



# Nightingales in Gilded Cages

## Worker Organizing under Surveillance Capitalism

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### Guiding Questions

- Has the subdivision of technological tasks, the outsourcing of labor to crowdsourcing platforms, and the rise of AI platforms contributed to a **return** or a **renewal** of industrial labor exploitation?
- How have nascent forms of AI changed the landscape of **union organizing** and the ability of workers to **protest** exploitative working environments? **Does collective action still exist** under modern conditions of workplace surveillance?
- Tracing the idea that Ellen Ullman characterizes as the “original sin” of AI—or the belief that the mind can act like a computer, and the computer can act like the mind—**can AI ever truly replace human labor** if it is incapable of conducting unconscious and subconscious emotional processes?

### Research Methodology

- Literature review on the origins and evolution of AI, technological development, historical trends in mechanization and industrialization, and different methods of labor organizing
- Interviews with organizers at Alphabet Workers Union (AWU) and No Tech For Apartheid (NoTA)
- Recent articles and papers on crowdwork, contract labor, and solutions to overcome collective action problems in the fissured and surveilled workforce
- Books that informed my research include *Atlas of AI, Surveillance Capitalism*, *The Fissured Workplace*, and *The Blue Eagle at Work*

### Historical Context

- Artificial intelligence is **neither artificial nor intelligent**; it is entirely the product of both natural resources and human labor, and it would not function without capital or without immense training using data at scale
  - Crowdworkers or contract workers are paid pennies per gig to perform microtasks like data labeling and content moderation
  - **AI cannot function without cheap, crowd-sourced labor**
  - AI is more accurately characterized as “ghost work” or “human-fueled automation”
- Humans are being treated increasingly like robots at work
  - A recent iteration of a historical trend, as workers were forced to conform to the needs of the machine during the industrial revolution
  - Marx in 1948 called factory employees “an appendage of the machine” because of automation
  - Maintaining an efficient, disciplined workforce requires surveillance
- Under our current economic order of **surveillance capitalism**, the **element of choice** over whether or not to participate in digital technologies has disappeared
  - Because most people must participate in mechanisms of surveillance in order to survive, **worker exit, voice, and loyalty** have been widely suppressed

“Ode to a Nightingale,” by W.J. Neatby



References

### Thesis

AI can be understood as a derivative of past attempts from the capitalist class to undermine worker power and aid in the rigid enforcement of surveillance capitalism.

With the purported goal of increasing productivity and eliminating menial tasks, employers are using AI for precise tactical purposes to dilute worker power in every conceivable way that has not yet already been implemented by the capitalists of eras preceding, and in many ways that already have been.

### Key Evidence

- The ubiquity of facial recognition technology, the mechanization of tasks, the “gamification” of low-wage jobs, and the exponential subcontracting of labor
- **Extreme retaliation** against workers who protest employer injustice, like the ~50 Google employees fired in April 2024 for protesting Project Nimbus
- Historical trends linking the **introduction of new machinery** in the workplace to **employer attempts to reduce worker power** and autonomy

### Findings

- **AI has severely complicated traditional forms of unionization** like majority unionism, which involves obtaining employer recognition through a National Labor Relations Board election
- **Pre-majority unionism** (also called minority unionism) is an incredible strategy with historical roots for overcoming fissuring, collective action difficulties, and omnipresent monitoring at work
- **Ubiquitous conditions of exploitation and surveillance**—regardless of whether workers perform skilled, permanent labor or unskilled, non-permanent labor—can unite people performing disparate jobs but employed by the same company like never before
- The **Alphabet Workers Union (AWU)** has used the pre-majority model to unionize blue-collar and white-collar employees at Google, YouTube, and other Alphabet subsidiaries
  - AWU’s **wall-to-wall strategy** has **proved immensely successful** in winning protections, raises, and rights for workers, and in expanding the labor movement
  - The burden falls more significantly on **highly skilled white-collar employees** with greater levels of stability to fight for better conditions for their more precarious coworkers

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