

5 Possibly Surprising Insights on the Future of Work

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See Our Senate Submission:

**“The Future of Work
is What We Make It”**

*Senate Select Inquiry on the Future of Work
and the Future of Workers*

January 2018

https://www.futurework.org.au/senate_inquiry_future_of_work

5 Possibly Surprising Insights

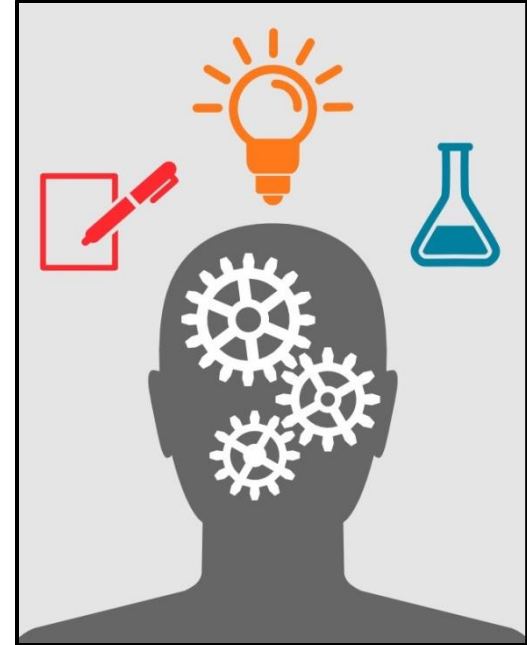
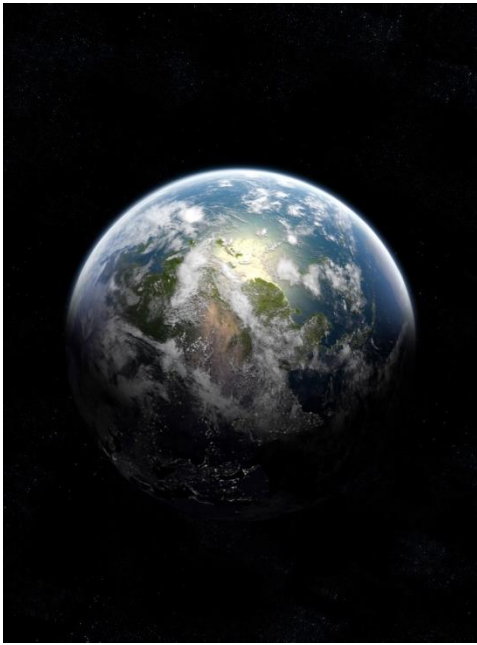
1. Work is not going to disappear. It can't.
2. There is no visible acceleration of labour-saving technology or productivity.
3. Biggest impact of technology on jobs is experienced through the employment relationship, more than through production.
 - An underreported example: surveillance & discipline.
4. There is little new about “gig” jobs.
5. Structural & institutional changes (not technology or “human capital”) explains workers' deteriorating outcomes.

Overarching Conclusion

Trade unions are an essential feature of a normal labour market.

They are as important (or even more important) to workers' well-being today as they have ever been.

1. Work Cannot “Disappear”



- Our capacity to work (brains & brawn) is the only force transforming what we harvest from nature (hopefully sustainably!) into useful goods & services.
- “Automation” uses more indirect labour (making tools) instead of direct labour. But it still depends on work.

Work, Employment, Jobs

WORK

Productive human activity.

EMPLOYMENT

Work performed for someone else in return for payment.

JOB

A particular structure & system for organizing employment.

Work cannot disappear. And in our economy, most work is still wage labour (employment). But jobs are changing, for the worse, because employers have more power to set their own terms. Technology is part of that process, but not the cause of it.

Work, Productivity, and Time

- We work to live – not live to work.
- So if productivity did increase a lot, we could work less (and have more time), via:
 - Unemployment for some workers; or
 - Lower average hours for all workers.
- Many options for lower hours: shorter work day, shorter work week, more annual leave, family & educational leave, early retirement.
- But that doesn't mean work "disappears."
- It just means we don't have to do as much, to maintain (or even improve) our material incomes.

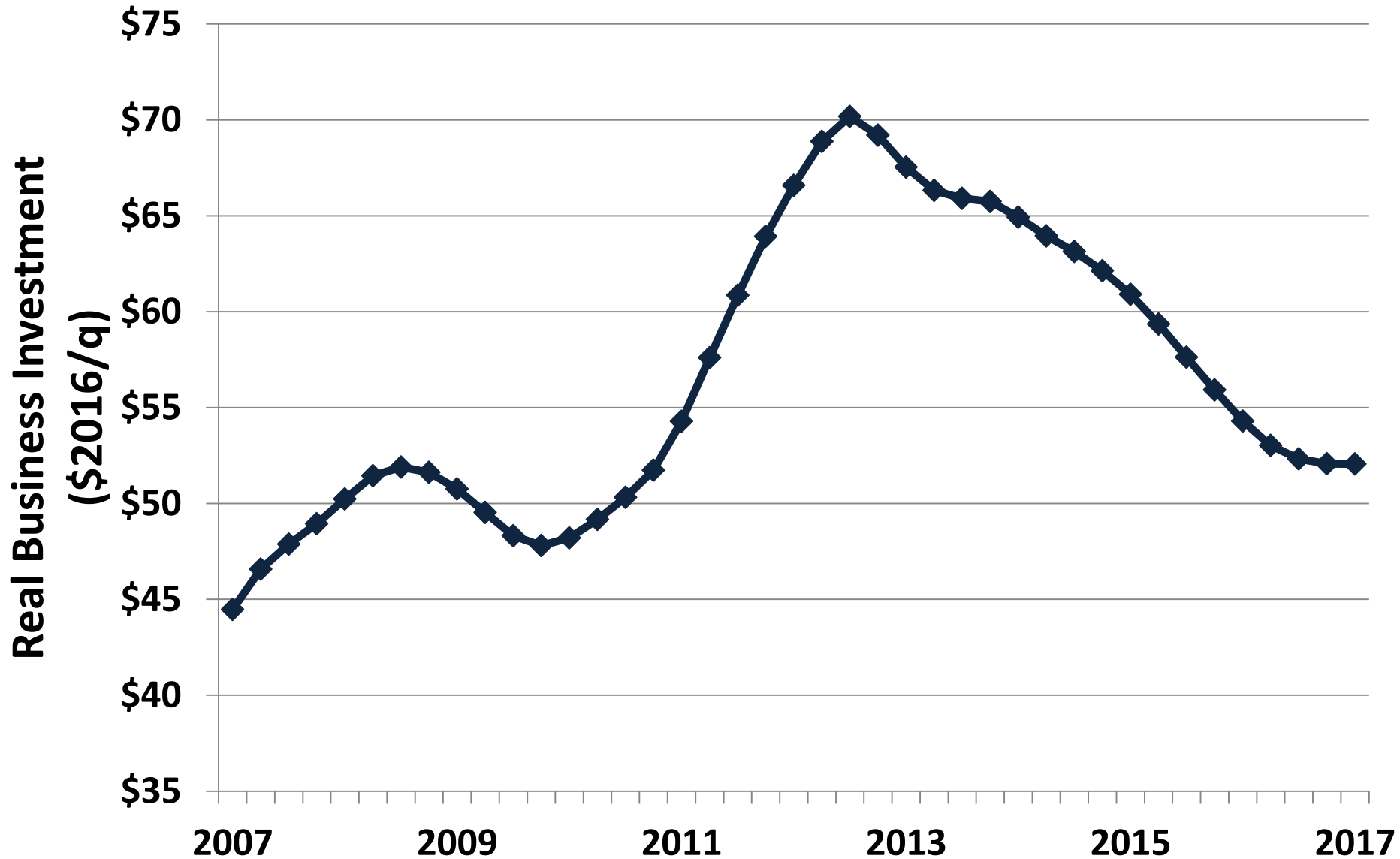
2. Labour-Saving Automation is not Actually Accelerating



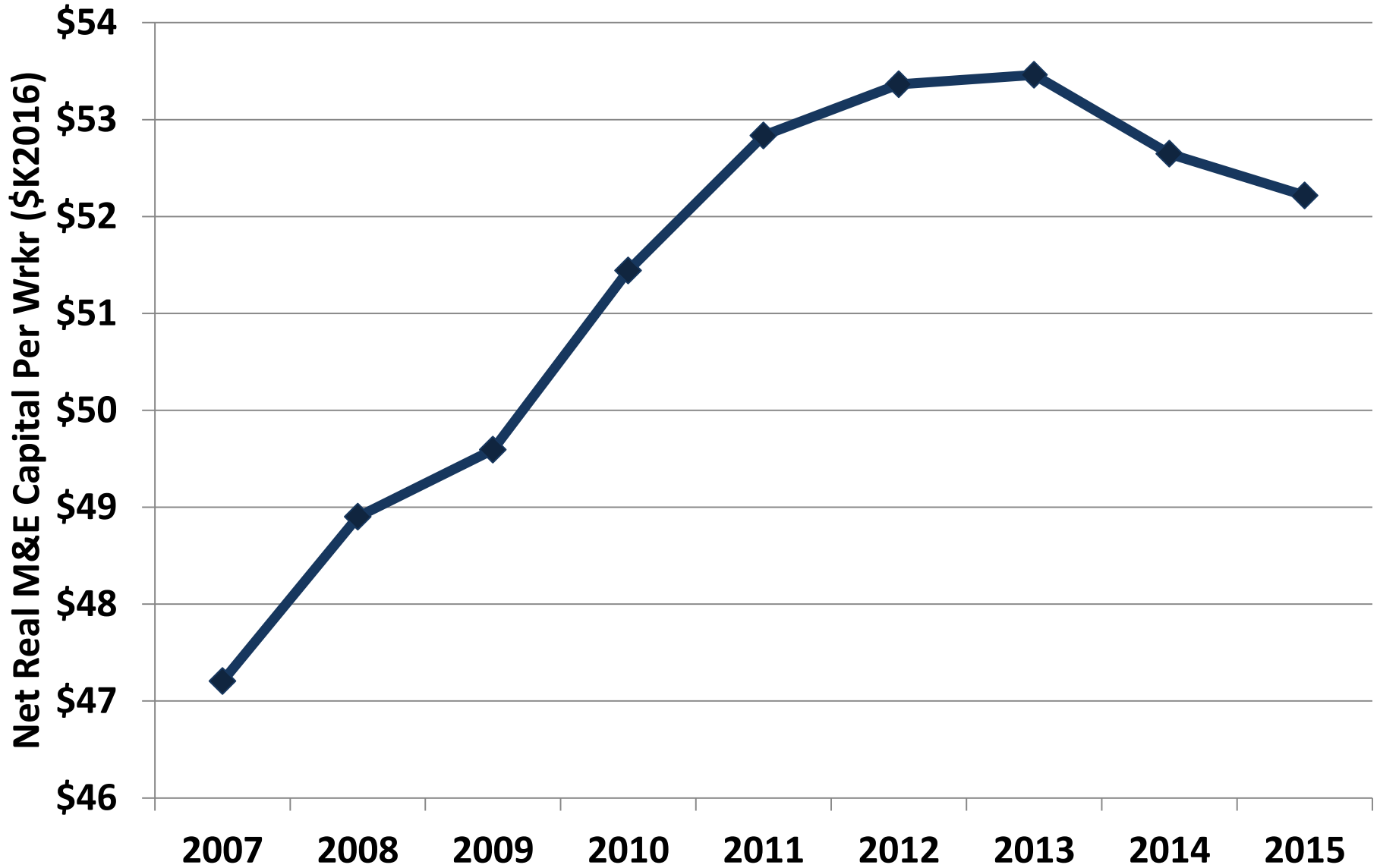
A Hare or a Turtle?

- Hype about automation / robotisation / computerisation does not match observed reality.
- Some industries / occupations are clearly affected.
- But recorded labour productivity growth is not accelerating (more likely slowing).
- Capital investment and capital intensity are declining, not growing.

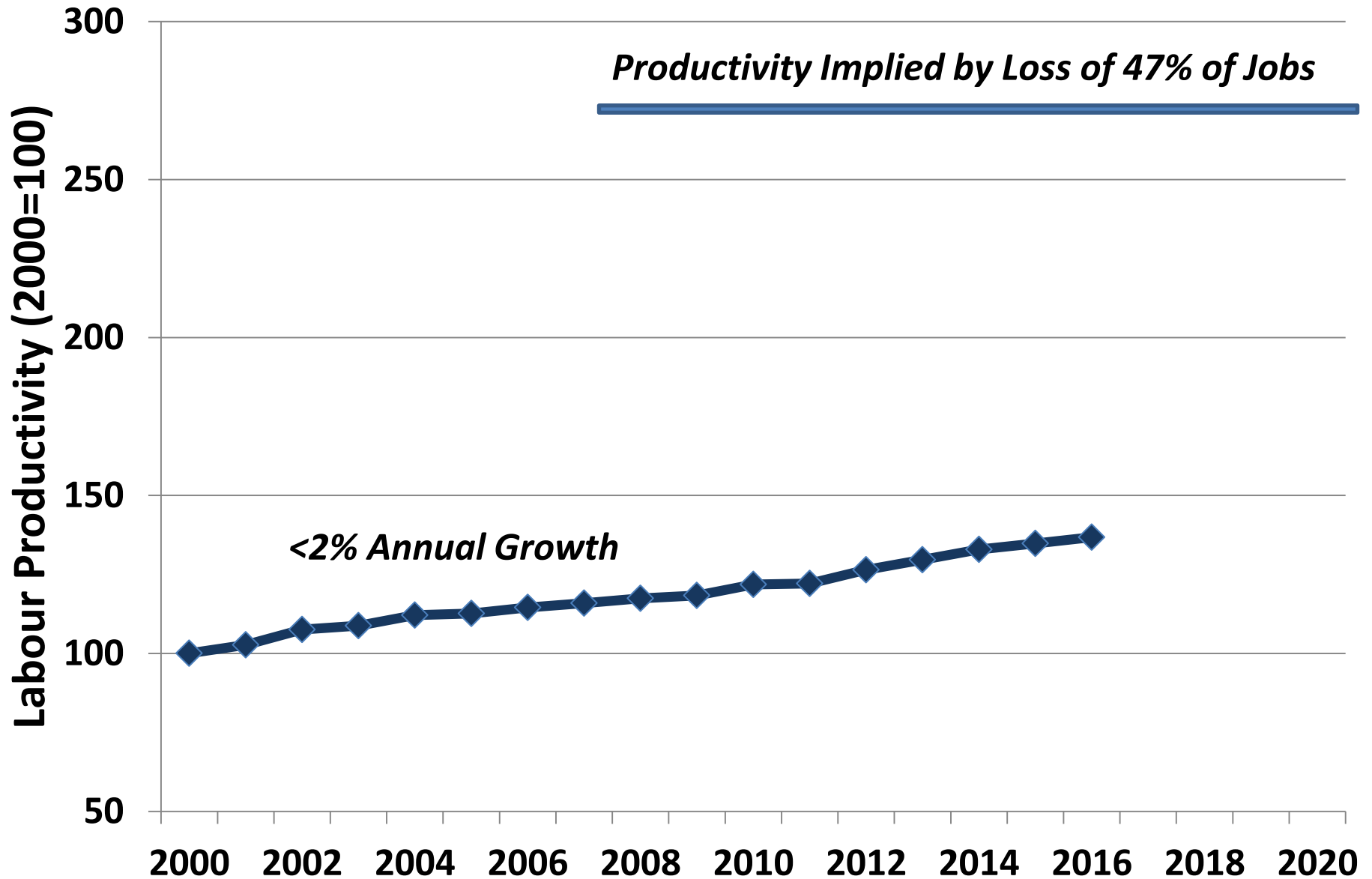
Falling Capital Investment



Eroding Capital Intensity



Actual & Implied Productivity



Example: Driverless Transport



3. Technology is Affecting the Employment Relationship

- Employers have always used technology as a tool to control the work process and the employment relationship.
 - Nothing new about that.
- Spheres of application:
 - Management and coordination.
 - Facilitate hiring and deployment.
 - Supervise and intensify work.

A Sleeper Issue:

Modern Surveillance & Discipline

- Technology makes it cheaper and easier to monitor, discipline, and even discharge labour.
- Examples:
 - CCTV, GPS, work pace monitoring, discipline and discharge apps.
- These offend the privacy and dignity of workers.
- They shift employers' labour extraction strategies to “sticks” rather than “carrots”.
 - Help to explain wage stagnation.

4. What is “Gig” Work? And is it Even “New”?

- 5 common key features:
 1. No commitment to continuing work (“on call”).
 2. Piece-work compensation.
 3. Worker assumes responsibility for providing equipment, workplace (“home work”).
 4. Triangulated relationship with an intermediary.
 5. Assumption of digital mediation.
 - What job doesn't have it??

Home Work



Piece Work



On-Call Work



Labour Hire

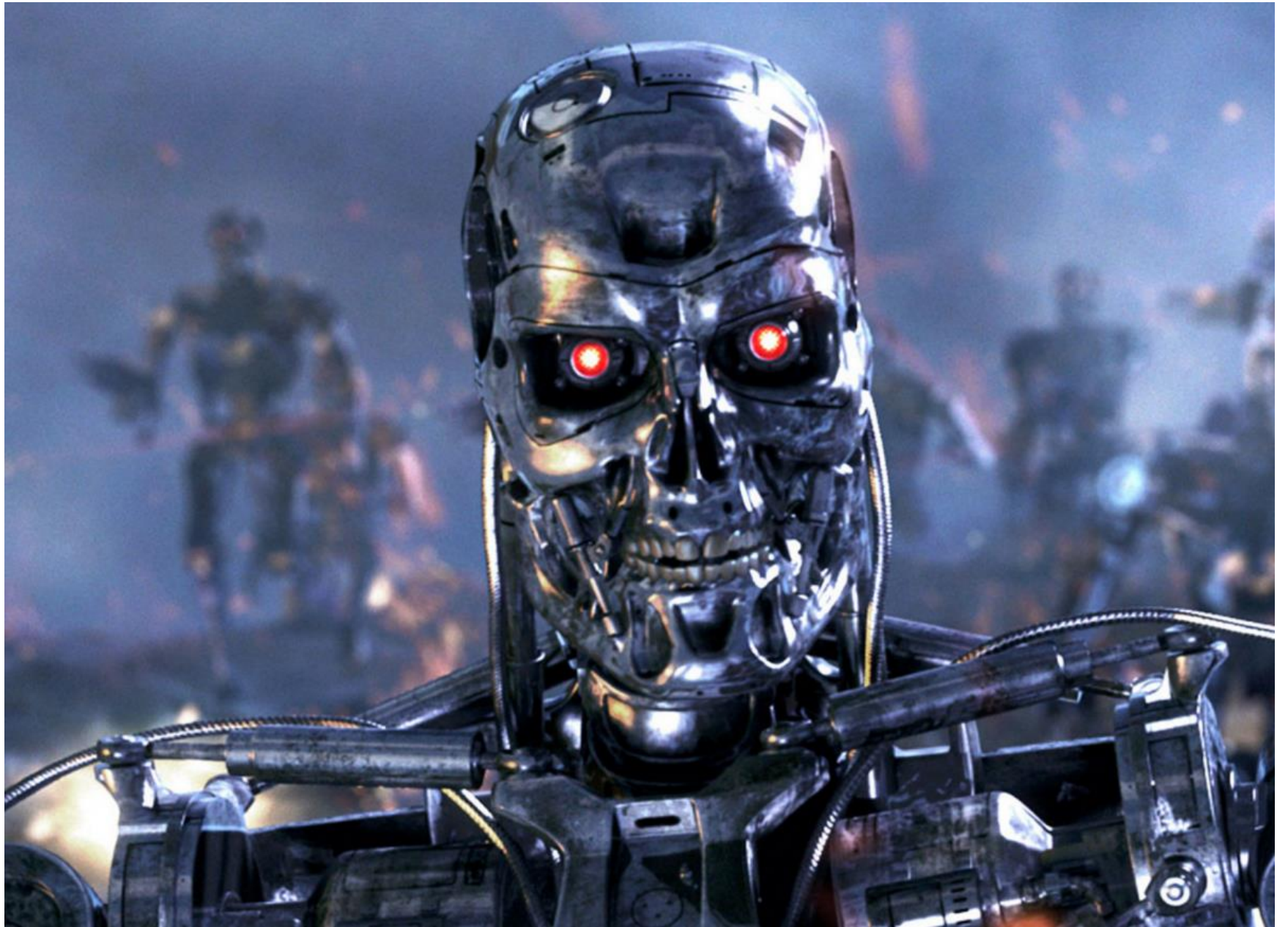


5. Structural & Institutional Disempowerment of Labour

- Erosion of institutions which supported higher and more equal wages explains the relative decline in labour incomes and their greater inequality.
- Because of economic conditions, regulatory openings, willingness (desperation?) of workers, and technology, employers have created a hyper-flexible system of just-in-time, precarious work.
- Technology facilitates this, but hasn't caused it.

Putting Technology in Its Place

- Every technical application has a social / political / regulatory context, that impacts its use as part of employers' cost-minimising business strategies.
- Example: Uber and “gig” jobs.
 - Why not use the actual new technology (dispatch system) to improve taxi service in a context that maintains standard jobs and stability of work??



Making Technology Work for Workers

1. Strong rights to information, notice, input.
2. Ability to negotiate adjustment.
3. Protections from automated monitoring, discipline.
4. Strong commitment from employers to redeployment, upgrading (internal mobility).
5. Strong income protections, training, and adjustment assistance (external mobility).
6. More effective skills/vocational programs & pathways.
7. Full employment macro policy stance.
8. More investments in public services (for work, care).

Overarching Conclusion

- Most work is still paid employment.
- Employers always try to get most labour effort, for the least price.
- Employers always use technology as a tool in that effort.
- Workers want better pay and decent conditions.
- Terms and conditions of work depend on the balance of power between the two sides.
- Unions are essential (more than ever) in giving workers some power in that struggle.

#ChangeTheRules

Thank You!

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