

CHANGING LIVES

#UNIONSTRONG

FACT SHEET SB 1470 (Stern)

TECHNOLOGY, AUTOMATION, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK COMMISSION

Purpose

To ensure that working people have a seat at the table in developing policies that address technology and automation in the workplace through the establishment of a Commission on Technology, Automation, and the Future of Work.

Background

Any discussion of the future of work must start with what's happening to workers now. Today, the social compact between employers and workers forged by the Labor Movement is broken. The expectation of staying at a good job for many years has been undermined by temporary work deployed through apps, without secure benefits or steady income.

Many workers today have no regular workplace, no reliable hours of work, and no one to hold accountable when their rights are violated. As a result, income inequality is at historic levels.

Rather than experiencing mass automation and displacement of workers at once, technology is being deployed in more subtle ways that impact the way work is performed and that has helped to accelerate the spread of precarious employment and the deep insecurity that goes along with it.

One example is the rise in apps for everything from food delivery to ride service to temporary work. Companies use apps to deploy armies of misclassified independent contractors, allowing them to disrupt industries by skirting labor law and scaling up quickly through digital apps.

Another example is the use of algorithms for everything from scheduling workers to replacing public employees in various positions. In retail, companies like Walmart, Starbucks, and others have perfected "just-in-time" scheduling algorithms that use weather forecasts, past sales data, and other variables to schedule workers at peak times, often for only a couple hours, with the goal of lowering labor costs.

Algorithms have also been used to replace public employees that do everything from public program eligibility to assessing risk for bail to child protective services.

Employers have deployed these types of algorithms solely to drive down labor costs—with workers bearing the burden. But it doesn't have to be that way. Algorithms could also be used to create more humane and workable schedules for workers that take into account child care and school schedules. Or they can be used to make the jobs of public employees more efficient, improving services and workers' jobs.

Rapid advances in technology have increased discussions of the future of work, with academics and experts split on the impacts and consequences. Some say it's possible that robots could make dangerous work safer and we could still ensure there are plenty of new jobs created for everyone.

Others see a future of mass unemployment and despair as robots replace workers and tech titans extract all the profits, exploding income inequality and joblessness to devastating new levels.

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But as we've historically seen, technology is neither inherently good nor bad—it is a tool that can create many different futures. We can use that tool to build a future to benefit workers. Or we can leave it in the hands of corporate giants who will maximize their profits and increase the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few at the expense of the many.

We need to implement strategies to manage technology in its development. To do so requires a mix of policies, regulations, taxation, and programs that are put into place that shape the kind of technologies that are developed, how they're put into use, and the quality of jobs that are created as a result.

What that requires is for workers and their unions to have a seat at the table where the future of work is envisioned and to take technology into our hands as a tool to build a better future.

We do not oppose technological advancement. In fact, we see enormous potential to improve lives, if done responsibly. But Labor will not concede the future to the injustices of the past. As we face the growth of the gig economy and the threat of automation, we remain committed to an economy where hard work is rewarded and where workers have a voice on the job.

We will not stand by as workers are treated as disposable or obsolete. We will not allow technology to be imposed upon working people, but will use it to shape the workplace of the future into one that offers a more just economy for all.

What This Bill Will Do

SB 1470 (Stern) establishes the California Commission on Technology, Automation and the Future of Work (Commission) that will include union members, academics, the tech industry, and policy makers. The Commission will be charged with developing policies to assess the impact of new technologies on workers, incentivize the development of technology to benefit workers and the public, mitigate any negative impacts, and distribute the benefits of technology fairly and equitably.

The Commission will have the goal of preserving work and ensuring that technology improves job quality, rather than eliminating jobs altogether.

The end product of the Commission will be recommendations to policy makers, technology companies, researchers, and worker representatives of how to shape the Future of Work to benefit workers, communities, and society.

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