

Labor summit showcases tech that could change letter carrying



Special Assistant to the President Doug Lape

On Jan. 9-10, the AFL-CIO held its fifth annual Labor Innovation and Technology Summit (LITS) in conjunction with the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, NV. The summit was organized by the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) to discuss concerns over the use of technology, particularly the use of artificial intelligence (AI), in the entertainment industry.

Both SAG-AFTRA and the Writers Guild of America have such pressing concerns about AI being used to generate characters based on real people's likenesses and to write scripts that both unions went on strike and included AI concerns in their negotiations. During the summit, representatives from both unions as well as labor leaders from the transportation, communications and service sectors discussed ways in which unions can tackle the potential threats that new technology poses in the workplace.

Advances in technology are inevitable, which is among the reasons the AFL-CIO holds this summit during CES, one of the largest gatherings of technology companies in the world. Each year, more than 100,000 people gather in Las Vegas to experience what the future might hold. The summit gives CES attendees the chance to see the machinery that could affect their workplaces.

As letter carriers, we don't always know what technological advances could eliminate our jobs. A century ago, letter carriers prepared their routes for delivery by casing their letters and flats manually, without any preparation being done by machine. Today, most of the letter mail is placed in Delivery Point Sequence (DPS) by machines operated by a few clerks. I am sure that letter carriers in 1924 could never have envisioned a day when a machine could read a piece of mail and put in delivery order. In much the same way, it is hard for letter carriers today to foresee the changes that technology could cause to our jobs.

By attending LITS and CES, NALC has the chance to see what engineers are working on and start to think about how it could affect our work. This year, a large portion of the floor space at CES was dedicated to vehicle technology, some of which could affect letter carriers in the future. Autonomous vehicles (AVs), also known as self-driving cars, were on display. For letter carriers who use a vehicle on their route, a vehicle

that drives itself might not seem like a bad idea since a person would still have to deliver the mail. While an AV does not necessarily eliminate the need for a letter carrier, this could be adapted to create mobile delivery units that are loaded at the post office and drive themselves to a centralized destination.

Customers could then walk to the AV, pick up their mail or packages, and the mobile mailbox could drive to the next delivery point. It may seem far-fetched, but if you were a letter carrier in the 1920s, you would probably be skeptical of the idea of DPS ever coming true.

Another piece of technology that could have a postal impact is the advancement of robotics. On display was a robot that could lift parcels from a pallet and place them in a designated area on the ground. If the Postal Service could use a machine like this to load packages in a delivery vehicle, the amount of time a letter carrier needs to load their vehicle could be reduced. Another robot picked up recyclable items, identified them based on the material, such as aluminum or glass, and placed them in the proper receptacle. If this robot could be adapted to read the address on a piece of mail and place it in a mailbox, there might not be a need for letter carriers to deliver to curbside boxes or centralized delivery units. Coupled with an AV, this robot could potentially perform all the work of a letter carrier on a curbside route. While a person would still be needed to deliver parcels in this scenario, drone delivery has been in development for a while now, with more companies taking an interest in developing machines to eliminate the need for a person to deliver a package.

The summit gave attendees the opportunity to hear how other labor organizations are confronting the possibility of technology making workers obsolete. By combining LIT with CES, union representatives can not only hear these ideas, but also learn about what could be on the horizon. Even though letter carriers working today may never see self-driving delivery vehicles and mail-delivery robots and drones, we owe it to future generations to be aware of how changes in technology could affect our job and the workplace.



On display was a self-driving car made by Zoox, a subsidiary of Amazon.