

Q&A: How should the labor movement handle the challenges of AI, automation at work?

August 28 2024, by Phil Ciciora



Credit: University of Illinois Press

Robert Bruno is a professor of labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the director of the Project

for Middle Class Renewal, a research-based initiative tasked with investigating labor policies in today's economy.

Bruno, the author of the [book](#) "What Work Is," spoke with News Bureau business and law editor Phil Ciciora about how the labor movement should grapple with the rise of artificial intelligence and automation on the job.

How do you foresee organized labor dealing with the challenges that technology such as automation and artificial intelligence pose to the ordinary worker?

The Writers Guild of America and Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists strikes of 2023 highlighted the genuine risks of artificial intelligence to knowledge workers. But the threat of generative and advanced technology on job tasks, employment skills, new job creation and redundancy has been felt for many years and by workers in numerous industries.

The rapid development of AI and other automating technologies ought to generate serious concerns among scholars, policymakers and workers' representatives. This "Fourth Industrial Revolution" is expected to bring profound transformations to the workplace, and preparing for these changes now will determine the future of work.

Jobs that once needed manual labor are now at risk of being replaced by automated technologies that can do the job faster and more efficiently. Automation has already played a major role in displacing manufacturing workers. As technology advances, it will progressively impact more industries.

Approximately how many jobs are at risk of being

automated right now?

Based on national reports, 47% of U.S. jobs could be automated within the next two decades due to intelligent machines becoming more sophisticated and specialized. For every robot per thousand workers in a local economy, approximately 5.6 jobs are lost. The positions being replaced by automation are typically in middle-class occupations. These are also occupations where union workers are more heavily employed.

What labor needs is to have a voice in how technology is developed, regulated and deployed in individual companies. Transitioning into a more AI-structured future of work is going to require unions to be proactive in their bargaining and policy advocacy around technology implementation.

How are workers and jobs considered 'at risk' for replacement by automation or AI?

Workers are considered "at risk" if they are likely to be impacted by computer-based technology, including AI, based on similarities between what they do and the potential of new technologies. Technologies may augment the productivity of some workers and replace others. There is also a time lag between technology's availability and adoption, which delays impacts. Given the time lag, risk does not necessarily entail displacement.

Using the state of Illinois as an example, a study that I co-authored estimated that between 14% to 25% of the state's employed labor force are at high risk of being impacted by automating technologies. That means up to 1.5 million workers in Illinois would be at risk.

Furthermore, 237,000 to 417,000 workers are at very high risk of seeing

their jobs automated. Another report that I co-authored focused on the construction industry and found approximately 49% of all construction tasks could be automated.

What steps are being taken to blunt the impact of such technology on workers?

The AFL-CIO has acknowledged the need to get out in front of technological change by forming the Technology Institute, the mission of which includes convening member unions to talk about the impact of technology, as well as attempting to influence policymakers on the need to regulate AI.

President Biden's "Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence" is one prominent example of how guardrails can be established to make sure technology serves to benefit workers and not simply eliminate their jobs.

The Institute's agenda encourages partnerships with universities to provide worker input on new technology as it's being developed. A first-of-its kind partnership between the AFL-CIO and Microsoft, it's intended to allow workers' perspectives to inform the company's approach to AI.

It's not quite "co-creation," but if it's genuine and if labor has a means of enforcing the partnership, then it may be a model for creating a mechanism for unions to share insights with the people developing the technology.

Ultimately, job impacts will be real but it's too uncertain to predict at this point. Uncertainty does, however, cause widespread fear. That fear ought to be an opportunity for labor unions to champion the interests of

workers. Instead of employers unilaterally injecting [technology](#) into the workplace, labor can fight for a voice in its creation and adoption.

The rise of worker advocacy on platforms like social media has been increasingly visible. How are these digital movements influencing traditional labor organizing?

What social media allows is for labor activists and individual workers to spread their message of employer abuse and worker struggles to a much wider audience, so they're expanding the number of people who can get involved in the fight for worker rights.

By using [social media platforms](#) to tell moving personal stories, labor is attempting to influence public opinion. This has the effect of organizing not just the workers who are immediately affected but others in the community who have a passion for social justice.

Employers prefer to deal exclusively with a narrow group of employees or a small number of worker representatives. Opening the labor fight to a broader community via social media is destabilizing for the employer and hard for them to combat.

Social media creates the opportunity to redefine the organizing effort as a community endeavor for justice. Oddly, the new social media paradigm is bringing back an old school approach to [labor](#) organizing that aligns [worker](#) interests with the common good.

Perhaps the highest profile and successful use of social media to organize workers was the Starbucks Workers United campaign. In 2022, Starbucks workers used TikTok to publish a video of thousands of workers walking off the job. It accumulated more than 28 million views.

The baristas have since used social media to organize more than 300 stores against extensive illegal corporate resistance.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Q&A: How should the labor movement handle the challenges of AI, automation at work? (2024, August 28) retrieved 28 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-qa-labor-movement-ai-automation.html>

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