



A bold voice for transportation workers

AUTOMATION IN TRANSPORTATION

Working people are living in a time when it is more and more difficult to make ends meet. Wages are stagnant, and the jobs created during the slow economic recovery are doing little to reduce inequality in the workplace. Meanwhile, attacks on unionization, offshoring, employee misclassification, convoluted corporate structures and technological change are threatening the nature of work for millions of Americans. The advent of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven automation in transportation poses risks to both jobs and safety and creates challenges for how existing government structures regulate transportation and respond to job impacts.

Clearly, technological changes in transportation threaten to drastically alter the provision of service and the nature of work, and destroy millions of jobs. Automation is certain to impact every sector of transportation and by extension, its workforce. From automated vehicles (AV) on the ground and ships at sea, to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), or drones, to the myriad applications of robotics, the pace and complexity of new technologies under development are significant. The predictions of substantial employment losses from automation will largely be realized if our elected leaders make all the wrong choices and fail to advance public policies meant to assist the dislocated. These job impacts are not just reserved to people who earn a living behind the wheel – there are vast swaths of the workforce at risk.

With this backdrop, the role that key institutions – most notably the labor movement – play in shaping the responses to this wave of automation will profoundly affect outcomes. The bottom line is that transportation labor will not let the people we elect or the giant corporations that stand to make billions in profits ignore the massive labor market disruptions that are on the immediate horizon. New automation technologies can't simply be about killing good jobs and gutting labor standards; they must be about enhancing safety and providing frontline workers with new tools to improve and modernize passenger and freight transportation service.

The federal regulatory apparatus will face considerable pressure during this automation wave. Transportation safety regulators enforce comprehensive regulations that help protect the traveling public, communities and the employees who work on our transportation systems. The regulations are imperfect and need constant improvement to address new developments, but they have been developed carefully over many decades of experience. Now these regulators face technological innovations that are advancing, not over many decades, but at a rapid pace. And the developers and investors in automation platforms believe deployment can occur in a matter of years. That raises the stakes for how our government responds.

Federal regulators are also the stewards of a complex transportation security regime that was largely developed as a response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These regulators will be tasked with figuring out responses to a variety of threats such as the very real concern that AVs, UAVs and other technology are vulnerable to hacking. Overall, they will need to implement rigid and enforceable safeguards designed to protect against use of automation technology to harm the nation.

Collectively, these standards set a level of safety and security that transportation providers and their employees are required to uphold and that Americans expect their government to enforce. So as we see the emergence and eventual implementation of automation or advanced technologies into our transportation network, transportation labor will demand that these advancements do not come at the expense of safety and security. We will be a leading voice in pushing policymakers to carefully study the myriad of ways these technologies can impact transportation safety and security across all modes and to establish and implement the necessary regulatory measures and structures before we open the floodgates to mass deployment.

As regulatory structures are evaluated in anticipation of a wave of transportation automation, transportation labor will insist on a national conversation about what these innovations mean for our economy and working people. For four decades, middle-class incomes have either stagnated or fallen, and today we have a labor market in which millions remain unemployed or underemployed, unionization rates are in decline, labor force participation is down, and employees are increasingly in less stable work arrangements with lower benefits. If we learned one lesson from this election, it is that people want meaningful work, and introducing a massive wave of job displacing technology will only further decimate the lives of working people and serve to increase economic inequality. Without a doubt, the aviation, transit, rail, maritime, port and transportation construction sectors are all under incredible threat from automation.

How exactly AI-driven technology effects workers and the distribution of income is not just a matter of intellectual debate, it is a matter of how public policy and employers respond, and what role unions and collective bargaining play in the process. If we follow Silicon Valley's increasingly popular model for employment – as represented by existing and emerging tech giants and startups – in which regulatory and tax arbitrage, misclassification, and the denial of labor rights are used to maximize profits, socialize risks, and hurt workers, the result will be a further lowering of labor standards and growing inequality. Instead, we must embrace a larger role for the most important mediating institution in American history for increasing wages and supporting the middle class: unions in the workplace. Even the most ardent opponents of unions know that collective bargaining is a proven way for working people to realize wage and benefit gains. Unions are also equalizers in making sure that the pursuit of profits doesn't come at the expense of workplace and public safety. It is why some tech executives, such as Tesla's CEO, openly oppose unions in their workplaces. Those attitudes must change if corporate leaders care about the fate of working people in the emerging economy.

As transportation automation advances, transportation labor is committed to ensuring that technology is used to enhance safety, security, service and efficiency, and does not become a strategy to crush wages and jettison millions of middle class jobs. This will require unions having an active decision-making role, a strengthened collective-bargaining system, and thoughtful partners in the governmental and corporate communities.

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