



A bold voice for transportation workers

PROMOTING THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS IN AN AUTONOMOUS TECHNOLOGY ERA

In March 2017, the TTD Executive Committee adopted a statement that set forth principles for tackling the challenges facing transportation workers due to the rapid advancement of autonomous technologies in the transportation industry. We know that these new technologies and related public policy debates will continue to evolve and we stand ready to protect the interests of front line workers in any transition to automation.

In fact, since the adoption of that broad statement just a few months ago, we have seen aggressive efforts by Congress and the Administration to support the deployment of autonomous vehicles (AVs) onto our nation's roads. There is little question that the widespread use of driverless vehicles raises substantial issues related to employment, safety, and proper regulation. Before Congress attempts to intervene in this space -- especially related to commercial motor vehicles -- these issues must be resolved and transportation workers and their unions must be brought into the decision-making process.

The most fundamentally pressing -- and important -- challenge that AVs present is their impact on employment. For those who drive for a living, the potential impact could be particularly painful due to both the scope and speed of job loss. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, 15.5 million people in the United States drive as part of their daily job, with approximately 4 million people in a driving-dependent occupation. These jobs are widely distributed throughout the country and can provide entry into the middle class at a time when that level of economic security is becoming harder and harder to reach. Compounding the employment problem is the speed at which some suggest jobs could be lost: at peak AV market saturation, as many as 300,000 jobs could be lost per year, or 25,000 per month. This type of swift and massive employment loss should give policy makers at every level reason to pause.

It is also relevant that driverless vehicles are being debated at a time of intense pressure on wages and increased income inequality. In the last 50 years, worker productivity has increased 74 percent while wages have increased by just 9 percent. Absent mitigating policies, the introduction of driver-less commercial vehicles will only widen the productivity and wage gap -- a phenomenon that has befuddled economists and policy wonks alike. Simply put, our economy can hardly afford hundreds of thousands of newly unemployed bus and truck drivers flooding the labor market -- never mind the broad displacement that advanced technologies will cause in other sectors. Higher union density, stronger collective bargaining rights, and smart labor policies must be part of any serious discussion over the introduction of AVs.

We have argued that before Congress passes legislation that would promote the introduction of AVs into the public marketplace it needs to address concerns related to jobs, safety, and complex regulatory issues. This is particularly true on the commercial side where jobs are most endangered and the safety and regulatory framework are both different and more complex than for passenger vehicles. Thus far the House and Senate have taken the right approach, carving out heavy commercial motor vehicles from legislation that was advanced earlier this year. But we know that trucking and technology lobbyists will push to include commercial vehicles when the full Senate considers its bill – the AV START Act. We will continue to urge Senators to reject these attempts and to ensure that any final bill reconciled with the House likewise excludes commercial buses and trucks.

Policy makers must also consider matters related to when drivers are interacting with semi and even fully autonomous vehicles. Building a safe work environment must include how and what type of training employees should receive if their work involves interacting with advanced technologies. Understanding what responsibilities humans have in the operation of vehicles equipped with advanced technology will be crucial to its safe deployment in the workplace. Learning how automated vehicles and equipment work and what human actions are required when those systems malfunction or get hacked is necessary for mitigating or preventing accidents when technologies fail and human response is required. And when technology does fail, the onus must be clear: the technology is at fault, not the human. Finally, creating appropriate hours of service standards that recognize the different levels of human engagement, the potential fatigue from inactivity, and the need to guard against employer incentives to increase operating hours will be necessary to preserve a safe regulatory regime that took decades to build.

Finally, we know that the debates over the right policies and restrictions on AVs are not just happening in Washington D.C. Some state legislators are approaching this issue in a serious and thoughtful manner and attempting to resolve important safety and policy issues before greenlighting driverless technologies. But we have also seen local jurisdictions – eager to package themselves as cutting edge – offer relaxed regulatory settings to entice the testing and early deployment of AVs. To the extent localities want to advance driverless vehicles, we will hold them to the same standard of responsibility; they will need to put jobs, safety, and the maintenance of regulatory standards first.

As the debate over autonomous vehicles continues, transportation labor will be at the center of all deliberations. Creating the right employment, safety, and regulatory framework will not only have an incredible impact on driving industries and millions of workers, but it will also set the framework for the future of employment. Rapid technological change has the potential to completely change the economy and the role of workers.

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