

AI, Work, Who Gains in Ireland

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Artificial intelligence models are trained on the shared knowledge of humanity: everything ever written, drawn, composed, or worked out, by artists, writers, scientists, & all those who came before us. These models are then finished by people paid by the hour to label, moderate, & correct them, but the gains from all this work are concentrating in just a few large firms. So what are we going to do about it?

In Sandyford this spring, 720 people who did Meta's content moderation & AI training were told the work was going. More than five hundred of them had been training the systems that would replace them. They were employed by Covalen, a Dublin contractor, so the decision to automate was Meta's & the legal obligations were somebody else's. They went on strike three times in May. By July the redundancies had gone through, & by their union's account many of them were paid nothing.

Covalen was not alone. In April, Oracle gave the Department notice of around 150 redundancies among its Irish staff. In May, Meta moved to cut up to 350 more Irish roles, & told staff by email in the early hours of the morning. In August, about three hundred people at TikTok in Ireland lost their jobs, from trust & safety, the part of the platform that decides what you see & what comes down. Their termination agreements reportedly asked them for two more things: no complaint to the Data Protection Commission about how their personal data was handled, & no request to see the data behind their own dismissal.

Who is willing to say the machine did it? Almost nobody. Meta came closest. On its January earnings call, Mark Zuckerberg said that projects which used to require big teams were now being accomplished by a single very talented person. Sam Altman told an interviewer in February that there is some AI washing, firms

blaming AI for job cuts they would have made anyway, & in the same breath that there is real displacement too.

Economists at the ESRI model that roughly 7% of jobs will be displaced, close to 200,000, & that inequality rises in every scenario they run. Nobody knows how much more of this is coming, & the number everyone quotes is softer than it looks. That 7% is imported from a Goldman Sachs estimate of United States employment, which the ESRI's authors themselves treat as a possible upper bound. Their model contains no job creation at all.

Adoption is still shallow; only 20.2% of Irish enterprises used AI in some capacity in 2025. The headline numbers look fine, with IDA client employment at 312,468, up 1.5% on the year, & most employers cutting jobs are not naming AI as the reason. If AI is only the cover story, does anything here change? No. A right to see the algorithm, terms on the power it runs on, & a floor under the people it displaces are worth having either way.

The losses fall on wages. The gains land as capital. The State owns the grid the machines run on, it operates two sovereign funds, it writes the labour law, & it has held the chair of the EU Council since 1 July. Who carries the loss & who keeps the gain is being decided mostly by default.

What the Law Owes

What does the law actually guarantee you when the job goes?

Statutory redundancy needs 104 weeks of continuous service. Below that you get nothing. Above it you get two weeks' pay for each year of service, plus one more week, & a week's pay is capped at €600, which has not moved since January 2005.

The law does say how the cap should move. Under the Redundancy Payments Act 1979, a Minister raising it must take into account any changes in the average earnings of workers in the transportable goods industries. That is a Central Statistics Office series, & the CSO stopped publishing it in 2007. Asked about the cap in September 2024, the Minister still named that series as the benchmark,

accepted the cap had not risen since 2005, & said officials were keeping the matter under active review. Nothing obliges anyone to move it at all. The Connect trade union puts the indexed figure at €1,015.

Meta's own Dublin staff were let go three weeks after the Covalen workers, on terms reported as sixteen weeks plus two a year, which Meta has never confirmed for Irish workers. Amazon's Irish package in March was five weeks a year, with a floor of twelve weeks & a cap of seventy-five. The statute sets the same floor for all three; everything above it was a choice.

The duty to consult before any of that happens has a gap in it, & the gap is two words wide. The Protection of Employment Act 1977 applies that duty whether the decision is taken by the employer or by a company that controls it. "Controls it" reaches up a corporate chain, from a subsidiary to its parent. It does not reach across a commercial one, from a contractor to its client. Meta was Covalen's client, not its parent, so the law's reach ended exactly where the decision was made.

Covalen notified the Department on 27 April with 720 roles at risk. It declined to attend the Workplace Relations Commission, & it was entitled not to, because conciliation there is voluntary & nobody can be compelled to appear. The case was raised in the Dáil in June, & the law has not moved.

Worker Voice

Software now sorts who gets hired, sets who works when, & scores how well they did it, what the EU calls algorithmic management. A person still signs the dismissal, but the software has already decided. The European Commission's Joint Research Centre surveyed more than 70,000 workers across all 27 member states. Three in ten use AI for work; one in four has their working time allocated automatically by software. In a Eurobarometer survey of the Irish public, 80% said it mattered that workers & their representatives be involved in adopting workplace technology. They are not involved, & nothing yet obliges anyone to involve them.

Two countries already impose that obligation. Spain's Rider Law has since 2021 given workers' representatives the right to know the parameters, rules, &

instructions behind any algorithm that affects working conditions, hiring, or dismissal. It sits in the general labour code, so it covers every employer & not only the delivery platforms it was named for. In Germany an employer has needed the works council's consent for monitoring systems since long before AI, & the 2021 reform confirmed that it covers AI too. Both have limits. Spain's right works only where workers have elected representatives, & enforcement has been thin, with many councils unaware they hold it. The German council's say over hiring runs only to selection guidelines, & only firms with more than 500 employees can be made to draw them up.

The European Union has already written the duty. Under the AI Act, an employer must tell its workers & their representatives before it uses a high-risk AI system on them at work. That covers the employer who buys a system as well as the one who builds it, & most buy. It does not depend on union recognition either, which matters in a country with no right to recognition, where collective agreements cover about a third of workers. Then, in June, the Parliament & the Council deferred it: the AI omnibus, which came into force on 27 July, pushes the employment duties back to a fixed date, 2 December 2027.

Ireland's Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Act 2026 was signed on 21 July. A statutory instrument on 31 July then made the Workplace Relations Commission the body that will police how employers use these systems, sixteen months ahead of the employment duties it is there to enforce. Our own Act sets up the enforcement structure & writes no right of its own. Every duty an employer will owe & every protection a worker will get comes from the AI Act.

So why legislate what Brussels has already written? Because Brussels deferred it, & left the door open on purpose. The AI Act & the GDPR both let member states give workers stronger protection over AI at work, so a duty on the employer using the system, rather than on the people who build it, needs no new EU law. The AI Act does it in Article 2(11). The GDPR does it in Article 88, which is the sturdier hook, because it names monitoring at work outright & lets the rules come by law or by collective agreement.

The Presidency

We have held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union since 1 July, & we hold it until 31 December. The chair came with one package, the digital omnibus, in two halves, & only one half is still live.

The AI half of the November 2025 omnibus is finished, & only its entry into force on 27 July fell inside our six months. The data half is far from finished. As of Parliament's August update, the Council has no agreed position on it & the Parliament has only a draft report, with more than 1,750 amendments tabled.

The drafting falls to us. The Cypriot presidency handed that half over on 26 June because member states could not agree, & our first compromise text, dated 3 September, was listed for a Council working group on 11 September. Nothing binds anybody to it yet. A coalition of 133 civil society organisations & trade unions calls the package the biggest rollback of digital rights in EU history. Rather than holding a line in a negotiation already under way, we decide whether a Council position exists before January.

The Quality Jobs Act fits the chair, & nobody is discussing it. The second phase of the Commission's consultation on it ran from 20 July to 28 September, wholly within our six months. It names algorithmic management & artificial intelligence at work as a target area: making automated decisions more transparent & human-centred, & protecting employees from excessive monitoring. Our published Presidency programme mentions algorithmic management & platform work nowhere. What is the chair for, if not this?

A Stake in the Machine

Data centres took 23% of our metered electricity in 2025, some 7,663 gigawatt hours, & their consumption grew 10% in a year while every other user grew 2%. The regulator projects them at 31% of national demand by 2034. We own the grid they draw on.

KPMG's *The Value of Data Centres to Ireland*, commissioned by the Government, counts data centre operations as supporting 8,534 jobs in 2025, of which 39%, or 3,338, are directly employed. Set that against the electricity & you get about 2,296 megawatt hours a year for every person directly employed to operate an Irish data centre. That is not a ratio anyone should legislate against; infrastructure this capital-intensive employs few people by its nature. But when the jobs number is the argument for the connection, the jobs number has to be said out loud, small as it is.

The Minister published the report on 2 June. Its headline is that some 876,000 jobs are enabled by data centres, which turns out to be total employment in the six sectors that lean on them most, not jobs that exist because of them. In August, records released under freedom of information showed a Department official telling KPMG that the executive summary needed a strong narrative supporting the case for more data centres. A section on the opportunity costs did not survive into the final text. The Department denies predetermining anything.

What do we charge a data centre for the electricity it takes, over what any other business pays? Nothing. The same euro per megawatt hour applies to a data centre & to a bakery.

Grid access itself is not a bargaining chip. European electricity law lets a connection be refused only for lack of capacity, for safety, or on technical grounds, & requires the terms to be published & the same for every user. Trading access for a stake would also wreck the basis on which a State fund invests at all, which is that it behaves like any other market investor.

The connection already comes with terms. The December 2025 conditions require every data centre connecting at a megavolt-ampere or more to source 80% of its annual demand from new renewable generation in Ireland within six years of switching on. That is a condition on the connection, lawful & in force.

Environmental groups have been challenging it in the High Court since March on the ground that it is too weak. The argument is now about how strict the conditions are, not whether they may exist.

There is one condition we agreed to & never enacted. EU energy efficiency law requires data centres above a megawatt to use their waste heat unless they can show it is not technically or economically feasible. Our deadline to have that in law was 11 October 2025.

What we can bargain with is everything else we supply: land, planning, transmission reinforcement, & our own custom as a buyer, each at a price we can set. The Ireland Strategic Investment Fund already has the mandate to invest on a commercial basis in support of economic activity & employment in Ireland. It can take a stake on the terms a private co-investor would get, with no new vehicle & no special exception. The public would then hold a share of the return as well as the tax.

The objection is that the buildings earn a utility's margin while the models earn the rent, so this is a claim on the least valuable part of the business. It is, but that part is the only one built here, on ground we control, which makes it the one part we can take a share of.

The Oireachtas has already asked for more than conditions. Its Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence recommended in December 2025 that the State guard against an overreliance on the private sector, & in the very next line that it explore publicly owned AI resources & technologies. The Government has answered neither.

The Future Ireland Fund, our savings fund, is a different instrument on a different timescale, & it is already built Norway's way. Norway's fund invests entirely outside Norway, by mandate since 1996, so the windfall is not recycled into the economy that produced it. Ours held €12.7 billion at the end of 2025, none of which has to be invested at home, & it is locked until 2041. What it lacks is scale, & an answer to who it pays.

The Tax Base

Corporation tax comes from a small number of foreign multinationals. The Fiscal Council, the State's budget watchdog, estimates that the top three corporate

groups paid 46% of it in 2024, roughly €13 billion, & warns that, as receipts concentrate, they become riskier. Several of those firms are now betting their futures on AI. If the bets disappoint, we lose tax on wages & on profits at once.

We tax capital at high rates, but on a narrow base. Capital gains, inheritances, & deposit interest are all taxed at 33%, & fund exits at 38%, cut from 41% in Budget 2026. What we do not tax at all is accumulated net wealth. In the comparison the ESRI prints, income tax was 34% of tax revenue, corporation tax 32%, consumption 29%, & taxes on wealth & capital 5%. The ESRI's joint work with the Department of Finance finds that AI shifts income from labour to capital, from the base we tax most to the base we tax least. It says broadening the tax base & strengthening the taxation of wealth & capital may become necessary.

In the ESRI's model, inequality rises through three channels: job losses, wage gains, & capital income. Job losses & wage gains do most of the widening, & capital income, the channel a wealth tax is aimed at, is the smallest of the three. A resident net wealth tax cannot touch foreign-owned profits booked here for non-resident shareholders either, so it does nothing about the concentration of corporation tax described above.

Access to Work

The ESRI's report cuts against the usual story: the risk sits with higher-earning & highly educated workers, with 0.7% of the lowest-earning tenth displaced against 5.1% of the highest-earning tenth. A wave that reaches into salaried professional work is a harder problem, & it puts more people on the same side of the argument.

The Department of Finance & the Department of Enterprise classify 63% of Irish employment as highly exposed, & split that into 33% where AI is likely to complement labour & 30% where it may substitute for it. Exposure falls unevenly: 76% of women's jobs are highly exposed against 51% of men's, so whatever protection we build reaches a larger share of women than of men. That is about who is exposed, not who has already lost.

The entry rung is where the losses are visible now. Stanford's tracking, revised on 12 August, finds employment of 22 to 25 year olds in the most exposed occupations running about 19% behind their peers of the same age in less exposed work. The authors' first stated finding is that there is no evidence of widespread economy-wide displacement, & the gap is opening because firms are hiring fewer young people, not because they are letting more of them go. A door that never opens is harder to see than one that closes. Someone leaving college in Ireland this year gets no reply rather than a redundancy notice. The National Youth Council's citizens' juries put stronger protection of entry-level work among their recommendations in June.

Retraining alone will not carry it. A Brookings commentary reviewing sixty years of American retraining found the effect on displaced workers inconclusive at best. That is American evidence, so it is a reason to evaluate an Irish scheme rather than to assume one works.

Under the reinforced EU Youth Guarantee we already undertake to offer everyone under 30 a job, apprenticeship, traineeship, or education place within four months. Austria has run the nearest thing to a test of what keeping such a promise costs. Its Marienthal pilot enrolled 107 people from 2020 to 2024 & all but eliminated long-term unemployment in one town without displacing other work. The Austrian government has since put €50 million towards extending it.

Marienthal aimed at people out of work for twelve months or more, not at graduates facing a hiring freeze, so an Irish evaluation would have to test whether it works for them. We had 38,900 people in long-term unemployment in the second quarter of 2026, up 7,200 in a year. An Irish version would be a Budget line in the low hundreds of millions. That is a rough figure, because the pilot's per-participant costs do not transfer: Austria's benefit system sits inside them.

The money is already collected. The National Training Fund held a surplus of almost €1.8 billion at the end of 2024, raised from a levy employers already pay & unspent behind a spending ceiling we set ourselves. It cannot lawfully pay wages: the Act confines it to training people in work, training people who want to gain

skills, & research on what skills are needed. The Oireachtas amended the Act in January 2026 to let the Fund buy land & buildings, & still did not let it pay a wage.

The Levers

There are nine asks, ordered by whose desk each lands on. The Minister for Enterprise can do the first three before Christmas without asking anyone for money.

Give workers' representatives a collective right over the algorithms that hire, roster, & score them. Write it into the Information and Consultation Act 2006, & into the Platform Work Directive when we transpose it, which we have to do by 2 December 2026 anyway. It is the smallest ask here, because a right to be consulted is not a right to refuse.

Fix the reach of redundancy law. It climbs a corporate chain & stops, so the client who ended the work walks away. Extend it across the commercial chain, shorten the 104-week rule, index the €600 cap to a series that still exists, & make the client jointly liable when the work is outsourced.

Set up a Joint Labour Committee for outsourced moderation & annotation. A committee like that sets binding pay & conditions for its sector, & its orders bind every employer in it from the day they are signed, whether or not a union is ever recognised. Early Years went from setting up its committee to binding rates in a little over a year. The Labour Court's review records most committees as idle because employers do not attend, so it is a route around recognition that still needs somebody to sit down.

The fourth belongs to the Presidency, & it runs out with the chair on 31 December. The Commission's Quality Jobs Act consultation named algorithmic management & closed on 28 September. Put that part of it into the Council's work now, rather than waiting to answer the Commission's proposal later this year.

Two go in the Finance Bill, & the Budget is on 6 October.

Price the capacity. Put a charge on the grid capacity data centres reserve, through the Finance Bill rather than a network tariff, so it sits outside the electricity tax altogether. For scale, €10 per megawatt hour on 2025 consumption would raise about €77 million gross, nearer €65 million once deducted against profits taxed at 15%. The real charge would be set on what is reserved rather than what is used, & sized on its own terms. Either way, it is a price on something scarce, not a levy to fund the energy transition. Keep the December 2025 renewable conditions & tighten them.

Get more out of the capital taxes we already have. Our Commission on Taxation and Welfare looked at a net wealth tax in 2022 & recommended raising the yield of the existing capital taxes instead. The money is broadly the same as a wealth tax would raise, & the recommendation is already on a State body's record, so nobody can call it an invitation to capital flight. Then publish the wealth tax case with the evidence against it attached: when Spain reintroduced its regional tax with Madrid exempt, the income tax that left with the people who moved was six times the wealth tax that did. An exit charge, a minimum residence period, & valuation rules for unlisted holdings are the answers to that, & the case has to carry them.

One has no clock on it. Take the stake through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, which already invests here on commercial terms, & now write the citizen's share into the Act that governs the Future Ireland Fund. Norway found oil in 1969 & moved the first krone into its fund in 1996.

Two belong to other departments. The Minister for Further and Higher Education holds the training levy: fund the Youth Guarantee expansion from what it has already collected, & amend section 7 of the National Training Fund Act so the Fund can pay a wage. The Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment holds the energy law: enact the waste-heat duty for data centres that was due in Irish law by October 2025.

My late father often said to me, "That's great, David, but what are you going to do about it?"

We have our individual rights, but we do not hold a collective right over the systems that hire, roster, & score us. We write one before Christmas. We put algorithmic management on the Council's table while the chair is still ours. We fix the reach of redundancy law, across the commercial chain & down from 104 weeks, so the next 720 people do not end up at a client's door with nothing owed. We take the stake through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund now, because that one has no date, & never will unless we set one.

Artificial intelligence is built on the work of all of us, so who gains from it is our question to ask. We own the grid. We hold the funds. We write the labour law. So let's get to it.

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