Empowerment, Participation and Democratisation: Prospects for Industrial Work

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Steven Dhondt

The recording

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Insights from the BRIDGES 5.0/EUWIN Webinar – 30th January 2026

The first BRIDGES/EUWIN webinar of 2026 brought together researchers, practitioners, and policy thinkers from across Europe to explore one of the most urgent conversations in industrial transformation today: how Industry 5.0 can meaningfully connect organisational innovation, worker empowerment, and wider societal value.

Across three complementary presentations – from **Ralf Kopp** (TU Dortmund), **Stefan Schoppengerd** (Hans-Böckler-Stiftung / WSI-Mitteilungen), and **Antonius Schröder** (TU Dortmund)—the webinar painted a rich picture of both the opportunities and the unresolved tensions embedded in Europe's transition toward more democratic, sustainable, and humancentred industrial ecosystems.

A Broader Vision for Industry 5.0

Opening the webinar, **Ralf Kopp** challenged the prevailing reductionist narrative surrounding Industry 5.0. While policy discussions often focus narrowly on skills, digitalisation, and green transition, his analysis reminds us that the original EU framing also emphasises *societal value*, *regional cohesion*, and *industrial democracy*.

Kopp argued that despite the EU's conceptual commitment to a more holistic model, research funding and project structures remain strongly enterprisecentric. As a result, many of the deeper democratic and societal ambitions of Industry 5.0 are left unexplored.

His proposal:
To truly realise Industry 5.0, companies must be embedded within **regional innovation ecosystems**—spaces where workers, enterprises, civil society, universities, and regional authorities collaborate to define *purposeful* and *sustainable* industrial futures.

He highlighted models such as:

- **Transformation networks** in the German automotive sector
- **Common good economy frameworks**
- **Regional governance approaches** that facilitate codesign and shared decisionmaking

These models offer glimpses of what democratic industrial transformation could look like, even if current examples remain partial and uneven.

Inside the Factory: Worker Participation in Decarbonisation

If Kopp provided the conceptual scaffolding, **Stefan Schoppengerd** offered a vivid look at what worker participation looks like *on the ground*.

Drawing on 20 interviews in Lower Saxony's automotive and steel industries, his research shows that effective decarbonisation is deeply intertwined with workplace democracy. Three cases illustrated this reality:

1. Participatory Transformation Management in Automotive Manufacturing

A major automotive producer demonstrated how strong works councils and established codetermination practices enable:

- negotiated department closures and openings
- largescale reskilling
- “transformation interviews” mapping individual skills and future roles

The result is a smoother, more trusted transition—even if broader questions about sustainable mobility remain largely absent.

2. Scenario Workshops in the Steel Sector

In a steel mill shifting toward hydrogen based production, workers, union representatives and management engaged in imaginative scenario planning—writing short future narratives and debating alternative pathways.

This process revealed:

- the value of structured democratic dialogue
- the skill requirements for meaningful participation
- frustrations when participatory processes lack real decisionmaking power

3. Participation Through Collective Bargaining in a Supplier Firm

In a mediumsized automotive supplier at risk due to the decline of combustion engines, the union used collective bargaining to negotiate a “future agreement” that balanced job security, investment commitments, and codetermination rights.

Although the agreement was later rescinded due to economic pressures, it showcased a bold use of collective bargaining as a lever for industrial transition.

Across all three cases, Schoppengerd emphasised a key conclusion:
Participatory transformation requires time, resources, and skills—none of which can be taken for granted.

CoCreation and Skills for the Green, Digital, and Social Transition

The final presentation, from **Antonius Schröder**, grounded the discussion in concrete examples of empowering workers through cocreation and new skill development within energyintensive industries.

His cases underscored that:

Cocreation isn’t a slogan—it’s a methodology

In one steel plant, operators helped design a robotic workstation to replace hazardous manual tasks. Because workers were deeply involved from day one, the adoption process was extraordinarily smooth, shifting operators’ identities from manual labourers to supervisors of robotic systems.

Digitalisation works best when operators shape it

A plantwide optimisation system was codesigned with operators, improving crossdepartmental coordination and fostering a shared sense of ownership over quality and efficiency.

Skills ecosystems must be regional

Additional hydrogenrelated qualifications, co-developed with universities, vocational schools, companies, and chambers of commerce, became a model for anticipatory training—preparing apprentices long before new production facilities open.

Schröder emphasised the importance of *ecosystem thinking*: training platforms, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and new “gamechanger” job profiles such as:

- **Circular resilience strategists**
- **Human-machine teaming leads**
- **Just transition orchestrators**

These roles recognise that the transition to Industry 5.0 is not only technical but social, ethical, and cross-disciplinary.

CrossCutting Reflections: The Regional Turn

In the concluding discussion, panellists and participants noted the emergence of a consistent theme: **regional ecosystems matter.**

Whether considering:

- democratic governance
- workforce participation

- skills ecosystems
- or societal purpose

…many of the most promising developments occur when industries are embedded in cooperative regional contexts.

Yet there are also major challenges:

- uneven existing structures across Europe
- lack of funding for broader societal experimentation
- variability in union strength and social partnership traditions
- management reluctance in organisations without participatory histories

Still, the webinar showed that pockets of innovation exist—especially in industries with longstanding traditions of social partnership, such as steel and automotive manufacturing.

Conclusion: Toward a More Democratic Industrial Future

The BRIDGES/EUWIN webinar highlighted a simple but profound truth:
Industry 5.0 will not be achieved through technology alone.

It will depend on:

- empowered workers
- democratic dialogue
- regional cooperation
- new skills and mindsets
- and a willingness to rethink the purpose of industrial production

The rich examples presented—robotic codesign, participatory decarbonisation, future-oriented skills alliances—demonstrate that the foundations for change already exist. The challenge now is scaling these practices and ensuring that Europe’s industrial transformation is as socially ambitious as it is technologically advanced.

The Bridges 5.0 Masterclass demonstrated that building human-centric workplaces is both an urgent necessity and a complex, ongoing process. Success depends on integrating digital, green, and social transformation, fostering inclusive and

participative cultures, and equipping leaders and employees alike with the skills and frameworks to navigate change. The collective insights and experiences shared in this session provide a roadmap for organisations seeking to thrive in the era of Industry 5.0.

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