



“People Before Robots” – Possible Strike Over Driverless Buses

Insights

9.21.18

In Columbus, Ohio, negotiations between the Central Ohio Transit Authority and the Transportation Workers Union of America are currently underway in the midst of what government officials call a “tsunami of job change” resulting from the surge of automated intelligence in the workplace.

Earlier this week, the international president of the union, which currently represents 700 drivers, introduced the union’s “People Before Robots” campaign and threatened a strike should state leaders attempt to bring automated driverless buses onto the streets of Columbus. A low-speed driverless shuttle is already set to begin operating in the fall, fueling bus drivers’ concerns about the possibility of losing their jobs.

Similar to concerns raised by others in industries affected by the rapid growth of automation, the Transportation Workers Union of America is focusing on the human element of the job. Bus drivers in Columbus argue that self-driving buses are no replacement for drivers, who frequently rely upon their own judgment and instincts to intervene in situations where automated systems cannot. Among others, those drivers cite the detection of physical threats, medical emergencies, and even suspicious packages as examples. On the other hand, the buses will not be entirely without human presence. Current plans for the smart city initiative place an operator on board to take over when necessary.

The threatened strike raises significant concerns for employers negotiating new union agreements while simultaneously seizing the opportunities presented by automation and other new technologies. Your organization would be wise to consider the impact of automation well in advance of implementation. As in this case, there are often legal issues that must be addressed.

For example, in the union context, if employees’ jobs will be eliminated, you may have a duty to bargain with the union over the decision to make the change, as well as a duty to bargain over the effects the change will have on employees. If one or both duties are triggered, you must ensure you has met your legal obligations. Failure to bargain over a decision as required by law could result in your organization being ordered to reinstate anyone laid off with back pay. These risks illustrate the need to review any such changes with legal counsel to ensure smooth transition of AI into the workplace.

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