

**Meeting:** Future of Work (employment)  
**Committee:** Robot vs. Human Labour  
**Country:** Sweden

In much of the world, people whose livelihoods depend on pay checks are increasingly anxious about a potential wave of unemployment threatened by robots and automation. As the frightening tale goes, globalization forced people in wealthier lands like North America and Europe to compete directly with cheaper labourers in Asia and Latin America, sowing joblessness. But such talk has little currency in Sweden where unions are powerful, government support is abundant, and trust between employers and employees runs deep. Here, robots are just another way to make companies more efficient. As employers prosper, workers have consistently gained a proportionate slice of the spoils. Two-thirds of Americans believe robots will soon take over the majority of tasks currently done by humans. Swedes, on the other hand, are not concerned about new technology. “No, I’m afraid of old technology,” the Swedish minister for employment and integration, Ylva Johansson, told the New York Times. “The jobs disappear, and then we train people for new jobs. We won’t protect jobs. But we will protect workers.”

Eighty percent of Swedes express positive views about robots and artificial intelligence, according to a survey this year by the European Commission. Why such enthusiasm? In Sweden, governments provide health care along with free education. They pay generous unemployment benefits, while employers finance extensive job training. Unions generally embrace robots and automation as a competitive advantage that makes jobs more secure. Swedish citizens tend to trust that their government and the companies they work for will take care of them, and they see robots and automation as a way to improve business efficiency. Since Swedish employees actually do benefit from increased profits by getting higher wages, a win for companies is a win for workers which may be why people in the country are mostly happy to pay income tax rates of up to nearly 60 percent.

In Stockholm, one of Sweden’s employer-funded job security councils, which help workers who lose jobs find new ones, claims an 83 percent success rate. Yet even if robots create more jobs than they eliminate, large numbers of people are going to need to pursue new careers. Sweden and its Nordic brethren have proved successful at managing such transitions. So-called job security councils financed by employers help people who lose jobs find new ones. One such council in Stockholm, the TRR Trygghetsradet, boasts that 83 percent of participants have found new jobs this year. Two-thirds have landed in positions paying the same as or better than their previous jobs.

Advocates for robotic automation routinely point to the fact that, for the most part, robots cannot service or program themselves yet. In theory, this will create new, high-skilled jobs for technicians, programmers and other newly essential roles. However, for every job created by robotic automation, several more will be eliminated entirely. At scale, this disruption will have a devastating impact on the workforce as it will jeopardize the livelihoods of millions of people.

Although human employment may seem overly optimistic in Sweden, getting to grips with the rise in income inequality, democratic polarisation and capital gains capturing an ever-increasing share of economic surpluses, involves fixing fundamental shortcomings of capitalism pertaining to bargaining power. The Swedish example shows that complicated issues within the labour market may be solved at the bargaining table, given that bargaining power between labour and capital is relatively equal.