

Why American Workers Need to Be Protected From Automation

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Bill de Blasio, *Wired*, September 5, 2019



If a corporation eliminated jobs through automation, the Federal Automation and Worker Protection Agency would require the company to offer their workers new jobs with equal pay, or a severance package in line with their tenure at the company. Daniel Acker/Bloomberg/Getty Images

They call it the “lights out factory.” A manufacturing complex run by the Japanese company FANUC, it spans 22 facilities producing 23,000 computer parts each month for companies like Tesla and Apple. The plant runs close to 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

WIRED OPINION

ABOUT

Bill de Blasio is the mayor of New York City and a candidate for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination.

The complex seems to run so smoothly, it might take a moment to realize that something’s missing: human workers. FANUC’s factory is 100 percent automated, with robots going “unsupervised” by a human for as many as 30 days at a time.

The scale of automation in our economy is increasing far faster than most people realize, and its impact on working people in America and across the world, unless corralled, will be devastating. Already, according to the Brookings Institution, 36 million American jobs are “highly likely” to be automated out of existence in the coming decades.

But automation and human employment should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. America has welcomed technological advancement throughout our history, and we still should, as long as the benefits of these advancements are shared evenly instead of solely going to big corporations.

As mayor of New York, and as a candidate for President focused on the needs of working people, I’ve seen at home and across the country that workers can benefit from these technological changes, but we can’t let American jobs be replaced by them. That’s why I’m proposing a new plan today to protect American workers and ensure that we all share in the gains from technological advancement.

To start, my plan calls for a new federal agency, the Federal Automation and Worker Protection Agency (FAWPA), to oversee automation and safeguard jobs and communities.

FAWPA would create a permitting process for any company seeking to increase automation that would displace workers. Approval of those plans would be conditioned on protecting workers; if their jobs are eliminated through automation, the company would be required to offer their workers new jobs with equal pay, or a severance package in line with their tenure at the company.

Additionally, my plan would close tax loopholes worth hundreds of billions of dollars for corporations that invest in automation and then often deduct it on their taxes, even if they know that their “investment” will likely destroy their employees’ jobs.

Lastly, my proposal would institute a “robot tax” on large companies that eliminate jobs through increased automation and fail to provide adequate replacement jobs. They’d be required to pay five years of payroll taxes up front for each employee eliminated. That revenue would go right into a new generation of labor-intensive, high-employment infrastructure projects and new jobs in areas such as health care and green energy that would provide new employment. Displaced workers would be guaranteed new jobs created in these fields at comparable salaries.

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This tax, and the jobs in 21st century fields that it creates, would drastically change what the next economy will look like for working people. It’ll have two fundamental effects that would guarantee that American workers have a shield against unemployment.

First, my plan would ensure stability for the workers who have the jobs of today. Secondly, by taking the revenues created by closing the automation loophole and the “robot tax” and investing them in new programs, it would facilitate the next generation

of jobs—good-paying union jobs in green energy, early childhood education, home health care, and the like. For generations, Americans went to work confident not just that they had the security of a good-paying job with union benefits, but that they'd have that security for years to come. Those of them still in the workforce—as well as Generation X and Millennials—deserve that same peace of mind.

To deal with this looming threat, some tech leaders in Silicon Valley, and my fellow 2020 candidate Andrew Yang, have proposed providing every American with a Universal Basic Income (UBI) of \$12,000 a year. While this idea could be part of a broader solution, as a standalone proposal it's woefully inadequate and has the potential to do more harm than good.

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At best, UBI overlooks the intrinsic value of a job, believing the financial life support of a monthly check can substitute for meaningful employment. At worst, it's a sleight of hand trick, telling Americans that automation will create a better future for all while it instead locks middle-class families into unemployment and ensures the profits created by new technological advancement flow only to the wealthy.

My plan wouldn't accept a post-work future. Instead, it would hasten a work-filled future—one where we use technological advancement to bridge the gap between our current workforce at risk of being made redundant by automation and the resilient union workforce we need. A "robot tax" will help us create stable, good-paying middle-class jobs for generations to come.

Last week I visited the Port of Los Angeles, the site of one of the newest battles over workplace automation. Thousands of members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union took to the streets this spring to protest a plan to replace their jobs with gigantic automated, remote-controlled container moving vehicles.

Their story shows the power that a united group of working people has—but it also shows the limits of how far even they can go without the help of their government. The company and port officials have ignored their pleas so far, and hundreds of jobs may now be lost. Workers like the longshoremen, and the American communities that depend on them, need the government to be on their side if they're going to survive the onslaught of automation. That means creating an automation policy that puts workers, not corporations, first.

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