

# Organized Labor's Fight Against Automation in the U.S.

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Organized Labor’s Fight Against Automation in the U.S.**

Recent developments in AI, including the release of ChatGPT, have brought renewed attention to an old issue: automation. For U.S. employers, automation offers lower labor costs. In a survey of global companies, McKinsey (2020) found that in 2020, about “two-thirds of respondents say their organizations are at least piloting the automation of business processes in one or more business units or functions, compared with 57 percent who said so” in a 2018 survey. Many U.S. workers fear automation threatens their jobs. Osterman (2019) found that “most Americans – 72 percent – are worried about a future where robots and computers can do most jobs” (p. 6).

U.S. labor unions have been helping their members fight against the employment threats of automation. Parolin (2021) found that “earnings and employment trends among occupations at greater risk of automation are conditional on the strength of organized labor” (p. 922). Unions have organized to respond to the threat and protect their members’ jobs by influencing individuals through articles, social media posts, and interviews; influencing the government through testimonies, legislation endorsements, and lobbying; using different tactics like picketing and boycotting; and adapting their members to the changes through training or reskilling programs or by researching how to adapt.

### **Review of Research**

U.S. unions have used collective bargaining to respond to the employment threats of automation. In trucking, Han, Otto, and Dresner (2019) found that the International Brotherhood of Teamsters used collective bargaining to demand that “UPS agree to not use drones or self-driving trucks to automate deliveries” (p. 338). In retail, Andrews (2009) found that a United

Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) local used collective bargaining to force the Superfood to agree that management “could not substitute employees with self-checkouts” (p. 121) and were “required to meet with the union to discuss the potential changes involved with the introduction of the new technology if requested” (p. 121). According to Kresge (2020), the National Association of Government Employees (NAGE) used collective bargaining to force employers to establish “a “Committee for Technological Change and Automation” that meets to discuss job transitions, job restructuring, career ladder realignment, job training plans, health and safety, etc” (p. 3). In the shipping industry, Kresge (2020) also found that the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) and the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU) used collective bargaining to force shipping companies to finance “automation funds that supported displaced workers and provided a guaranteed weekly income” (p. 9). Nevertheless, union responses to automation’s perceived and actual threats to automation are not limited to collective bargaining strategies.

Researchers have studied strikes as a response to automation. In the gambling industry, Garcia (2019) found that the Culinary Workers Union Local 226 used “a strike authorization from 99 percent of voting members in two large public meetings” (p. 379) to convince Station Casinos at the height of their negotiations to accept contracts with new protections against “the automation of certain jobs” (p. 379) in their casinos. In the shipping industry, Bradley (2016) found that the ILWU went on strike against the Pacific Maritime Association to demand “a reinstatement of the wage guarantee” (p. 49) in response to automation. According to Tracy (2006), the International Typographical Union Local 6 led a strike against New York City newspapers in order to gain “the establishment of a workers’ fund supported by savings from limited automation and computerization” (p. 544). In the automaking industry, Meyer (2002)

found that the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 1250 went on strike against a Ford Motor Company engine plant to negotiate “foundry job classifications and pay rates and automation disputes in the engine plant” (p. 74). Researchers have examined collective bargaining and strikes as means of protecting jobs from automation, but other responses have received less research attention.

### **Media Influence**

Labor unions write or feature articles on their websites about the repercussions of automation to influence people to join them in the fight against automation. In the postal industry, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) wrote an article on their news page about how “automation is one of the biggest reasons for the reduction in Clerk Craft employees and has made the Post Office a difficult and sometimes more dangerous place to work” (Brooks, 2019). In retail, the UFCW (2019a) wrote an article on their news page about how retail experts state that businesses embracing automation could lose their older customers who expect a higher level of service from human employees compared to self-checkouts. In trucking, the Teamsters (2018a) featured an article from Rolling Stone on their news page about how their union has been urging caution towards advanced truck automation and how advanced truck automation will result in job loss for many American truckers. In the shipping industry, the ILWU (2019) featured a message from their president on their news page about how automation is threatening to permanently eliminate good jobs for many Americans and how a certain proposed project in Southern California could replace workers with automated equipment. Each of these unions wrote these articles in order to produce sympathy or outrage from people not in their respective

industries or to entice other workers in their respective industries to join their union in their fight against automation.

Labor unions write articles on their websites about how they are fighting against automation to influence people to join them in the fight against automation. In the transportation industry, the Transportation Workers Union (TWU) (2018) wrote an article on their news page about the formation of a statewide coalition that protects bus operators in Ohio from being replaced by autonomous buses. In retail, the UFCW Local 663 (2018) wrote an article on their news page about how their members at Supervalu Cub Foods, Kowalski's, and Independent Grocers were able to approve multi-year contracts that gives notice and training opportunities if any automation is implemented in the stores. In trucking, the Teamsters Joint Council 7 wrote an article on their news page about all the ways that they are combating automation in the trucking industry, such as negotiating a deal with Peloton Technology that guarantees a driver in every truck within their platoon while they test in California (Bloch, 2018). In the gambling industry, the Culinary Workers Union Local 226 (2023) wrote an article on their news page about how they used collective bargaining to force Sodexo LIVE! to ratify a contract that protects workers from the employment threats of automation and gives many other benefits to the workers. Each of these unions wrote these articles in order to entice other workers in their respective industries to join their union in their fight against automation or to scare companies from using automation in their workplaces through their strength.

Labor unions write Facebook posts about the dangers of automation to influence people to join them in the fight against automation. In the shipping industry, the ILA (2021a) posted on their Facebook their president's remark on automation where he said that "the word automation means you lose your job" and that workers "need to take a stand and fight with all" their blood

against automation. In the gambling industry, the Culinary Workers Union Local 226 (2018) posted on their Facebook their secretary-treasurer's remark on automation where she said that "we support innovations that improve jobs, but we oppose automation when it only destroys jobs". In the transportation industry, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) (2022a) posted on their Facebook their international president's remark on automation where he said that "no one is talking about the impact on the workers" from automation and that "what's the message we are sending to the workers" with automation. In retail, the UFCW (2019b) posted on their Facebook that self-checkouts are detrimental to retail employees and make shopping for groceries harder for the elderly and the disabled. Each of these unions wrote these posts on Facebook in order to produce sympathy or outrage from people not in their respective industries or to entice other workers in their respective industries to join their union in their fight against automation.

Labor unions write Twitter posts about the dangers of automation to influence people to join them in the fight against automation. In retail, the UFCW (2019c) posted on their Twitter that automation is hurting workers and customers instead of helping them by reducing work schedules, understaffing stores, and putting customers to work. In the transportation industry, the TWU (2022a) posted on their Twitter their international president's remark on automation where he said that "no level of vehicle automation should ever replace" bus, subway, and truck operators. In the hospitality industry, the UNITE HERE Local 2 (2021) posted on their Twitter that hotel workers are marching down a street in San Francisco to demand good jobs after hotel companies cut jobs due to automation. In the shipping industry, the ILWU Coast Longshore Division (2022) posted on their Twitter their coast committeeman's remark on automation where he stated that "the very purpose of automation is to replace human workers with machines" and that "the bottom line is that automation has destroyed Longshore jobs." Each of these unions

wrote these posts on Twitter in order to produce sympathy or outrage from people not in their respective industries or to entice other workers in their respective industries to join their union in their fight against automation.

The presidents of labor unions decide to get interviewed by others on automation to influence people to join them in the fight against automation. In retail, the UFCW Local 655's president was interviewed by the cast of the America's Work Force Union Podcast on how he thinks automation is impacting grocery store workers where he said that "automation will lead to severe displacement of grocery workers" (Cropper, 2022). In the transportation industry, the TWU's president was interviewed on how the government can better prepare workers from the threats of automation where he said that the government "should be developing a system that's always looking 20 years to the future, to ensure the nation's workforce isn't ambushed by technology going forward" (Teale, 2021). In trucking, the Teamsters' president was interviewed on what is the Teamsters' future as automation become more prevalent where he said that they are always "going to fight hard against autonomous vehicles, especially in the trucking industry" (Soroff, 2022). Each of these union's presidents decided to get interviewed on automation to spread awareness of the employment threats of automation and to showcase their plans on confronting it.

### **Political Influence**

Labor unions lobby politicians at all levels of the U.S. government to influence it to help them fight against automation. In trucking, the Teamsters lobbied lawmakers in Congress to ensure that autonomous trucks would not be exempt from state and federal regulations on driverless vehicles (Halper, 2017). In the transportation industry, the Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and

Transportation Workers (SMART) Union lobbied federal regulators to mandate that two-person crews were needed to operate all freight trains due to the fear of the employment threats of automation (Boehm, 2021). In the shipping industry, the ILWU Local 23 (2021) stated on their Facebook that they are lobbying legislators in Washington’s state legislature in order to support their anti-automation bill. Each of these unions lobbied lawmakers or regulators at all levels of the government in order to push legislation or mandates that prohibit or restrict automation’s growth in their respective industries.

Labor unions testify at congressional subcommittees on automation to influence the federal government to help them fight against automation. In the transportation industry, the TWU’s president testified in front of a congressional subcommittee about autonomous vehicles on the road in order to “strongly endorse legislation that regulates the Autonomous Vehicle industry” and to hold “new technologies to our existing or higher safety standards” (TWU, 2022b). The president of the Transportation Trades Department for the AFL-CIO also testified in front of a congressional subcommittee about autonomous vehicles in order to state “that autonomous vehicles place “million jobs at risk” and any legislation to speed deployment of self-driving cars should not apply to commercial trucks weighing 10,000 pounds or more” (Shepardson, 2021). In trucking, the Teamsters’ legislative representative spoke at a congressional roundtable on automation where they stated that “the quality of jobs and the safety of transportation workers is not a trading piece blindly sacrificed in order to bring these automated vehicles to market as quickly as possible” (Teamsters, 2018b).

Labor unions endorse or back certain legislation on automation to influence the state and federal governments to help them fight against automation. In the automaking industry, the UAW and the AFL-CIO endorsed a federal bill from U.S. Senator Cortez Masto that would



support workers who lose their jobs due to automation through job training and reemployment services and would establish a committee that would provide recommendations to the Department of Labor, Congress, and the public on addressing the employment threats of automation on the workforce (Cortez Masto's Staff, 2019). The AFL-CIO and the UAW Local 1219 would also endorse a federal bill from U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown that would provide critical resources to workers whose companies are planning to replace their jobs with automation (Brown's Staff, 2019). In retail, the Oregon chapter of the AFL-CIO would back a ballot initiative to get legislation that would forbid grocery stores in Oregon from operating more than two self-checkout machines at a time to be on the 2020 state ballot (Britschgi, 2019).

## **Tactics**

Labor unions use picketing to respond to the employment threats of automation. In retail, the UFCW represented Stop & Shop workers who picketed while striking over their concerns of layoffs due to the company using more automation (Arria, 2019). In the hospitality industry, the UNITE HERE labor union represented Marriott workers who were picketing outside the company's hotels in order to discuss automation's impact on employees (Campbell, 2018). In the automaking industry, the UAW picketed outside a General Motors facility while striking in order to push for better wages for entry-level workers and top benefits and pension plans for all workers due to the employment threats of automation (Kelly, 2019). In the healthcare industry, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 49 picketed at the Kaiser Permanente Westside Medical Center in order to negotiate contract provisions that would limit any automation that results in worsened patient care (McIntosh, 2019).

Labor unions use boycotting to respond to the employment threats of automation. In retail, the UFCW Local 655 asked customers to boycott self-checkout and to insist on having a human check them out instead in order to help the union fight against the employment threats of automation (Killeen, 2021). The UFCW Local 99 (2019) also asked customers to boycott self-checkouts and to go through a proper check-out lane with a human instead in order to do their part in the union's fight against the employment threats of automation. The local Wisconsin AFL-CIO (2018) posted on their Facebook that customers should boycott self-checkouts and should check out with a cashier instead in order to save retail jobs from automation. In the shipping industry, the ILA (2021b) stopped working with companies that plan on using autonomous ships with no crewmembers as a defiance to these companies.

### **Adaptation**

Labor unions create training programs for the new jobs created by automation to adapt workers to the transition to an automated workplace. In the steel industry, the local United Steelworkers Union in Granite City, Illinois has a training program that teaches workers how to program the machines designed to replace them (Adams, 2017). In the automaking industry, the UAW has set up training programs that prepare workers for jobs unrelated to the industry due to the employment threats of automation (Brown & Schrage, 1984). In the construction industry, the International Union of Operating Engineers made a deal with Built Robotics to create training programs that teach displaced construction workers how to operate Built's autonomous construction equipment (Allinson, 2023). In the transportation industry, the TWU Local 208's international president wanted the Central Transit Ohio Authority to provide a training program that would teach bus drivers how to program the driverless buses (Perry, 2017).

Labor unions create reskilling programs for the jobs affected by automation to adapt workers to the transition to an automated workplace. In the healthcare industry, the SEIU Local 1000 was able to get their represented members a reskilling program through online classes that teaches computer skills, accounting, entrepreneurship and other fields in exchange for full salary payment in the foreseeable future in order to help their members displaced from automation (Semuels, 2020). In the manufacturing industry, the International Association of Machinists bargained to reskill workers displaced from automation so they could be promoted instead of being replaced (Diaz & Wallender, 2019). In retail, the UFCW created reskilling programs for members through free online courses that lead to associate degrees or GEDs in order to help them adapt to the employment threats of automation (Wallender, 2018).

Members of labor unions are appointed to committees in the federal and state governments to determine how to shield the labor unions' members from the employment threats of automation. In the shipping industry, members from the ILWU Local 94, 16, and 63 were appointed to an industry panel on how to stop the impact of automation on the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach (California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, 2021). In the transportation industry, a member from the Transportation Trades Department for the AFL-CIO was appointed to an advisory committee developed by the U.S. Department of Transportation to help share the best practices and opportunities on protecting transportation workers from the employment threats of automation (Tire Review, 2017). In trucking and warehousing, the Teamsters' international vice president was appointed to a committee in New Jersey by the governor to support and protect workers from the employment threats of automation and to prepare workers for advancements in automation and robotics (Teamsters, 2020).

Labor unions work with Carnegie Mellon University to determine how automation impacts their members in their respective industries and to research ways how to bring worker's voices into the process of transitioning into an automated workplace. In the hospitality industry, the UNITE HERE union is working with Carnegie-Mellon University to study how hospitality work is evolving and changing due to automation and to find ways how to bring worker's voices into the development process of transitioning to an automated workplace (Markley, 2022). In the transportation industry, the ATU's research director talked about how the union is working with Carnegie Mellon University to study the impact automation has on their members and their industry (ATU, 2022b). The AFL-CIO has teamed up with Carnegie Mellon University to help the AFL-CIO's affiliate unions look at expanding their worker's role in the development, deployment, and regulation process of transitioning into an automated workplace (CMU's Block Center for Technology and Society, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

U.S. labor unions have taken many different approaches to respond to automation. Some went on the offense, while others adapted. However, these approaches are only temporary solutions that benefit workers in the short-term. Many workers turned to labor unions to voice their concerns of automation since companies have ignored these concerns. The solution is to get automation-friendly companies to bring their workers' voices to the discussion of transitioning to an automated workplace. Automation has been a successful technological innovation that has benefited many companies. It will continue being an even more successful one with its many future advancements. However, companies now need to create a successful social innovation that

will give the worker a chance to bring their voice in the discussion of automation in the workforce.

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