rights and contribute to the prevention of psychosocial risks affecting their mental health and well-being. The research primarily adopts a legal-theoretical approach, complemented by normative and comparative legal methods, to examine the relationship between collective labour rights, digital forms of worker organisation, and psychosocial risk prevention, with particular attention to young workers entering increasingly digitalised labour markets. The article argues that meaningful participation should be understood not merely as a collective labour right but also as a potential mechanism of psychosocial risk prevention, enabling workers to exercise voice over workload, autonomy, surveillance, and other conditions affecting mental health. The phenomenon of quiet quitting (QQ) is further examined as a possible manifestation of weakened worker voice and organisational participation. The article concludes that digital forms of collective participation can contribute to reaffirming the protective function of labour law by strengthening young workers' capacity to influence the conditions in which their work and professional identities develop.

Keywords: young workers; digital unionism; worker participation; psychosocial risks; mental health; occupational safety and health; labour law

1. Introduction: Young Workers, Collective Voice and Mental Health in the Digital Workplace

Digital transformation is reshaping not only how work is performed but also how workers interact with employers, colleagues and representative institutions. Digitalisation, algorithmic management, remote and platform work, and data-driven managerial control challenge established forms of collective labour rights, particularly workers' capacity to influence working conditions and exercise collective voice in increasingly individualised workplaces.

These questions are particularly significant for young workers entering the labour market. Young workers have historically experienced lower levels of trade union membership and representation than older workers, a pattern that cannot be explained solely by generational attitudes, but is also associated with changing labour-market structures, reduced exposure to trade unionism in the workplace, and the concentration of young workers in sectors and forms of employment with weaker union presence and representation

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(Vandaele 2012, 2018). On the other hand, recent scholarship further demonstrates that young workers should not be regarded simply as passive recipients of union representation, but also as active participants and agents in union organising, mobilisation, and collective action (Blanc 2026). Rather, the challenge concerns the capacity of trade unions to develop forms of participation and organisation corresponding to young workers' changing working lives and forms of communication.

Digital technologies may provide new possibilities in this respect. Social media and other digital communication technologies enable trade unions to communicate with workers beyond traditional workplace structures, facilitate recruitment and mobilisation, and create new forms of interaction between workers and their representatives. Research on British trade unions' youth sections shows that social media is increasingly used to engage young workers, although its interactive potential remains unevenly exploited (Hodder and Houghton 2020). Recent research also examines digital labour groups as emerging industrial-relations actors, highlighting their potential to create new spaces for collective voice and participation (Yao and Frangi 2026).

In this article, digital unionism is understood not merely as the use of digital communication technologies by trade unions, but more broadly as the use of digital technologies and digitally mediated practices to organise, communicate with, mobilise and represent workers, and to facilitate new forms of collective participation and voice (Carneiro and Costa 2022). This broader understanding raises the question of whether digital engagement can translate into meaningful worker influence and strengthen collective representation in increasingly fragmented and technologically mediated workplaces.

The emergence of digital unionism therefore raises a broader question for labour law: Can digital forms of collective participation renew the protective function of collective labour rights in workplaces in which traditional forms of worker organisation are becoming more difficult to sustain? This question becomes particularly important when collective participation is considered in connection with occupational safety and health (OSH) and the prevention of psychosocial risks.

Psychosocial risks are a central concern in contemporary OSH. Excessive workload, low autonomy, job insecurity, inadequate organisational support, work–life conflict, surveillance and organisational injustice can undermine workers' mental health and well-being. Young workers may be particularly vulnerable because limited organisational power and experience can constrain their ability to identify and challenge harmful working conditions (Zlatanović 2026). A systematic review confirms the relevance of psychosocial work factors to young workers' stress, burnout, anxiety, depression-related complaints and fatigue, while highlighting gaps and heterogeneity in the available evidence (van Veen et al. 2023).

Against this background, worker participation acquires significance beyond its traditional understanding as a mechanism of industrial democracy. Participation may constitute an element of psychosocial risk prevention because it enables workers to influence the organisation of work and to communicate concerns concerning harmful working conditions. Recent empirical research indicates that insufficient worker participation is associated with multiple psychosocial risk dimensions, including quantitative and cognitive demands, influence at work, control over working time, social support, organisational justice, work–life conflict, job insecurity, and burnout (Şahan and Demiral 2024). The relationship between trade unions and health is also increasingly recognised in the empirical literature. Longitudinal research in Great Britain has found an association between union presence and better mental and physical health, while recent systematic-review evidence identifies a positive relationship between union membership and workers' well-being (Sciarra and Albertini 2025).

This connection provides a basis for reconsidering the relationship between *collective labour rights* and *individual OSH rights*. Freedom of association, collective bargaining, in-

formation and consultation, and worker participation traditionally belong to the collective dimension of labour law, whereas the right to safe and healthy working conditions belongs primarily to the individual protective dimension. In digitally transformed workplaces, however, these dimensions increasingly intersect. A worker who lacks meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions concerning algorithmic management, workload, performance monitoring, working time, or digital surveillance may also have fewer opportunities to identify and prevent psychosocial risks affecting mental health.

The overarching purpose of this article is to examine how digital unionism can strengthen young workers' collective voice and participation and contribute to psychosocial risk prevention and mental health protection in digitally transformed workplaces. To this end, the article proposes a preliminary conceptual framework for a Young-Worker-Centred Model of Digital Participation, based on six interrelated principles addressing meaningful participation, effective representation, OSH governance, age-sensitive psychosocial protection, oversight of algorithmic management and protection against retaliation for digital collective activity. The framework considers how existing collective labour rights and OSH protections can be adapted to the specific challenges of digitally transformed working conditions, without establishing a separate system of rights for young workers.

This argument is further explored through QQ, a contested concept associated with work disengagement. Research suggests that younger workers and organisational newcomers may be more likely to exhibit QQ behaviours, which are associated with stress, burnout and other work-related outcomes (Dilchert et al. 2026). Rather than treating QQ solely as individual withdrawal or declining work ethic, the article considers whether it may also signal weakened worker voice, limited autonomy, dissatisfaction with working conditions or attempts to resist excessive demands.

The article argues that labour law should connect collective participation with OSH. In digitally driven workplaces, meaningful participation can help prevent psychosocial harm, while digital unionism may enable young workers to articulate concerns, influence working conditions and contribute to risk prevention. The challenge is to ensure that technological transformation strengthens workers' collective voice and influence.

2. Young Workers and the Changing Architecture of Collective Labour Rights

2.1. Young Workers and the Traditional Participation Gap

The participation of young workers in collective labour institutions has traditionally represented a significant challenge for trade unions and, more broadly, for the effective exercise of collective labour rights. Lower rates of trade union membership among younger workers have often been interpreted as reflecting a declining propensity for collective organisation, attributed to growing individualism, cultural distance from traditional forms of unionism, and a generational preference for more individualised employment relations (Hennebert et al. 2021a). However, such an interpretation risks placing the explanatory burden primarily on workers themselves while overlooking the institutional and structural conditions under which collective participation becomes possible. Vandaele (2018), for example, argues that declining youth unionisation in Europe is associated not simply with changing attitudes but also with the erosion of union membership as a social custom and the reduced exposure of young workers to trade unionism at the workplace. From a labour-law perspective, this distinction is important because it shifts the focus from whether young workers are willing to participate towards whether existing structures of collective representation are sufficiently accessible and responsive to workers at the beginning of their employment trajectories.

The position of young workers at labour-market entry further reinforces this problem. Their initial employment experiences are frequently characterised by temporary and part-time employment, organisational mobility, subcontracting, platform work and other forms of non-standard employment. Such employment trajectories may weaken the institutional continuity through which workers traditionally develop relationships with trade unions and participate in collective structures. Research has demonstrated that non-standard workers generally have weaker access to union representation than workers in standard employment relationships (Booth and Francesconi 2003). The emergence of platform work further illustrates this representation gap: recent research shows that, although independent unions and self-organised groups have developed bottom-up strategies to mobilise platform workers around shared grievances, established unions have generally sought to incorporate platform workers into existing structures of membership, recognition and collective bargaining, leaving persistent gaps in meaningful worker representation (Johnson et al. 2026).

At the same time, platform work should not be understood solely in terms of fragmentation and exclusion from established forms of representation. Research on digital labour indicates that the conditions of platform work may also generate *informal forms of unionism*, new repertoires of collective action, and emerging forms of worker subjectivity and solidarity that develop beyond conventional trade union structures (Chicchi and Marrone 2024). This is particularly relevant to young workers, whose greater exposure to non-standard and digitally mediated employment may place them at the margins of established structures of collective representation while simultaneously creating opportunities for new forms of worker agency and collective organisation. The problem is therefore not merely one of union membership but of *institutional embeddedness*: where employment is fragmented, temporary or organisationally dispersed, opportunities for developing collective solidarity and exercising meaningful worker voice may become more limited, while new forms of collective organisation may emerge outside traditional institutional frameworks.

Recent research cautions against framing young workers primarily in terms of a "participation deficit." Analysing the US unionisation surge between 2021 and 2024, Blanc (2026) shows that young workers can drive union revitalisation when organisational conditions support mobilisation. Five mutually reinforcing factors were particularly important: organising in youth-concentrated industries, bottom-up strategies, committed workplace activists, digital tools and worker-led collective action. By contrast, youth sections, youth-oriented marketing and alliances with social movements played comparatively smaller roles.

Blanc's findings are particularly significant for a critical labour-law analysis because they challenge the assumption that young workers constitute a generation inherently detached from collective labour organisation. Instead, they suggest that the apparent participation gap may partly reflect a *mismatch between traditional organisational structures and the conditions through which younger workers experience and understand collective action*. Digital tools are relevant in this respect not because technological mediation automatically generates collective organisation, but because they may facilitate communication, mobilisation and worker-to-worker organising where conventional organisational channels are less accessible. Digitalisation may therefore provide an additional infrastructure through which collective labour rights can become practically accessible to workers whose employment trajectories do not correspond to the relatively stable and geographically concentrated workplaces around which traditional trade unionism historically developed. Blanc's findings consequently provide an important empirical basis for examining digital unionism not merely as a technological adaptation of trade unions, but as a potential mechanism for renewing collective worker participation.

From a critical labour-law perspective, the central issue is therefore not simply that young workers participate less in traditional trade union structures, but that the *institutional architecture through which collective labour rights are exercised may no longer fully correspond to the changing organisation of work*. The protective function of collective labour law consequently faces a dual challenge: first, ensuring that young workers can effectively access established rights to freedom of association, representation and collective bargaining; and second, considering whether these rights can be exercised through organisational forms capable of reaching workers who are mobile, digitally connected, employed through non-standard arrangements or otherwise situated outside traditional workplace structures.

This perspective also provides the conceptual foundation for distinguishing between traditional unionism, the digitalisation of existing unions, digital organising and genuinely new forms of digitally mediated collective worker organisation. Rather than assuming that digital unionism represents a replacement for traditional collective labour institutions, the subsequent analysis can therefore examine whether digital forms of organisation may complement, extend or potentially transform the existing architecture of collective labour rights. The relevant question is ultimately not whether young workers are "interested" in unions, but under what institutional and technological conditions collective participation can become meaningful and capable of redistributing power within contemporary labour relations.

2.2. From Traditional Unionism to Digital Unionism

Digitalisation has generated new possibilities for collective organisation, but the concept of *digital unionism* should not be understood as synonymous with the mere use of digital technologies by trade unions. A useful distinction can be drawn between at least four overlapping phenomena.

First, *digitalisation of existing trade unions* refers to the incorporation of digital communication, social media, online membership systems and digital campaigning into established union structures. Hennebert et al. (2021b) demonstrate that digital technologies can provide unions with new organisational affordances, including greater visibility, aggregation, intensification and addressability. Their findings nevertheless challenge technologically deterministic assumptions: digital technologies do not automatically renew trade unions but create opportunities whose value depends on how unions organise and deploy them.

Second, *digital organising* concerns the use of digital technologies specifically to recruit, mobilise and organise workers who may otherwise remain outside conventional union structures. This distinction is particularly relevant to young workers. Research on British trade unions shows that youth sections have increasingly used social media to communicate with and engage younger workers, although the extent to which these platforms are used for genuine interactive participation remains uneven (Hodder and Houghton 2020).

Third, *online worker communities* may develop independently of established trade unions. Digital platforms can facilitate horizontal forms of communication among geographically dispersed or organisationally isolated workers, enabling information exchange, mutual support and collective identification. Such communities may therefore constitute *informal forms of worker voice* even where formal collective representation is absent. Recent research on platform work identifies such "grassroots voice mechanisms" as particularly important where institutional channels for unionisation and collective bargaining are weak or unavailable (Dasgupta et al. 2025).

Fourth, the emergence of *digital labour groups* points towards potentially new collective actors rather than merely technologically adapted trade unions. Yao and Frangi (2026) conceptualise digital labour groups as online groups centred on labour issues that may develop into actors within industrial relations. Their analysis identifies pathways through

which grassroots digital groups may enter, influence, or be incorporated into established industrial-relations structures.

These distinctions are theoretically important. Digital unionism should therefore be understood as an *umbrella concept* describing the digital transformation of collective worker organisation and voice, ranging from the digitalisation of established unions to autonomous digitally constituted forms of collective representation. The critical question is not whether digital technologies make unionism more efficient, but whether they alter the distribution of power underlying collective labour relations. Digitalisation may overcome geographical and organisational barriers, but it may also reproduce existing inequalities, reduce participation to symbolic online engagement, or substitute communication for genuine collective decision-making. The digital transformation of representation should therefore be assessed according to whether it enhances workers' *effective collective agency*, rather than merely their connectivity.

2.3. Participation Rights in Digitally Mediated Workplaces

Freedom of association, collective bargaining, information and consultation, and worker representation remain the principal legal mechanisms through which workers collectively influence working conditions. Digitalisation does not diminish their relevance; rather, it may increase the need for effective participation as managerial decisions become more technologically complex and organisational structures more dispersed.

Within this context, it is important to distinguish *worker voice* from *trade unions* as an institutionalised form of worker representation. Originating primarily in organisational science, worker voice refers to the mechanisms through which workers express their views and concerns and seek to influence work-related decisions (Wilkinson et al. 2018). It encompasses individual and collective, formal and informal channels, whereas trade unions provide an institutionalised form of collective voice, particularly through collective bargaining and social dialogue (Wilkinson et al. 2021). This distinction is especially relevant in fragmented and digitally mediated workplaces, where workers may organise through informal networks, digital platforms or structures beyond traditional trade-union frameworks.

The ILO's approach to social dialogue similarly encompasses negotiation, consultation and information exchange among governments, employers and workers or their representatives (ILO 2018b). However, meaningful participation requires more than the provision of information. The ILO identifies freedom of association and the effective recognition of collective bargaining as fundamental institutional foundations for worker representation (ILO 2000b). In OSH, Convention No. 155 specifically emphasises consultation with workers and their representatives on relevant workplace safety and health matters. Such consultation requires employers to consider workers' views before decisions are made, without necessarily implying joint decision-making or agreement (ILO 1981).

Worker voice thus provides an analytical link between formal participation rights and workers' actual capacity to influence decisions affecting their working conditions. It also helps connect labour law with the organisational dimensions of work by examining how workers' concerns are articulated and channelled through established participation mechanisms and emerging forms of collective organisation. Accordingly, worker voice should not be treated as an alternative to trade unions, but as a broader concept encompassing both institutionalised representation and other forms of collective participation.

In digitally mediated workplaces, collective bargaining may also provide a means of influencing technological choices and the implementation of algorithmic management. Collins and Atkinson (2023), for example, demonstrate its potential to enable worker influence over algorithmic management, although weak bargaining coverage and opaque decision-making remain significant obstacles. Comparative research likewise indicates that

digital tools can facilitate the work of workers' representatives and create new opportunities for information, consultation and collective bargaining, while challenging forms of solidarity traditionally based on physical proximity (Miranda Boto and Brameshuber 2024).

These developments are particularly visible in the platform economy. The ILO has documented collective protests, new forms of worker organisation, social dialogue and, to a more limited extent, collective bargaining among platform workers, demonstrating that collective agency can emerge even where conventional employment relationships and representation structures are weak or absent (Hadwiger 2022; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018). Such developments suggest that effective participation requires legal and institutional arrangements capable of accommodating diverse forms of worker organisation while preserving the independence and representative capacity of trade unions.

The collective organisation of young workers raises a related question: How can youth-oriented forms of participation strengthen, rather than undermine, independent worker representation? An illustrative, though limited, example is ILO Committee on Freedom of Association Case No. 2018 concerning Ukraine. The Committee is a tripartite supervisory body that examines complaints concerning violations of freedom of association and trade union rights and submits its conclusions and recommendations to the ILO Governing Body (ILO 2018a). The case involved allegations that an employer's funds had been used to establish a young workers' association reportedly linked to a no-strike agreement. The Government explained that the association's members also belonged to five trade unions and that its activities focused on youth work, sports, excursions and leisure. The Committee nevertheless reiterated that the association's functions should not encroach on the normal activities of independent trade unions, particularly in matters concerning strikes and collective bargaining (ILO 2000a, para. 83, pp. 86–87). The case did not establish a distinct legal doctrine on young workers' collective organisation; rather, it illustrates the importance of distinguishing genuine opportunities for youth participation from arrangements that may undermine independent collective representation.

From this perspective, the challenge for labour law is not whether digital unionism should replace traditional collective organisation, but whether existing legal frameworks can accommodate emerging forms of worker voice while preserving trade unions' capacity to represent workers and exercise meaningful bargaining power. For young workers in particular, digital accessibility must translate into meaningful participation and collective influence. Digital unionism may therefore offer an opportunity to renew the protective function of collective labour law by extending collective voice to workers whose employment trajectories increasingly fall outside the organisational structures upon which traditional unionism was built.

3. Digital Unionism and Psychosocial Risk Prevention

3.1. Worker Participation as a Protective Factor

Worker participation is traditionally understood in labour law as a mechanism through which workers and their representatives exercise influence over working conditions and organisational decision-making. From an OSH perspective, however, participation has a significance that extends beyond industrial democracy. It may also constitute an element of preventive risk management, particularly in relation to psychosocial risks arising from the organisation and design of work, including excessive workload, work intensity, limited autonomy, insufficient social support and inadequate control over working time. Research on worker representation indicates that representative participation can play an important role in the prevention and management of psychosocial risks, although its effectiveness depends substantially on the institutional and labour-relations context in which it operates (Walters et al. 2012). More broadly, research on OSH participation demonstrates that workers' ability

to raise concerns, participate in enforcement and act through worker representatives is an important component of the effective protection of OSH rights, while weak institutional protection and inadequate enforcement may significantly constrain the exercise of such participatory rights (King and Lewchuk 2022).

In practical terms, psychosocial risk prevention requires more than a general commitment to workers' well-being. It involves a structured process of identifying psychosocial hazards, assessing their prevalence and potential effects, determining their organisational causes, adopting preventive measures, and subsequently evaluating their effectiveness. The European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management conceptualises psychosocial risk management as a continuous organisational process encompassing risk assessment, the development and implementation of action plans, intervention, evaluation and organisational learning (Leka et al. 2011). At workplace level, this may involve the use of structured assessment instruments or checklists addressing, for example, workload and work pace, autonomy and control, working time, role clarity, social support, interpersonal relations, job insecurity and organisational change. Psychosocial risk assessment may combine employee questionnaires, interviews and other workplace data rather than relying exclusively on individual complaints (Leka et al. 2011; Weigl et al. 2017).

The preventive function of worker participation is also reflected in the EU legal framework. Article 11 of Council Directive 89/391/EEC requires employers to consult workers and/or their representatives on questions relating to OSH, enable them to participate in discussions and recognise their right to make proposals. These provisions establish participation as an element of occupational risk prevention rather than merely a procedural formality (Council of the European Communities 1989). Their relevance to psychosocial risks lies in the fact that such risks often originate in organisational decisions concerning workload, work intensity, performance expectations, managerial control and working-time arrangements. Meaningful consultation can therefore provide a channel through which workers' experiences inform the identification of risks and the development of preventive measures. Nevertheless, the existence of formal participation rights does not, in itself, guarantee their effective implementation or ensure that workers can influence organisational decisions (Walters 2011).

A further normative illustration can be found in French labour law. Article L. 4121-1 of the French Labour Code expressly requires employers to take the necessary measures to protect workers' physical and mental health, including through risk prevention, information and training, and appropriate work organisation. Article L. 4121-3 also provides for the contribution of the Social and Economic Committee (Comité social et économique, CSE), where established, to occupational risk assessment and consultation on the relevant risk-assessment document and its updates (Code du Travail n.d., arts. L. 4121-1, L. 4121-3). This framework illustrates how the general duty to protect workers' health can be connected with institutional participation in preventive risk assessment. Academic legal analysis of French labour law similarly identifies psychosocial risks as falling within the employer's prevention obligations and highlights the role of workers and their representatives in addressing these risks (Adam 2008).

The connection between participation and psychosocial risk prevention is particularly important because many psychosocial risks cannot be adequately addressed at the level of individual workers alone. They frequently originate in organisational decisions concerning workload, work intensity, performance expectations, working-time arrangements, managerial control and the distribution of autonomy. Worker participation can therefore provide an institutional mechanism through which risks that are experienced individually are identified as collective characteristics of work organisation. Participatory approaches may also strengthen workers' perceived control, fairness and social support, although recent

evidence suggests that participation does not automatically produce positive mental-health outcomes and that its effectiveness depends on whether participation is active, structured and capable of influencing organisational decisions (Sakuraya et al. 2026).

This distinction is also relevant to the form through which workers participate. Academic literature distinguishes between direct participation, in which workers themselves take part in the assessment, discussion and development of preventive measures, and indirect or representative participation, in which workers act through elected or appointed representatives, such as trade union or health and safety representatives (Abildgaard et al. 2020). These forms should not necessarily be viewed as alternatives. Recent research suggests that direct and indirect participation may operate as complementary pathways in organisational occupational health interventions, with their relative importance depending on the organisational context and the design of the intervention (Tafvelin et al. 2026).

Where a workplace lacks formal worker representation, direct participation may therefore provide an important complementary channel through which individual workers or groups of workers can contribute to psychosocial risk prevention. Such participation may include reporting and discussing psychosocial hazards, contributing to workplace surveys or interviews, participating in risk-assessment meetings or working groups, and collectively proposing changes to workload, work organisation, working time or managerial practices. This does not make direct participation equivalent to formal collective representation: representative participation provides institutional legitimacy and continuity, whereas direct participation can ensure that workers' own experiences and knowledge remain visible in the risk-assessment process (Abildgaard et al. 2020). Empirical research further indicates that direct participation may be associated with a healthier psychosocial work environment, particularly where workers are involved in decisions concerning the organisation of work (Nielsen et al. 2022).

This has an important implication for labour law. Participation should not be reduced to a procedural opportunity to communicate information. Its protective significance depends on the extent to which workers and their representatives can exercise meaningful influence over decisions concerning the conditions in which work is performed. In this sense, participation represents a potential bridge between the organisational dimension of work and the protective function of labour law.

3.2. Digital Unionism and Young Workers' Mental Health

The relationship between digital unionism and young workers' mental health is particularly significant in digitally mediated workplaces, where collective voice may help address psychosocial risks arising from work organisation and management practices. Young workers increasingly enter labour markets characterised by temporary and fragmented employment, platform work and technologically mediated management. These conditions may weaken access to established forms of collective representation while exposing workers to new psychosocial risks. Research on young platform workers identifies a tension between the apparent flexibility of platform work and the restrictions on autonomy imposed by algorithmic management, described as a "double autonomy paradox" (Laursen et al. 2021).

Digital unionism may provide a means of addressing this representation deficit by creating more accessible channels through which young workers can articulate concerns relating to workload, algorithmic management, surveillance, performance monitoring, working-time boundaries and work–life balance. Digital technologies can facilitate communication and mobilisation while potentially enabling trade unions to reach workers who are geographically dispersed or weakly integrated into conventional workplace structures. Research on trade unions and social media has consequently identified digital communication as a potential strategy for trade union renewal, particularly in relation to atypical

and younger workers (Hodder and Houghton 2020). More broadly, research on digital unionism identifies participation and organisation through digital networks as potentially important for reversing declining mobilisation capacity and reaching workers who are less connected to traditional union structures.

The transformative potential of digital unionism should nevertheless not be assumed. Digital technologies may extend existing forms of union communication without substantially changing the underlying relations of power or participation. Empirical research shows considerable variation: some unions use social media interactively to mobilise workers, while others reproduce predominantly one-way communication models (Houghton and Hodder 2021; Carneiro and Costa 2022). Digital communication may therefore widen access to collective organisation, but it cannot by itself create the trust, solidarity and sustained collective relationships on which effective worker organisation depends.

It is also important to distinguish between digitally mediated work and digital unionism. The former concerns how technology structures the employment relationship and the organisation of work; the latter concerns how workers organise and exercise collective voice. The two may overlap, particularly in platform work, but neither is dependent on the other: digitally mediated work can exist without digital unionism, while digital unionism can also organise workers in conventional workplaces. Its significance for young workers' mental health therefore lies not in the technology itself, but in whether digitally enabled organisation can generate collective capacity and influence over the conditions producing psychosocial risks. Evidence from platform-worker organising illustrates this potential: online worker groups have been used to facilitate collective organisation and, in some cases, to support collective bargaining and improvements in working conditions (Hau and Savage 2023).

Digital unionism should therefore not be understood merely as the digital delivery of traditional union services. Its more significant potential lies in enabling *new forms of collective participation and representation* in workplaces where physical proximity, stable organisational membership and conventional employment relationships can no longer be assumed. For young workers in particular, digital accessibility may reduce some of the practical barriers to collective engagement. Nevertheless, digital communication alone does not constitute meaningful worker participation. Its significance from a labour-law perspective depends on whether workers' digitally expressed concerns can be translated into representation, consultation, collective bargaining or other mechanisms capable of influencing working conditions.

3.3. From Collective Voice to Psychosocial Risk Prevention

Worker participation is not only a mechanism of industrial democracy but also a potential instrument of preventive labour law in digitally mediated workplaces. Psychosocial risks are shaped by work organisation, managerial practices and employment relations, yet are often approached primarily from an individual health perspective (Vassiley et al. 2025). An industrial-relations perspective shifts attention towards these organisational determinants and the mechanisms through which workers can influence them.

Worker representation can transform individual experiences of excessive workload, work intensification, limited autonomy and intrusive monitoring into shared concerns and preventive action. Evidence from Spain suggests that workplaces with worker representatives are more likely to implement occupational safety and health (OSH) measures, particularly organisational interventions (Ollé-Espluga et al. 2024). Research likewise highlights the preventive potential of worker representation in addressing psychosocial risks, while emphasising that its effectiveness depends on the broader labour-relations context (Walters 2011).

This approach is consistent with the recognition of a safe and healthy working environment as a fundamental principle and right at work within the ILO framework. Scholarship highlights the interdependence of OSH and other fundamental labour rights, particularly freedom of association and collective bargaining, as well as the role of collective action in advancing OSH protection (Politakis 2023; Silva and Thomas 2025). Collective voice can therefore contribute to prevention by enabling workers to secure institutional recognition of risks arising from work organisation and to influence the measures taken to address them.

These considerations are particularly relevant to digital work, where algorithmic management, surveillance, work intensification and reduced autonomy may generate psychosocial risks rooted in technological and organisational arrangements. Directive (EU) 2024/2831 on improving working conditions in platform work provides a significant legislative example. Article 12 requires digital labour platforms to assess the safety and health risks of automated monitoring and decision-making systems, introduce appropriate preventive and protective measures, and ensure effective information, consultation and participation of platform workers and/or their representatives. It also prohibits the use of such systems in ways that place undue pressure on workers or endanger their physical or mental health. Article 25 further requires Member States to take appropriate measures to promote collective bargaining in platform work (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2024).

Digital unionism can complement these safeguards by enabling dispersed workers to identify shared concerns and connect them with established mechanisms of representation, consultation and collective bargaining. Its significance lies not in digital communication itself, but in its potential to transform individual experiences into collective voice and meaningful influence over working conditions. Digital platforms may facilitate mobilisation, but do not automatically ensure effective participation or collective power (Piasna 2024; Stylogiannis 2023).

The participation of young workers also warrants specific attention. Council Directive 94/33/EC on the protection of young people at work requires risk assessment and information on workplace risks and preventive measures, while protecting workers under 18 against work exceeding their physical or psychological capacities. Complementing this specific protective framework, the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 promotes young people's meaningful participation in decision-making and encourages innovative forms of democratic participation, including digital tools (Council of the European Communities 1994; Council of the European Union 2018). Although these instruments differ in legal scope and purpose, both support the broader importance of informed involvement and meaningful participation. Building on this normative foundation, the proposed conceptual framework for the development of Young-Worker-Centred Model of Digital Participation seeks to connect young workers' collective voice with the identification and prevention of psychosocial risks at their organisational source.

4. Young Workers, Quiet Quitting and the Crisis of Worker Voice

The emergence of QQ may be understood not simply as declining work engagement, but as a form of withdrawal from discretionary participation in the employment relationship. The concept remains contested, encompassing reduced discretionary effort, boundary-setting and forms of psychological withdrawal rather than a refusal to perform contractual duties. From a labour-law perspective, QQ may therefore represent a worker's attempt to re-establish the boundaries of the employment relationship in response to excessive work expectations and the "always-on" culture associated with digitalised work (Solymosi-Szekeres and Stojković-Zlatanović 2024).

This interpretation is particularly relevant to younger workers. Recent empirical research indicates that younger employees and organisational newcomers are somewhat more

prone to quiet-quitting behaviours, while job autonomy appears to operate as a protective factor; QQ is also associated with stress, burnout and job satisfaction (Dilchert et al. 2026). The significance of these findings extends beyond employee engagement. Where workers experience limited autonomy, excessive demands or insufficient influence over the organisation of work, individual withdrawal may become a means of regulating the employment relationship and protecting personal boundaries.

From a labour-law perspective, QQ can therefore be contrasted with *worker voice*. Voice provides a mechanism through which workers communicate concerns and seek to influence working conditions, whereas QQ may represent an individualised response to the perceived absence of meaningful influence. Our previous research suggests that the phenomenon should consequently be examined not primarily through the question of whether workers are sufficiently committed to their employers, but through the interaction between employment obligations, organisational practices, work–life boundaries and workers' well-being (Solymosi-Szekeres and Stojković-Zlatanović 2024). The subsequent analysis of QQ in digital workplaces further situates the phenomenon within the transformation of work organisation affecting Generation Z and identifies its implications for both individual and collective labour law, including its relationship with mental health (Zlatanović et al. 2025).

The distinction becomes particularly significant in digitally mediated workplaces, where algorithmic management, digital surveillance, intensified performance expectations and blurred work–life boundaries may contribute to psychosocial pressures while simultaneously weakening conventional channels of workplace participation. QQ may consequently represent an *individualised form of resistance or boundary-setting*, whereas digital unionism offers the possibility of transforming comparable concerns into collective voice and institutionalised participation. The two phenomena can therefore be understood as contrasting responses to a common problem of worker agency: *QQ individualises withdrawal, while digital unionism has the potential to collectivise workers' concerns*.

For young workers, this distinction is especially important. If digitalisation facilitates new forms of individualised work and employment-related withdrawal, labour law must also consider whether collective institutions remain capable of providing meaningful channels through which workers can articulate concerns regarding workload, autonomy, surveillance, working time and psychosocial risks. Digital unionism should therefore not be understood merely as a technological adaptation of trade union activity. Its potential significance lies in converting digitally mediated communication into *collective participation, representation and influence over working conditions*. In this sense, the movement from QQ to collective voice represents not simply a shift from individual to collective behaviour, but a shift from individualised self-protection towards the institutional exercise of labour rights.

5. Towards a Young-Worker-Centred Model of Digital Participation

The preceding analysis suggests that digital transformation requires not merely the technological adaptation of trade-union practices, but a *normative reconfiguration of workers' participation*. This reconfiguration should pay particular attention to young workers, whose employment trajectories are increasingly shaped by digitalisation, non-standard employment and technologically mediated management. A *young-worker-centred approach* should therefore ensure that digital accessibility translates into meaningful participation and collective influence over working conditions.

The particular focus on young workers is justified by evidence that vulnerability at work is shaped not by age alone, but by the interaction between employment conditions, work organisation and access to protective resources. Young workers may be disproportionately exposed to precarious employment, limited control over work and psychosocial hazards, while those working through digital platforms may face additional gaps in OSH protection

arising from ambiguous employment relationships and limited capacity to influence working conditions (Shields et al. 2021; Nielsen et al. 2022). These vulnerabilities are neither universal nor uniform: they vary according to occupational status, skills, employment arrangements and the availability of effective representation. Accordingly, the proposed approach is both targeted and inclusive, addressing barriers that may disproportionately affect young workers while offering principles applicable to workers of all ages in digitally transformed workplaces.

The principles outlined below should be understood as a *preliminary conceptual framework* for developing a Young-Worker-Centred Model of Digital Participation, rather than as an established or empirically validated model. Derived from the preceding analysis, they identify key normative and institutional considerations and provide a basis for further theoretical elaboration, empirical research and policy development.

These principles should operate as an integrated framework linking freedom of association, collective representation, participation rights and OSH protection. This is particularly important where psychosocial risks are embedded in organisational and technological decisions beyond individual workers' control. Digital unionism may help transform individualised responses, including withdrawal or *quiet quitting*, into collective identification of workplace problems and preventive action.

First, *digital accessibility and meaningful participation* should be treated as complementary requirements. Digital channels can reduce geographical, organisational and temporal barriers to union membership, communication and mobilisation, particularly in dispersed and non-standard employment. However, accessibility alone is insufficient: workers must have access to relevant information, opportunities to contribute before decisions are made, and mechanisms through which their views can influence decision-making.

Second, the model should promote *effective representation of young workers* within trade unions and other representative bodies. Young workers should be recognised not merely as a group to be recruited, but as active participants in articulating collective interests, particularly where digitalised and non-standard employment creates concerns insufficiently reflected in established representative structures.

Third, participation should extend to *OSH governance*, particularly the assessment and prevention of psychosocial risks. Workers and their representatives should be able to contribute to identifying and addressing risks arising from workload, limited autonomy, surveillance and algorithmic management. This approach recognises that effective prevention requires attention not only to individual health outcomes but also to the organisational and employment conditions generating psychosocial risks (Vassiley et al. 2025).

Fourth, the model should incorporate *age-sensitive human rights due diligence for psychosocial protection*. Building on the age-responsible due diligence approach discussed by Zlatanović and Jovanović (2023), this principle would emphasise the identification, prevention and mitigation of adverse impacts of work organisation and digital technologies on young workers' rights and well-being. Particular attention should be paid to how employment insecurity, limited bargaining power, restricted autonomy and algorithmic management may increase exposure to psychosocial risks or impede access to effective protection. Employers should be encouraged to assess these risks, involve young workers and their representatives in developing preventive measures, and monitor their effectiveness. This approach should not presume that all young workers are inherently vulnerable, but should ensure that their specific circumstances and potential barriers to protection are adequately considered. It is proposed as a normative principle of the model, rather than a claim that existing law establishes a comprehensive, age-specific due diligence obligation for all employers.

Fifth, the model should provide for *collective oversight of algorithmic management and AI-mediated employment decisions*. Where automated systems affect task allocation, performance evaluation, remuneration or other working conditions, workers and their representatives should have appropriate information and opportunities to participate in assessing their implications. Meaningful human oversight and access to review mechanisms are particularly important where automated decisions may affect workers' rights and interests. Information, consultation and collective bargaining can help extend worker influence to technological decisions that shape the employment relationship.

Sixth, *protection against retaliation for digital collective activity* is essential. Workers should be protected against adverse treatment for exercising freedom of association, communicating collectively or engaging in online trade-union activities. Without such protection, digital channels may expand communication without providing the security necessary for effective collective participation.

The proposed *conceptual framework* should therefore be understood not as a separate system of labour rights for young people, but as an adaptive framework for exercising existing collective rights under digitally transformed working conditions. Its normative objective is to ensure that digitalisation strengthens, rather than undermines, workers' collective agency and their capacity to influence work organisation, technological governance and OSH. By connecting meaningful participation with the prevention of psychosocial risks, the model seeks to reinforce the protective function of labour law and contribute to the protection of workers' mental health.

6. Conclusions

Digitalisation is reshaping the conditions under which workers exercise collective labour rights. For young workers in fragmented and digitally mediated employment, digital unionism can renew collective participation, provided that digital access translates into meaningful representation and institutional influence.

The phenomenon of QQ highlights a critical tension in this context: while quiet quitting individualises withdrawal from unsatisfactory working conditions, digital unionism has the potential to collectivise workers' concerns and transform individual dissatisfaction into collective voice and action. This distinction is particularly relevant to young workers, whose disengagement may reflect broader concerns about recognition, autonomy, work intensity and work–life boundaries. Digital platforms can provide channels through which such concerns are shared, articulated and translated into collective demands.

Collective voice is also essential to the preventive function of labour law, enabling workers to identify and address psychosocial risks arising from algorithmic management, surveillance, work intensification, reduced autonomy and blurred work–life boundaries. To address these challenges, the article proposes a preliminary conceptual framework to inform the future development of a *Young-Worker-Centred Model of Digital Participation*, centred on meaningful participation, collective representation, psychosocial-risk prevention and human oversight of technological management. The proposed framework seeks to identify ways of adapting the exercise of existing collective labour rights to digitally transformed working environments without replacing established institutions of worker representation.

Ultimately, digital unionism should help transform individual withdrawal into collective agency, renewing the protective function of labour law and ensuring that technological innovation remains subordinate to workers' dignity, health, autonomy and collective rights.

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