

**District Council 37 testimony**  
**Before the Civil Service and Labor Committee**  
**Examining Automation within NYC's Labor Force**  
**November 13, 2019**

DC37 is grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony to this Committee on the important subject of Automation within the New York City Labor Force. This is a problem for workers, private and public sector alike, with which DC37 has been grappling for decades, and which we are grateful to see receiving much-needed public scrutiny.

DC37 is the City's largest public employees' union, with approximately 150,000 primarily City-Employed members, of whom a disproportionately high number are at the greatest risk of becoming outmoded due to rapidly increasing technological capabilities in municipal workplaces. This outmoding is by no means a new problem, and DC37 has been in the trenches fighting unchecked technological displacement for decades. The most dramatic example has been our NYC Clerical-Administrative Employees union, Local 1549—once our largest Local, now second-largest—which has seen its membership decline to the tune of tens of thousands, beginning in the 1980's with the advent of the personal computer, and continuing to this day.

A widely-cited 2013 Oxford study "The Future of Work,"<sup>i</sup> wherein scholars found that 47% of all jobs in the United States are at risk of probable displacement through automation. Many of the occupational categories it listed as having the highest probability of displacement contain work that DC37-represented titles do, particularly clerical work. Indeed, we are seeing the ongoing displacement every day of these members by technologies such as automated payroll and expense processing, interactive websites with features such as PDF intake forms, automated kiosks, electronic tablets in lieu of paper forms for field work, advanced word processing software, and many others. Some displacing technologies are rather peculiar to the public sector, and thus not popularly understood as being a cause of displacement. For example, the City's sudden conversion from mechanical to electronic parking meters, which reduced the need for Traffic Device Maintainers—who have less work repairing the fewer, more durable machines—and City Parking Equipment Service Workers—who do not have as much work collecting coins from the new machines which take cards. Some have even had negative impacts on some of our highest-skilled titles. In our Information Technology titles, some computer languages that our earlier-hired programmers specialize in are becoming obsolete, and integral programs are instead being written by outside contractors more versed in these newer languages. All this is to say nothing of the effects that exponentially advancing technology will have on DC37-represented work going forward.

There is also the very important question of who is being displaced. Based on the observations of DC 37 staff and publicly-available data on comparable city institutions, the municipal clerical titles serve as a source of upward mobility for a majority female, majority non-white workforce,

the majority of whom are heads of household. This is also true of DC37 as a whole, but particularly for the clerical titles that are being displaced the fastest.

When it comes to the impact of automation on these members, the issue is really about one thing: survival in the face of growing economic disparity. As the pace of technological advancement has accelerated since the rise of the PC in the early 80's, the demand—and real wage rate—for highly skilled/educated workers has steadily increased, while the demand—and real wage rate—for workers with less than an associate's degree has steadily decreased. The predictable result has been widening income divisions along educational attainment lines, proving, as the economist Jan Tinbergen has put it, that inequality is a “race between education and technology.”<sup>iii</sup> DC37 has experienced similar trends within its membership; while our headcounts have declined in the office clerical and related sectors, they have grown comparably in other areas, particularly within our Social Services and Information Technology titles. However, while that may be good news for DC37 as an institution so far, it must not obscure the significant pain for the individuals displaced, nor the likelihood that technological advancement is reaching the limits of its ability to create as many new high-tech jobs as it eliminates through automation. In the end, if nothing is done, not only will so many more of our members be displaced, our overall membership—and ability to represent and advocate for those members, will decline.

So what is to be done? Right now, particularly in the private sector, education in the context of automation and equality refers at best to a largely-reactive, impersonal process of meeting the increasing demand of students for the skill-requirements of the new, higher-skilled jobs created by technological advancement, students who often lack any real connection to those displaced by that advancement. The same is all-too-true of the public sector, despite the noble rearguard action being fought on the part of certain administrations and agencies to resist automation and/or retrain those set to be displaced whenever a particular new ‘automation-forward’ technology is used. Yet one of the strengths of our local, democracy-driven City government is that we are uniquely suited to carefully study and proactively address this problem within our own workforce. But doing so will require far more money and effort than has previously been expended.

DC37 has been training its members since 1971, improving and adapting to our members' needs over time, and this vital work was given a measure of longevity and sustainability with our recent economic agreement with the City wherein we were able to double the per annum contributions from the City to our Education Fund for the 90,000-plus members covered by that agreement. We are currently offering dozens of courses for the Winter 2020 semester in Writing and Public Speaking, Business, Technology, Language, Adult Education, and Labor Education. Many of these are targeted to our lower-skilled, less-educationally attained membership, the majority of whom using our free or low-cost services are from Local 1549. These trainings have also been informed by our attempts to poll and survey various City Agency Hiring Managers, including a Spring 2018 survey developed in collaboration with DC37, DCAS and OLR, titled “Clerical Skills and Staffing Assessment: Agency Survey”, received responses

from about 20% of the Hiring Managers to whom DCAS reached out. The City has also been providing its own in-house trainings in various areas, which carry the benefit of release time for those authorized to take a class.

What is lacking in all of these training endeavors, we have found, is both the breadth and depth of training resources available—and we would very much advocate for more moneys invested in both Union and DCAS trainings to be allocated to this ballooning problem—and the career pathways to turn them into real upward mobility and avoid displacement. One issue is the lack of widely-acknowledged credentials such trainings can provide. To that end, DC37 provides a tuition reimbursement of up to \$800 annually for members or their dependents who are enrolled in college classes. But not all our members can afford college even with this benefit, which often pales in comparison to ballooning tuition expenses, and it is not always feasible to attempt to gain a new degree in the short time between a new technology being introduced and one's job being displaced, even assuming financial issues are not a concern. So while more funding for both Union education funds and DCAS trainings would be advisable, there also needs to be a proactive effort to study and target trainings to areas of the city's workforce that are most likely to be displaced in the near future, and, finally, a plan in place to have those trainings result in a pathways toward better, more technologically sustainable, career-oriented jobs afterward. This may or may not require making modest, carefully considered modifications to both the job specification and salary structure of these at-risk titles, pending successful retraining of their workforces.

Also, and perhaps most importantly, what is not to be done? First, automation must not become a scapegoat for outsourcing of any kind. City workers can learn how to do anything that a private contractor can do, while preserving their other invaluable institutional memory and knowledge. Second, automation must not be a scapegoat for circumventing the civil service system, abusing the use of provisional hiring, or other means of cutting corners instead of adapting holistically to this ever-changing automation and technological landscape. Third, we must not become lulled into complacency by the current administration's willingness to keep headcounts in almost all titles buoyant within the City workforce. Future administrations might not be as willing to do so, to say nothing of future economic contractions, etc. For that reason, we need to move as swiftly as possible to get these policy changes implemented. Finally, we must not allow ourselves to become cynical, or believe that this situation is intractable and hopeless. There is still adequate time for us to get ahead of the negative effects of automation, but we must not hesitate to boldly act.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The\\_Future\\_of\\_Employment.pdf](http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The_Future_of_Employment.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Jan Tinbergen, *Income Distribution: Analysis and Policies*, Amsterdam, 1975