

Are workers uniting against automation?

by Rachel Ranosa

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Tens of thousands of hotel, restaurant, and casino workers in Las Vegas are set to go on strike starting June 1 if their demands for greater job security against automation are not met.

Culinary Union, which advocates for 50,000 hospitality workers, has authorized protests that could see workers walking out and potentially crippling operations at 34 resorts, including the city's largest casinos MGM Grand and Caesars Palace, according to The Washington Post.

The protests are reportedly scheduled to coincide with the Stanley Cup finals when the city tunes in to watch its newly launched hockey team, the Golden Knights, compete in the playoffs. With sports fans pouring into the hotels and sports bars, the strike is expected to hurt the city's tourism business, the report noted.

Apart from demanding higher wages and stronger protection against sexual harassment, the workers are calling for better measures to safeguard jobs against disruption. These measures include retraining the workforce to suit the demands of the new economy.

"We know technology is coming," said the cook Chad Neanover, "but workers shouldn't be pushed out or left behind."

The shortage of talent

The Southern Nevada tourism industry, which generated almost US\$60bn in economic activity in 2016, relies on hospitality workers – from cooks, servers, and bartenders to bellhops and housekeepers. The onslaught of robots designed to automate repetitive tasks, however, threatens the livelihood of these workers.

A University of Redlands study showed Las Vegas to be the US city most vulnerable to the negative effects of automation. The researchers predicted, in the next 15 to 20 years, Sin City will lose 65% of its jobs because of increasing reliance on machines.

The researchers also said the rise of robots in factories could mean cheaper production costs in the US which could, in turn, translate into more factories opening in the country.

“The real issue here is to consolidate city finances to be able to do workforce retraining and prepare infrastructure to make sure you have space for those companies to settle,” said Johannes Moenius, the professor at University of Redlands who supervised the study.

Unemployment in the future might not be due to a limited number of vacancies but a shortage of talent. Education and training programs are predicted to shift their focus on jobs that require creativity and people skills apart from technical know-how.

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