



CAPITAL IDEAS

OCTOBER 2023

Autonomous Vehicles Continue to Drive in California Fast Lane Despite Union Opposition

BY KERRY JACKSON

“Devil wagons” and “untamable beasts” that reveal the “carelessness” of their owners. Visible intrusions, nuisances, agents of injury that cause “road battles” and should “be classed with ferocious animals.” Vehicles to be avoided, feared and if possible banned.

“To those who occupy or drive them, they are undoubtedly a fascinating amusement,” writes a retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice, who also called them a “[terrible engine of destruction](#).”

Criticisms of self-driving cars? No, just condemnations from more than a century ago of the first cars, which were not readily accepted by a skeptical and sometimes terrified public.

History might repeat itself, but it also has many parallels, and the resistance to autonomous vehicles on our streets and the opposition to automobiles in their infancy is one of them. In 2023, the adversaries of progress are “[California Democrats](#) (who are) trying to slow the rollout of driverless trucks,” reports Politico.

On the other side is Gov. Gavin Newsom, himself a California Democrat, who “has sided with a home-state industry over legislative Democrats — both in the state Legislature and in Congress.”

Newsom is not alone. He is backed by, and is backing, the tech wizards of Silicon Valley. Much of the rest of his party, however, is supported by, and is supporting, the ever-politically potent labor unions, which fear unleashing autonomous cars and trucks “could push their members out of work,” says Politico.

Bartlett Cleland, a Pacific Research Institute senior fellow, says Newsom “is taking the side of letting innovation flourish rather than restricting or eliminating it based on fear of change,” likely because the governor sees California “slipping in its dominance of the place for innovation.

Meanwhile, the unions have taken on the role of modern Luddites to protect their drivers’ jobs from the gales of creative destruction that have always brought human progress. They are squarely behind Assembly Bill 316, called by its author “a needed guard-rail on the deployment of autonomous medium- and heavy-duty vehicles on California’s public roads.” Newsom recently vetoed the bill.

Like an attorney who argues the facts because he doesn’t have the law on his side, the unions are trying to make the case that autonomous vehicles, AVs, are simply too dangerous to set free.

Jason Rabinowitz, Teamsters Joint Council 7 president, says “we’ve already seen dozens of AV-related safety incidents and it’s time we [stopped treating the public like crash test dummies](#).” Brandon Dawkins of the Service Employees International Union claims “self-driving cars can [pose risks to public safety](#), due to challenges in accurately interpreting complex and dynamic real-world scenarios.”

The facts, though, are not on labor’s side. The data show that while AVs don’t have a perfect safety record, they are “safer than human-operated” automobiles, says Cleland.

“The unions are stuck in the nirvana fallacy,” he adds.

The accident rate for Waymo, a tech company that operates commercial robotaxi services in Phoenix and San Francisco, is 0.59 per million miles driven ([and zero fatalities](#) in more than 23 million miles of operation). The overall crash rate in the U.S. is far higher – 2.98 per million miles driven.

Gitnux reports that autonomous vehicles can potentially “[reduce accident-related fatalities by up to 90%](#),” because nearly all – 94% – of automobile accidents are caused by “human error, which self-driving cars aim to eliminate.” The marketing data research firm also notes that “self-driving vehicles could lead to \$447 billion in reduced spending on emergency services and vehicles by 2050.”

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, “[vehicle safety](#) promises to be one of automation’s biggest benefits.” Cars that drive themselves “remove the human driver from the chain of events that can lead to a crash.”

Like an attorney who argues the facts because he doesn’t have the law on his side, the unions are trying to make the case that autonomous vehicles, AVs, are simply too dangerous to set free.

Cleland is also skeptical of the unions' argument that AVs will cost them jobs.

“Most data suggest that innovation does eliminate some specific jobs but that overall employment levels increase,” he says.

If allowed to follow the natural curve of technological development, AVs can produce societal benefits similar to those that evolved from the “devil wagons.” Once they have reached “[maturity](#),” self-driving vehicles have the potential to “increase mobility for seniors and people with disabilities and expand transportation options for underrepresented communities,” says NHTSA, “deliver additional economic and societal benefits” by “eliminating the majority of vehicle crashes through technology,” and reduce the precious hours Americans lose to traffic congestion.

If the unions and the governor's opponents in Sacramento want to block that future, it's a certainty that another state will do what California won't. It could even be Texas, which would surely drive Newsom into a frenzy.

Kerry Jackson is a fellow with the Center for California Reform at the Pacific Research Institute.