

**Opening Statement of Ranking Member Ilhan Omar (MN-05)**

Subcommittee on Workforce Protections

*"Building an AI-Ready America: Safer Workplaces Through Smarter Technology"*

Wednesday, January 11, 2026 | 10:15 a.m.

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank to our witnesses for being here today.

Automation is not a distant theory. It is already embedded in hiring, scheduling, surveillance, and safety systems. Right now, employers are making decisions that will shape working conditions for millions of people – often without sufficient transparency, worker input, or guardrails.

Automation is not new. However, there is a relatively new way of talking about it, with the advent of “artificial intelligence”, or AI. This term is sometimes used to tell a story about automation as both a future that we cannot escape and a race that we must win at all costs. But underneath this story is a very small number of powerful companies with access to massive amounts of data and computing resources. And the lesson we are supposed to learn is almost always the same: that government must stay out of the way and keep its hands off AI.

But we do need government to act. From invasive surveillance systems to dangerous work speed quotas, the workplace risks posed by these automated technologies are real and immediate.

And under the Trump Administration, we have seen an eagerness to grant Big Tech corporations unprecedented access to Americans’ data while rolling back guidance intended to protect workers and promote workplace safety. Weakening those protections does not drive innovation. It shifts risk onto workers and their families, making our communities and our markets worse off in the long run.

At the same time, automation and advanced technologies can help make workplaces safer when deployed responsibly. A fully funded National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health could lead the way in ensuring these tools are used to protect workers rather than harm them.

Strong safety standards can usually foster innovation. One well-known example is OSHA’s standard on cotton dust. As a result of that standard, not only did fewer textile workers develop brown lung disease, but the industry also became more productive and efficient.

State governments also play a critical role. About half of our states receive federal funding to enforce OSHA standards, and their state plan agencies can set standards for hazards that OSHA has not addressed.

State health and safety agencies can be leaders in developing important safeguards against technology-related hazards, especially since OSHA’s rulemaking process can take anywhere from 5 to 12 years.

It is also not too late for Congress to do its job and legislate. There are already introduced bills that I urge our committee to consider, such as Representative Norcross’s *Warehouse Worker Protection Act* and my bill with Representative Jayapal, the *Empowering App-Based Workers Act*. We must take an active role in shaping how AI

is integrated into American workplaces. AI should be a tool that improves workers' lives by making jobs safer and more sustainable. That means ensuring worker safety is prioritized from the start, instead of being treated as an afterthought once the harm has already occurred.

Finally, as we continue discussing AI, we must look beyond the workplace and consider the broader impact on communities. The data centers that power AI and other technologies consume enormous amounts of energy, which can strain aging infrastructure, drive up electricity bills, and have adverse effects on the environment. Our constituents deserve greater transparency and accountability about resource use, community benefit agreements that ensure residents share in economic gains, and a real seat at the table as AI development expands.

But the truth is none of this works if we continue to hollow out our federal agencies responsible for protecting workers and communities. My Republican colleagues like to talk about government efficiency, but then go about it in the most chaotic ways. Recklessly firing safety inspectors and slashing capacity across our enforcement agencies only makes workers less safe and businesses less certain about the rules they need to follow.

If AI is going to reshape our economy in the coming years, then we need to make sure that workers and communities truly benefit from, and not just bear the costs of, this technology boom. Because when we unleash technology without guardrails, workers will always pay the price.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.