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CALIFORNIA LABOR FEDERATION * STATE BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION TRADES COUNCIL

FACT SHEET
SB 336 (Dodd)
STOP WORKER DISPLACEMENT AND PROTECT PUBLIC SAFETY
FROM AUTOMATION

Purpose

To ensure that public funds for transit are not used to displace workers, endanger passengers, or jeopardize public safety by requiring that any fully-automated public transit vehicle always has a transit employee on board trained in safety operations.

Background

The futuristic vision of fully-automated transit is already a reality in cities across the U.S. Las Vegas was the first city in the country to launch a fleet of fully-autonomous shuttles driven on public roads. The Contra Costa Transportation Authority began testing fully-autonomous buses on public roads in 2018. State transit leaders have a goal of 100 driverless vehicles on state roads by 2020.

Policymakers are eager to authorize automated vehicles to supposedly make transit safer, more efficient, and cheaper to operate. Automation has the potential to improve transit and working conditions, but only if it's deployed in a way that protects workers, passengers, and the public.

Over a million drivers transport passengers for a living. Public transit jobs are stable jobs with good wages and benefits that sustain the middle class. A large percentage of transit operators are African-American and male, careers that provide a path to close the racial wage gap.

Fully-automated public transit would displace hundreds of thousands of workers without a retraining or job creation plan. Many workers are older and have few options for other careers. Not only does this impact workers and their families, but it will have a devastating impact on the state's economy, widening the income inequality and racial wage gap. Thousands of unemployed workers with no job prospects will impact the state's budget and strain social safety net programs.

In addition, transit employees serve as the de facto social worker on their vehicles. Disabled and elderly passengers riding public transportation or paratransit rely on transit employees to help them on board and off board, a service they need. Limited English speakers, the homeless, mentally ill, and other vulnerable populations depend on transit employees for directions, translation, and interaction—a social good that would be lost with automation.

Many school children commute to school using public transportation, as well. Without a driver on board, these children will ride to school without any supervision at all, putting them in harm's way. Fully-automated school buses would also face the same challenge of leaving children unsupervised or supervised by artificial intelligence unable to adequately address children's needs.

Autonomous public transit vehicles will also be more susceptible to threats such as hacking attacks or terrorism, sharing the road with non-automated vehicles, and technological malfunctions; all of which may require an extra set of trained eyes and ears to protect ridership and the general public. Large transit buses could be weaponized by hackers seeking to drive them into crowds or buildings.

Passengers are more susceptible to random or planned acts of violence, sexual harassment, and assault, as well a host of other safety concerns when alone on a vehicle. Transit operators play the role of first responder if there is violence, accidents, or injuries on board. Without that presence, riders are left on their own to navigate dangerous situations or unexpected illness or injury.

What This Bill Will Do

This bill requires that fully-automated public transit vehicles always have a transit employee on board while in operation. Any transit operator that receives public funds is subject to the requirement, ensuring that contractors and other companies subsidized by public funds also must comply with the requirement.

Sponsors

- California Labor Federation
- Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)
- California Teamsters Public Affairs Council

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