

Michael Sorensen

CST300

February 19th, 2025

Applying Ethics to Automation in the Real World

For as long as humanity has been able to attach stones to sticks, automation has improved our lives. Great inventions like the wheel, the steam engine, and the computer have propelled our species to greater and greater heights. From these great heights it is easy to see how these efficiencies have improved the lives of millions if not billions of people but, from this distance, it is difficult to see those that are crushed by the wheel of progress.

This essay will highlight a union of blue collar east coast dock workers (The International Longshoreman's Association aka The ILA) that are fighting back against automation at their ports out of fear of losing their livelihood (Wiseman, 2025). Conversely, this essay will analyze how this impacts the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX) that moves freight through the ports that are managed by The ILA's members. As of the time of writing, The ILA and USMX have reached a tentative agreement but this conflict remains an important case study regarding the ethics of automation (Taylor, 2025).

This particular conflict started to ignite when The ILA and USMX were negotiating a new contract in February 2023 and did not bubble over into a strike until October 2024 (Taylor, 2025). However, the theme of this conflict is by no means a modern invention. In the United States the legend of John Henry dates back to the mid 1800s (*John Henry and the Coming of the Railroad - New River Gorge National Park & Preserve (U.S, n.d.)*). John Henry's story is akin to

the story of David and Goliath where the machine is Goliath and John Henry is David. There are several variations of this story dating even farther back as machines make certain jobs obsolete.

WHAT ARE THE STAKES?

The ILA. The International Longshoreman's Association (The ILA) is a labor union that represents upwards of eight five thousand longshoreman (*The ILA Union Website*, n.d.). As a union, The ILA has a responsibility to advocate on behalf of its members to ensure financial security. Usually financial security involves retaining employment which rewards a livable wage. This livable wage awards its members the ability to not only afford the bare necessities but also, the ability to raise a family, contribute to their community and pursue happiness (*The ILA Union Website*, n.d.).

Automation on docks is a clear existential threat to that financial security as it will make many jobs, currently occupied by union members, obsolete (*The ILA's Fight Against Automation: Preserving Jobs, Securing National Security, and Defending the Future of Work*, 2024). As a result, the union is vehemently against implementing the full scale automation that is found in many ports around the world.

The ILA walks a tight line as they cannot be seen to be against efficiency but they are required to protect their members. The result of this is their claims that automation is not necessary for efficiency as they continue to move a record amount of cargo since 2020 (*The ILA's Fight Against Automation: Preserving Jobs, Securing National Security, and Defending the Future of Work*, 2024). The ILA also claims that full automation presents a national risk as these automated systems are vulnerable to cyber security threats (*The ILA's Fight Against Automation:*

Preserving Jobs, Securing National Security, and Defending the Future of Work, 2024).

However, the most important claim is that implementing full automation will cause irreparable financial harm to its members.

USMX. The United States Maritime Alliance (*USMX*) represents the employer's interests (*USMX Website*, n.d.). Members include shipping companies like Maersk and Marine Terminal Operators like Ports America (*USMX Website*, n.d.). This "non-profit" organization primarily values the interests of its members. Those interests really boil down to making as much money as possible while staying within the bounds of the law.

USMX has a very clear position on this issue. Automation has been proven to reduce labor costs at docks making it cheaper and more efficient to move freight from their member's ships onto land based vehicles (trains and trucks) and vice versa. This reduced cost benefits its members and the end consumers of the products that are being shipped (United States Maritime Alliance Ltd, 2024).

The evidence to support their position is very clear as fully automated port terminals have existed for decades even in the United States (United States Maritime Alliance Ltd, 2024). However, outside the United States, ports like QingDao in China have fully automated cranes and trucks to move cargo with great success. *USMX* claims that efficiency in ports in the United States lags behind competitors due to opposition from labor unions like The ILA (United States Maritime Alliance Ltd, 2024).

ARGUMENT QUESTION

USMX wants to implement Full Automation on behalf of its member's interests but Full Automation is a direct threat to The ILA's member's livelihood. The conflict between The ILA and USMX really comes down to one question; Should "Full Automation" be implemented in the U.S. East Coast ports?

ARGUMENTS

The ILA. The primary framework the ILA uses to defend its members is the Care Ethics Framework. Developed by Carol Gilligan and famously used by feminists in the 1980s this framework leans on care as a moral value (Gilligan, 2011). It emphasizes relationships between people as having great value and that caring for each other is universal (Gilligan, 2011).

The ILA applies this framework by suggesting that applying Automation without consideration of the human cost is immoral and inhumane. Job loss at this scale could cause significant societal damage to the surrounding communities (*The ILA's Fight Against Automation: Preserving Jobs, Securing National Security, and Defending the Future of Work*, 2024). The longshoreman who have been laboring at the docks for generations have earned the right to be treated with care.

It is ethical to care about the wellbeing of these dockworkers thus making removing their financial source without replacement unethical. The ILA's preferred course of action would be to maintain the status quo. That means that Full Automation would not be implemented.

If this were the outcome then The ILA's members would maintain their income and the local economy's would not be negatively affected.

USMX. The framework that best applies to *USMX*'s position is the Ethical Egoism framework. Ethical Egoism was introduced by Henry Sidgwick in 1874 and declares that it is morally correct to pursue one's own self interest (Sidgwick, 1981, 55).

This framework usually applies almost ubiquitously to companies as the leadership of the company is legally obligated to act in the best interest of the shareholders. Since *USMX* represents the interests of large corporations like Maersk then *USMX* transitively represents the interests of Maersk's shareholders. The shareholders of these large organizations are primarily interested in increasing profits, increasing dividends and making capital gains. Automation tends to reduce costs and increase profits thus making Automation a clear goal for shareholders.

USMX's preferred outcome would be to implement Full Automation to its full potential including automated cranes and self driving "trucks". If the automation was implemented as advertised then manual labor costs would be much lower and the freight capacity of the port could be much higher. As a result, the cost of operating the port would be much lower. This falls directly into the interests of *USMX* and would be ethically correct according to Henry Sedgwick.

If Full Automation was implemented on the East Coast then Maersk and other members of *USMX* could charge their customers less or take their profits and increase the dividends for their shareholders (United States Maritime Alliance Ltd, 2024). There are several options that *USMX* members could take with the reduced overhead at the ports.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the wheel of progress is a tireless machine. The machine may slow at times but it rarely stops short of calamity. As a result it is usually best to adapt and move out of the way of this metaphorical wheel. However, it is important not to lose sight of our humanity lest we adapt into the machines ourselves.

While the analogy above is murky at best, the positions of the stakeholders on this issue are clear. USMX and its members want to implement full automation on their ports while The ILA and its union members do not. While each side has a clear financial incentive to protect, The ILA unfortunately relies on the empathy of others to protect its interests.

The author of this essay is not a corporate entity and affords his livelihood via income generated by his labor. As a result the bias of this essay leans heavily towards The ILA members' position on this issue. The ILA's ability and willingness to protect its members is admirable and something that should be applied on an even larger scale.

However, only a fool that believes that progress can be stopped forever. Care Ethics is very easily subverted by Utilitarian Ethics afterall. As a result, the best resolution of this issue is likely a compromise. There are several ways to address the pain caused by implementing Full Automation on these docks. For example, USMX members can provide paid training to The ILA's members so they can more easily transition into new roles. They can provide compensation to those who voluntarily relinquish their positions to the machines. These might not be perfect compromises but, they are examples of ways USMX and assuage the pain caused by making a position obsolete.

As computer automation shifts into hyperdrive with the advent of AI it is important that issues like these are handled with care as our society will see these scenarios become all the more common.

References

- Gilligan, C. (2011, July 16). *Carol Gilligan*. Ethics of care. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from <https://ethicsofcare.org/carol-gilligan/>
- The ILA's Fight Against Automation: Preserving Jobs, Securing National Security, and Defending the Future of Work*. (2024, December 2). ILA Union. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from <https://ilaunion.org/the-ilas-fight-against-automation-preserving-jobs-securing-national-security-and-defending-the-future-of-work/>
- The ILA Union Website*. (n.d.). ILA Union. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from <https://ilaunion.org/>
- John Henry and the Coming of the Railroad - New River Gorge National Park & Preserve (U.S.* (n.d.). National Park Service. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from <https://home.nps.gov/neri/learn/historyculture/john-henry-and-the-coming-of-the-railroad.htm>
- Sidgwick, H. (1981). *The methods of ethics*. Hackett.
- Taylor, G. (2025, January 8). ILA, USMX Reach Tentative Six-Year Deal, Ending East Coast Port Labor Battle. *Sourcing Journal*.

https://sourcingjournal.com/topics/logistics/east-gulf-coast-ports-ila-usmx-reach-tentative-deal-master-contract-negotiations-ports-automation-donald-trump-daggett-1234730221/#recipient_hashed=37383c979dcf7b1257b81c46b24eafc1cdcb81e13793b77ac482c3e6fdafe3

United States Maritime Alliance Ltd. (2024, December 3). *HOW PORT MODERNIZATION IS CRITICAL TO SUPPORTING THE FUTURE OF THE MARITIME INDUSTRY AND THE ILA.*

https://www.usmx.com/assets/content/public-resources/12-3-24_Port_Modernization_and_Investment_in_Technology.pdf

USMX Website. (n.d.). USMX: Home Page. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from

<https://www.usmx.com/>

Wiseman, P. (2025, January 1). US dockworkers threaten to strike against automation, creating economic uncertainty. *Associated Press.*

<https://apnews.com/article/strike-labor-ports-longshoremen-8f2c193b414a2d810b9d38febe05e212>