



CWU DIGITAL+TECHWORKER ALLIANCE

The CWU stands up for Covalen Workers

Who protects the internet and keeps your social media platforms safe for you and your family?

It's content moderation workers – the people who, day in and day out, filter out the worst forms of violence and abuse that might otherwise reach your phones and computers. They train AI programmes so that these systems don't return answers that support violent or abusive acts, or generate content along those lines.

When it comes to Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp – social media tools owned by the tech multinational Meta – this work in Ireland is carried out by workers who have joined DATA-CWU and begun to build their own union in a company called Covalen. These union members are the guardians of the internet as you experience it through these Meta applications.

The workforce is extremely diverse, coming from a wide range of backgrounds, ages, races, nationalities, genders, and sexualities – with most workers not originally from Ireland. Many are on work visas, and the vast majority spend most of their salaries on Dublin rents. CWU Organisers John Bohan and Shane Murphy have been supporting members in Covalen to build the power they need to improve conditions in their workplace and win the respect they deserve. Membership is increasing at quick and consistent pace as workers come together to stand up for what's right.

"How can I say without blowing into the details? Probably some of you already watch the Dexter series on Netflix, or the Jeffrey Dahmer documentary. Yeah, so if you saw that documentary, you know our job. We are exposed to this kind of content – but 100 times more disturbing." – DATA-CWU Covalen Rep, Seminar 2025

Covalen is a subsidiary of the Irish company CPL, which provides temporary and permanent staff to the technology, accounting and finance, sales, engineering, light industrial, healthcare, pharmaceutical, and office admin sectors. It employs over 13,000 people across around 45 offices worldwide. CPL was acquired by the Japanese company "Outsourcing" in 2020 – an all-cash deal worth €318 million, netting then-CEO and Longford native Anne Heraty and her family €110 million.

Outsourcing made €23.9 million in profits in 2023, financial documents show. For context, their current client Meta made €1.305 billion through its Irish arm in the same year. Covalen itself employs around 2,000 people in Sandyford working on the Meta project – with almost all staff working five days a week in the office.

"When I complained to the [Senior Manager], I told them, listen, you need to tell all your operational managers and your TLs to treat all of us representatives like kings and queens. And the [Senior Manager] was like, how so? And I said, because your money comes from us. The client is paying the headcount for the representatives, not for the management, so your money is paid by the company – and company money comes from us." – DATA-CWU Covalen Rep, Seminar 2025

As CWU delegates heard at our annual seminar in Dún Laoghaire, workers in Covalen are a far cry from the well-paid technology workers we often associate with the sector. Your fellow members aren't earning six-figure salaries, nor do they relax on bean bags in the break room while eating gourmet food. Instead, they earn below the average industrial wage, repeatedly have their bonuses denied based on excessive time management metrics and code use, and face a toxic culture of bullying, harassment, and a complete lack of communication from management.

While Meta and Covalen rake in millions and even billions in profit, your fellow members make a pittance while dealing with constant disrespect, continual changes to working conditions, and the steady erosion of their limited benefits. As a Union, we were moved by the bravery of our two representatives who took time off work – despite concerns about job safety – to attend the seminar and share their experiences in organising for a better workplace.

This isn't just a story of horrific conditions; it's a story of workers standing up, through their union, and fighting together for something better.

Beginning with two angry members determined



to improve their workplace in January this year, membership has sky-rocketed in just a few months. Through a combination of one-to-one conversations, phone calls, and in-person meetings, members and CWU organisers increased Union membership to over 30 people, just from the initial stages – these numbers continue to rise rapidly.

At seminar, our Covalen representatives spoke of their struggles: the lack of a pay structure, no pay rises, overbearing micromanagement through the use of codes, and how the company has reduced their “wellness time” – time meant to help workers cope with the traumatic content they deal with, including sexual violence and child abuse.

One representative shared how she and her colleagues were already organising and standing up to management before she ever spoke to a CWU organiser on LinkedIn. After one particularly awful meeting with management:

“We were like, no – I’m not taking that anymore. And then we submitted a collective letter. We formed a group on our internal work chat system. We had about 180 people and we signed the letter. Then I submitted the letter to higher management. That day I was like, ‘Oh, now I need more protection.’ And then I joined the Union.” – DATA-CWU Covalen Rep, Seminar 2025

Through this action, they won collective meetings with management, who began making small concessions – but no meaningful changes. The need for a strong union was clear.

As frustration grew, workers were told their food benefits were being cut. The company would no longer provide breakfasts, lunches, or dinners – and even basic tea and coffee provisions were withdrawn. For workers hired with the promise of remote working, this cut removed one of the few cost-of-living supports available to them on already inadequate wages.

In response, Union membership more than doubled. Members, with support from John and Shane, developed and distributed a staff survey on the impact of the cuts, gathering over 700 responses. They wrote a letter to management, citing the results and widespread anger. This forced management to backtrack partially, reinstating one meal per day.

However, the quality of the meals was exceedingly poor. Allergies weren’t accounted for, rice was undercooked, and several workers reported falling ill. So members kept organising.

After a series of weekend meetings hosted by CWU organisers, members created a campaign plan, elected their own committee, and began mapping the workforce. They surveyed over 150 workers to reinforce that food and low wages were the most pressing issues.

In mid-May, members released an open letter

demanding either the return of good-quality meals or a €16 daily food allowance. The letter also called for the election of a Worker Safety Representative, as set out in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. Staff were invited to sign the letter both to support the demands and to elect a Union colleague to the Safety Representative role.

Setting a target of 250 signatures, members surpassed this in just two days. By day three, the letter had over 270 signatures, rising to more than 400 by the end of day four. The election of a Safety Representative will finally provide a formal channel for raising health and safety concerns – from physical conditions in the office to food safety and mental health risks – and allow meaningful consultation as the Union continues to build its strength.

“I would say, because I’m a foreigner from Brazil, and the majority of people that work for Covalen are foreigners, we don’t really know our rights here. But with the Union, we can have the right support and know our rights.” – DATA-CWU Covalen Rep, Seminar 2025

CWU organisers John Bohan and Shane Murphy will continue to support these members as they grow their campaign in Covalen. As your Deputy General Secretary, Ian McArdle, said at the seminar: “Power concedes nothing without a struggle.”

We echo the words of our President, Frank Donohue, who closed the Covalen discussion panel with a rousing call to support these members in their fight for the respect, conditions, and union rights many of us already enjoy.

We still hear the echo of the standing ovation our Covalen representatives received. To any Covalen worker reading this: **you have the full support of the CWU as you continue building the workplace union you need – one that can deliver the change you and your colleagues deserve.**

