

Virtual Capitol Hill Briefing: Expert Panel on Autonomous Vehicle Safety

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Remarks by

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The AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department (TTD) is a federation of 37 labor unions across all modes of transportation, including many unions whose members actually perform driving for a living. Organized labor has dealt with a century of deployment of new technology into our transportation systems. Historically strong union density has played a key role in making sure that technology is introduced into the workplace in a way that ensures safety and manages the significant job impacts that are inherent to major shifts in technology.

With regard to autonomous vehicles (AV) specifically, organized labor has been clear that we are not looking to stand in the way of technology. In fact, we believe that technology can often improve safety or improve the quality of life for workers when it is deployed correctly. But we do have some very serious concerns about how AV technology is being deployed. From a federal policy perspective, more needs to be done to ensure that AV tech is deployed in a responsible, safe way that does not have unnecessarily adverse impacts on the workforce.

First, despite the promise of some stakeholders in the AV industry, AV technology itself is not yet ready to fully promote safety and equity; ensure better transfer of freight delivery; have positive environmental outcomes; and mitigate workforce impacts. These outcomes, and other factors, will only materialize if there is a strong federal policy framework to guarantee them. In the absence of that strong federal framework, we are left with 50 states where incredibly misguided and irresponsible bills are being introduced and passed into law. Those bills have turned our streets, road users, transit passengers, and transportation workers into unwilling guinea pigs for technology that has proven, over and over again, not to be ready for primetime.

Second, we're not taking workforce concerns seriously at a time when we could actually get ahead of the deployment of this technology in a sensible way and avoid the mistakes of the past that have led to displacement of millions of workers in other industries. For example, California Governor Newsom, with the overwhelming support of the legislature, vetoed a bill last year that would have simply required transit agencies to notify workers that they plan to use automated technologies. The bill was about a simple notification. It didn't require bargaining to prevent the deployment of AVs or anything else. It was merely something as simple as an email to workers informing them that new technology is going to be in their workplace.

There are plenty of reasons to take a serious, commonsense approach to any new transportation technology. Last year, Carnegie Mellon's Transportation Research Institute expressed extreme skepticism about the capacity of AVs to operate safely in the transit and commercial motor vehicle context. In particular, they raised concerns about Automated Driving Systems (ADS) technology's ability to replicate things that are intrinsically human. For example, making eye contact between the driver and the vulnerable road users to determine if it's safe to proceed through an uncontrolled intersection. There's something seriously wrong when the burden for proving safety or workforce concerns is shifted from the AV companies to the safety advocates and to labor organizations like ours. But that's where we

are right now because we're missing the strong federal guidance, regulations, and laws needed to ensure that this tech is deployed in a responsible way.

We believe that a federal framework is absolutely necessary to preempt bad behavior by the states right now and to set clear safety benchmarks for Automated Driving Systems (ADS) technology. Lawmakers need to play a clear role here. They must start any framework from the perspective of safety, of workers, of equity, and of all the other promises that the AV industry likes to tout on one hand while fighting regulations to guarantee those outcomes on the other. We know the consequences of failing to deploy this technology in the right way. So, we have a real opportunity here to make a difference as we can see where technology is trending and how it's moving forward. We are not here to simply put our finger in the dam and prevent something that is inevitable. We are here to effect change. Just last week, the Transportation Trades Department signed a letter with ITS America about what we expect from a federal framework, in terms of responsible regulations and policies guiding how these technologies can be deployed into the workplace.

From a workforce perspective, we have a real opportunity to grow our workforce by advocating for the reskilling, training, and advancement of workers as we are also advancing technology into our transportation systems. This is a critical time right now to ensure that this technology is disruptive in a good way that actually enhances safety and moves our roads toward a safer environment. To do that, we need to make sure that the workers who are going to be responsible for this technology are adequately prepared to operate, maintain, and run it safely. By building these future career paths, we can also move forward in a way that ensures workers have the same standards, benefits, and working conditions that the labor movement has guaranteed they've had in the current system.

Thank you very much for having me today and thank you to the rest of the panelists for your wonderful comments.