

What does the economy of tomorrow require from labour today?

In 2017, the City of Toronto introduced a pilot initiative called Staffless Libraries. Our employer did it very strategically. They introduced these services in two of the most affluent neighbourhoods in the city of Toronto, because they felt that probably a lot of people are not going to complain, saying, like, I pay my taxes, why can't I have a library worker, like, the full range of library services that everybody else can. So, at first, it rolled out a little bit quietly, we had incidents where people collapsed, and they stayed kind of unconscious for a long period of time without people finding them. We also had, what we called tailgating, where because libraries were closed to children that are under 16, children were kind of sneaking in after somebody else that goes in, you know, wanting to get into the library, which is great, but when you get there, there's nobody there to help you with, that service

Brandon Haynes, President, Toronto Library Workers CUPE Local 4948,
AI and labour panel (GLRC, March, 2026)

Staffless libraries, driverless TTC subway trains, and self-check-in kiosks at hospital doors are a few of the automation technologies introduced in Toronto over the recent years and were the focus of a discussion panel of labour organizers on workplace AI and automation, held at GLRC in March 2026. Panelists included labour organizers from a range of sectors: Aleem Tharani, executive board member at large maintenance ATU local 113, Sarah Correia, Director, labour relations at SEIU Healthcare, Brandon Haynes, President, Toronto Library Workers CUPE 4948, Houston Gonsalves, organizer in Gig Workers' United and Sharon Simpson, Special Projects Coordinator, Labour Community Services.

Workplace automation experiments underway raise several questions about what is changing in workplaces and worker relations and its connection with the present and future of wider public needs. What do worker voices from the frontlines tell us about how and why AI and automation are being rolled out at work? In an era of financial austerity, how do we make sense of public money being pooled in privatized AI corporations? Exploring these questions and possible answers, this snapshot includes insights from the panel as well as an ongoing research study examining workers' perceptions and experiences with automation in public services in Ontario. Conducted between June 2025 and January 2026, the first phase of this study included in-depth interviews with 27 participants, including rank-and-file workers and labour organizers across healthcare, transit, libraries, public administration and education settings.

Tech corporate imperatives and public needs

"We now walk around with these things in our pockets that we call a telephone...the least of its functions is to make a phone call. It is a computer that is very sophisticated, and we can do very many things with it. But at the same time, we're not able to feed those who need feeding. We're not able to provide housing for those who need housing... The middle-income people are not rising to the top they're dropping to the bottom. We're hollowing out, and we're creating what we used to call cracks, chasms.

And those chasms are becoming harder and harder to cross as we enter into an age where the computers, and the digital stuff, and the automation, and the AI, and the large language models, and the next thing that's probably on the horizon that I do not know is not solving my social problems.”

Sharon Simpson, Special Projects Coordinator, Labour Community Services, AI and labour panel, GLRC

The federal government rolled out its [“AI for All”](#) strategy in the hopes of providing tech solutions for the chasms (of access and quality) within our fundamental public services such as healthcare, education, and transport, among others. “AI solutions” to reduce emergency wait times and address surgical backlogs, [AI agents for post-secondary students](#) in the (projected) absence of an adequately “AI-skilled” workforce, [chatbots in K-12 to address teacher burnout](#), driverless trains to solve public transit gridlock.

Public dollars fund [corporate-owned technologies](#) to solve crises that have developed with decades of [underfunding](#) of basic resources, outsourcing, financial mismanagement (administrative bloat and [outsourcing](#)) and [undermining worker and union](#) attempts at building better public services. Social problems need social solutions.

Staffless Libraries systems were sold by a private Swiss corporation that also introduced self-serve kiosks in Toronto Public Library in 2004. The chosen setting to roll out this experiment was affluent neighbourhoods of Toronto. The setting seems to obfuscate the violation of a fundamental principle on which public services are designed: that of easy, secure and barrier-free access and use. There were instances where people in the community collapsed and stayed unconscious for a long period of time without people finding them. Transit workers in our study shared similarly that the One Train One Operation (OTOP) initiative causes train delays with the loss of the position of the guard on a train and also poses danger to the safety of people on platforms. Tech solutionism in this case, like many others, posed barriers to physical access, to the common-sense modality of human interaction that the community values, and safety risks.

To state the obvious, institutions such as libraries, schools, and hospitals are more than public “goods” or commodities funded by taxpayers. These are universal public needs, and as institutions, they are shaped by and constantly build local sociality, collective human sense-making and cultural ethos. The market, on the other hand, guided by logics of privatization, extraction and profit-making, operates on imperatives that are incompatible with these social and cultural dynamics.

The financial model of the AI industry (big tech, AI solution companies and tech startups) runs on profit imperatives. It runs on a compulsion to attract investment capital from venture capitalists and state funds while promising speculative futures. Promises of a post-human labour imaginary where collective human skills, expertise, feelings, experiences and actions will be codified into data and machines, for goods and services production at an unprecedented scale and pace in the service of profit.

The actual path, on the other hand, this industry takes to develop automation systems often involves exploiting human labour at scale, extracting natural resources and the [theft of common](#)

[data](#). Training data for AI systems involves [millions of underpaid workers in the Global South](#). Sustaining the consistent churn of data to fuel AI systems requires unprecedented levels of [environmental extraction](#). How can systems built on exploitation, extraction and theft provide solutions in the interest of the public good?

Profit over people (workers and wider public) appears baked into the way the AI industry must secure funding, labour and resources to compete and sustain itself. Our collective needs and associated workplaces and workers become sites of these speculative experiments of what services automation can and cannot provide (eg: staffless libraries experiment, smart cities experiment in Toronto, AI patient management systems in hospitals). The “hype” and “threat” are other sides of the speculative finance model of AI, which translate into widespread uncertainty in the labour market or worse, rattling historical labour protections. Meanwhile, the labour market is being restructured, one job at a time and public services are no exception.

Tech-enabled austerity today for an economy of tomorrow

The Canadian federal government is investing close to \$5 billion towards “AI solutions” to prepare for an [economy of tomorrow](#). What does this economy of tomorrow require from the workers and public of today?

“Given the experience that our workers are living on a day-to-day basis, overworked, understaffed, hospitals are running at 120% capacity, AI, for them can often be viewed as a tool that might be helpful to create efficiencies. If a nurse is carrying twice the regular patient load, and they don't have to spend 20 minutes after their shift charting, that's a win, right?... But what that means for the workforce, what that means for job security, and all the other implications can be a very sobering second thought. Some of the programs are not intended to complement the workflow. They really are intended to wholly restructure and replace it.”

Sarah Correia, Director of labour relations, SEIU Healthcare at the AI and labour panel (GLRC, 2026)

SEIU Healthcare represents 64000 hospital workers. AI-enabled “cost-cutting” solutions in health include algorithmic management systems, automated shift callouts, worker pace monitoring and bodycams in emergency rooms. In effect, these monitor and surveil workers and are designed to extract more labour from fewer workers in less time. Decades of de-prioritizing funding for hospitals have created multiple related issues of worker shortages, work intensification for remaining staff, and saturated workflow and scheduling systems, all of which are bound to reflect in wait times and patient management. Instead of fixing structural issues politically, the target strategy within industry-oriented logic becomes to further intensify work and multiplication of labour.

What accompanies these control-oriented and extractive cost-cutting measures is social austerity and the deterioration of public services. Correia asks, “Whose license is on the line when a machine tells a nurse that you don't need to check vitals based on the algorithm of our analysis of the patient history? Who's accountable if that decision goes wrong?” Work processes in public services such as healthcare steer through the everyday messiness and complexities of human

intelligence, empathy, experiential decision-making and collective care capacities. The “AI solutions” however are designed to disregard the organic rhythms of work processes within public services since these rhythms cannot be patterned and coded into neat data systems.

Workers experience social and political austerity also in the form of increasing isolation at work and a rigid fragmentation of roles and tasks (Figure 1.1).

Margaret, a TTC subway operator in Toronto, described major workplace changes following the automation of Line 1. Nine months into her role, she felt she was finally becoming comfortable in the position when “the line went fully automated.” The guard role disappeared. Many were reassigned through a process that “offered little real choice”. Margaret was temporarily moved into a lower-paid collector role, which she described as feeling “like [she] was being demoted, almost.”

She later returned to train operations but the work had “changed significantly”. Responsibilities were redistributed and “multiplied”. Operators were now simultaneously responsible for driving, monitoring cameras, opening and closing doors, and managing multiple digital interfaces. When camera systems malfunctioned, workers remained responsible for safety while waiting for authorization from centralized control systems.

“The second worker (guard) role disappeared. People are just, like, to themselves now”. The informal interactions that once shaped everyday workplace sociality and helped workers remain alert during long shifts were gone. I saw him (co-worker) from a distance the other day doing other roles, he seems grumpy now, doesn’t smile much”.

Fig 1.1: Excerpt from research study: Worker voices on AI, automation and public services (2025)

Workplaces and social settings that de-center the human are no futuristic dystopia. Gig work, in flesh and bones, warns us that despite needing human labour to do its fundamental jobs, a market that runs on app-based and algorithmic mediation obscures the very workers and their deteriorating job conditions to generate high profits for privately owned companies with no accountability for workers’ job conditions or survival.

“If we want to complain...if we want a sick day...if we have issues...we are not speaking to a human, we are speaking to an app”

Houston Gonsalves, labour organizer, Gig Workers United at the AI and labour panel (GLRC, 2026)

Despite gig work and public services being placed at opposite ends of the labour market spectrum in popular imagination, early trends in our study using a comparative lens indicate striking parallels. Margaret’s experiences and Houston’s insights both point to similar mechanisms of reorganization (Fig 1.2). Other than problems of isolation and loss of community amongst workers, social relations appear here to be mediated by technology, obscuring the decision-making human behind the codes, the management layers within corporates or generalized rules of labour extraction at any cost algorithmized into these platforms.

Fig 1.2 Gigification and Platformization of Public Services?

Sector	Dominant automation systems of concern	Transforming labour process	Social dynamic
Transit	Automated train systems to operate trains with less humans labour and reassignment to other positions	Multiplication of tasks (operators single-handedly responsible for more jobs) ; Deskilling (worker placed in roles unrelated to their skills/experience)	Worker isolation, losing dignity
Healthcare	Algorithmic management systems, automated shift callouts, worker pace monitoring and bodycams	Work intensification, algorithmic monitoring, breaking a holistic job into tiny parts (decomposition), decreasing decision-making related to work conditions or patients	Burnout, anxiety and loss of collective spaces/time to connect
Education	AI tools to save time on lesson planning and teaching tools; pushing for online learning systems; AI plagiarism in student work	Increase in unpaid labour, extraction of teacher's cognitive data to train AI products, workload increase	Mistrust within the system, issues of accessibility and overall quality of affective aspects of teaching-learning
Municipal work	Digital performance logs, automated scheduling	Digital surveillance and monitoring	Permanent insecurity, losing collective
Libraries	Automated sorting systems, staffless libraries, self check-out kiosks	Overtime on tech troubleshooting, transfer of risk to communities	Loss of human interaction and community
<i>Research Study: Worker voices on AI, automation and public services (2025)</i>			

An economy of tomorrow cannot be built by making our present jobs poor. For future labour productivity, our present productivity shouldn't have to be defined/mediated by technology but by real material factors (living wages, secure jobs and democratic workplaces). The AI inevitability narrative must be put to the test too. The material, infrastructural and political bases for expansion of the AI solutions industry are a series of choices made at various levels: the employer, the provincial and federal governments and industry partners. What will it take for us to make choices that center worker needs, as Sharon Simpson's remarks push us to think "our social, living needs"?

The paths ahead: Negotiation, refusal and pan-labour solidarity

"A lot of the (public transit) vehicles and equipment that we're buying comes with a warranty. So, we bargained language that says all non-TTC employees responsible for completing warranty repair work...shall have a Local 113 bargaining unit employee present whenever training opportunities arise...say for 5 years or 10 years, any work that the original manufacturer is doing on that vehicle, our members shadow them, so that when the warranty is done, we take over the work right away. There's no training us, because we're already familiarized. So we protect our workforce"

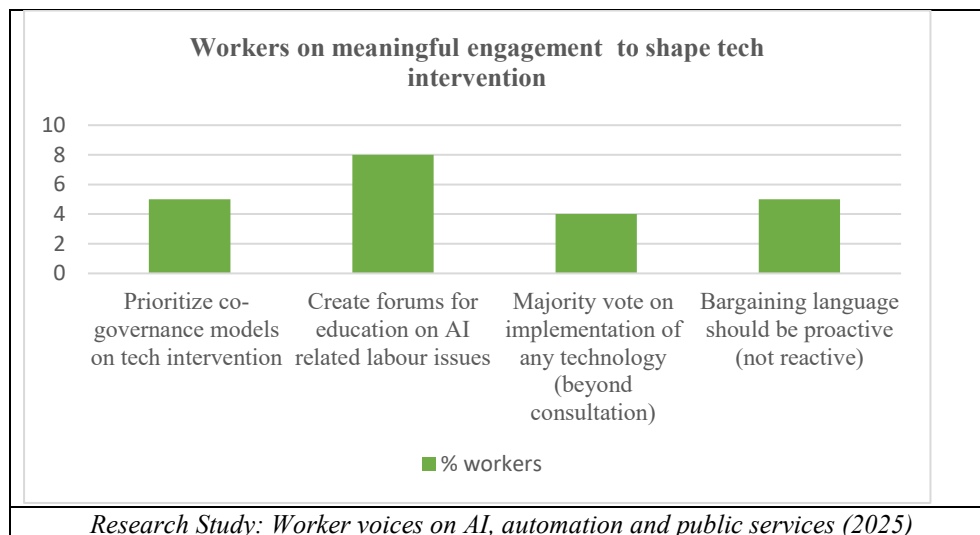
Employers pay hefty fees to private companies for years towards warranties and maintenance in technical sectors such as transit, leaking funds that can be efficiently used with the same job roles being created within the internal membership. In discussing the predictive bargaining model to prevent layoffs and enhance productivity while optimizing public funds, ATU 113 shows a strategy which is more than a seat at the table or merely a consultation process. It offers a model where workers and unions, with appropriate deliberation within the membership on issues related to automation, strategize to develop technical knowledge (and not mere upskilling) and collective power to proactively (and not reactively) bargain for worker protections.

Not all wins can be negotiated at the table. CUPE Local 4948 organized a long [fight-back campaign](#) with community alliances against staffless libraries in the interest of the workers and wider community and halted the employer's plans in its tracks, successfully stopping more libraries from being impacted. The 2023 WAG and SAG-AFTRA strike brought Hollywood to a standstill to win worker-centred guardrails in how the technology can be used in film and television projects to keep authentic art alive for us all.



CUPE locals are fighting back against the introduction of staffless libraries to protect and promote high-quality library services and jobs.

- Create videos and other social media shareables to inform community members about staffless libraries and to gain their support.
- Hold information pickets at public events and canvass neighbourhoods where staffless libraries could be introduced.



ATU Local 113's predictive bargaining model and CUPE 4948's fight against staffless libraries demonstrate that unionized workers can shape (and halt!) technological interventions through collective deliberation, knowledge-building and refusal. Early patterns in research interviews

also suggest that while some workers trust the leverage that public sector unions have, owing to the historical organizing and mobilizing infrastructure it provides, other workers call for a more proactive approach that educates workers on the impacts of technologies, beyond consultation or upskilling initiatives.

The common theme that emerges across the panel and the workers in our study from public services, including transit, libraries, healthcare, and gig work, is that automation appears to be technologically determined but, in reality, is a series of political and economic choices in the service of private profit. These choices deepen the “chasms” of the labour market, where workers in public services and gig work (and other sectors) must fight these choices on inequitable fronts, as well as workers within public services must experience these impacts on an uneven front based on race, gender and age. This unevenness points to open questions for the research ahead: where does the agenda for the “economy of tomorrow” advance further/deeper and where does it meet resistance, who bears its costs most unevenly and what forms of solidarity across unionized and non-unionized public-facing labour can shape tech intervention in workplaces.

If you have any questions about the study or want to participate in the next phase, please reach out to asmitabv@yorku.ca

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