The Technological Revolution and the Future of Work

We are amid a Technological Revolution unforeseen in human history. Automation, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning, and the Internet of Things (IoT) is changing everything from how we purchase products, to how we drive our cars, to how we interact with each other, to how we work and our relation to the economy. We’ve only scratched the surface on what changes this Technological Revolution will bring to our lives. These advances in technology can certainly provide us with many tools to potentially tackle big problems like Global Warming, water shortages, energy distribution, and - most important to those of us who work in dangerous jobs like the railroad - safety.

However, it will also provide the Rich and Powerful with the tools to increase their profits at the expense of working people, job safety, and other real world issues. We’ve seen how this works on the railroad. The carriers install technology, that if used properly, would make our jobs easier and safer. Instead, they use this technology to cut jobs and dump more responsibilities on those lucky enough to not be let go through furloughs and layoffs. Instead of making railroad operations safer, they make it more dangerous, not only for the employees, but also for the communities through which the railroad operates.

Railroad Workers United (RWU) was formed in response to one of these proposed changes driven by the Technological Revolution; i.e., single employee train crews. The founders of RWU were mostly engineers and trainmen who noticed what the rail carriers were doing and that our union leadership wasn’t taking this threat seriously. At its Founding Convention, RWU pledged to resist this reckless approach to railroading. It’s clear now, a decade further on, that the carriers have much more extreme ideas planned for how to operate the railroad in the coming years. In a December 12, 2018 article of Railway Age Magazine titled, “At Norfolk Southern, Automation is Driving Information”, an NS executive is quoted: “What we are doing is leveraging the safety enhancements of PTC and the data generated by the Global Positioning System (GPS) for optimized operations,” says Warren Stubbs, Director of Information System Development. “We try to minimize human transactions. We want autonomous operations, not just autonomous trains.” Railroad executives and investors have no plans for us in this Railroad of the Future. Profits are their primary concern, not safety or employment. It is our job to resist this attempt to use these new powerful technological tools to decimate employment and increase investor profits at the expense of community safety and railroaders’ lives.

Going forward we are going to run regular articles on the Technological Revolution and how it is changing not just the railroad, but other industries as well. We want to hear from the boots-on-the-ground and the frontline employees who are seeing up close how these technologies are changing the railroad and the nature of our work. We want to hear from all crafts on how these new technologies are changing your job. We’ll also be keeping a close eye on management and executives, and keeping you informed - to the best of our ability - of what their plans are. Rail execs are very proud of their disregard for railroad culture, and their elevation of short-term profits over employee and community safety. In that same article quoted above, another railroad executive is quoted as saying, “We want to be a tech company that runs trains, using technology to solve problems in a traditional industry.” Dan Plonk, Director of Transportation Application Planning at NS, adds this: “With PTC integration, you can take everyone off the train. The development phase will take three to four years, including the sensor package and machine vision, and it will be 10 years to full integration” - until, he adds, public sentiment is firmly on the side of autonomous vehicle technology. RWU is here to resist this sentiment. We want to make sure that safety, good jobs, and a strong community - not profits - are the priorities of this new Technological Revolution.