



Technology is a product of human labour. The working class and society can therefore shape its direction. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), long-term technological change has created more employment than it has destroyed, and has pushed overall living standards to new levels, notwithstanding the disruption that it inevitably brings.

What's more, the ILO concludes in a 2017 report, there's no clear sense that this will be otherwise in the foreseeable future.

The Southern Centre for Inequality Studies has embarked on a research project comparing countries across the global South to explore, through global production networks, the impact of new technology on the future of work and workers. Global production networks have gained increased importance in global production organisation, co-ordination and associated international trade. Using global production networks to anchor an analytical framework enables a focus on the actors involved in the geographically dispersed, multi-scale, multi-dimensional, globalised structures of production and trade.

This includes a focus on workers.

My research focuses on the automotive manufacturing sector – South Africa's leading manufacturing sector. The research shows that, while technology is indeed a powerful determinant of change, it is important to recognise the role that worker organisation and the state, through its industrial policy, play in shaping the direction of change.

Technological change and job disruption

My findings indicate a decline in employment in the final vehicle assembly segment by 8,600 workers, from 38,600 in 1995 to 30,000 in 2017.

During the same period, investment by final vehicle companies, known as original equipment manufacturers, increased from R0.8 billion in 1995 to R8.2 billion in 2017.