How Luddites Showed Us The Politics Of Machinery w/ Brian Merchant

Brian Merchant, Sam Seder & Emma Vigeland

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Sam Seder: We are back. Sam Seder. Emma Vigeland on the majority report. Want to welcome to the program. Brian Merchant is the tech columnist at the Los Angeles Times and author. Of blood in the machine, the origins of the rebellion against Big Tech. Brian, welcome to the program.

Brian Merchant: Thanks so much for having me.

Sam Seder: So for a long time, I think, and certainly because I'm old enough to have been like sort of a one of those generations that was not computer, it was not native computer. There was a lot of adoption of technology basically since you know. I was in starting in college computers and just like all sorts of gizmos and cable television where you and even the like non clickable remote controls and the term Luddite. Got thrown around a lot as somebody who just like, was afraid of technology. I subsequently learned. That that wasn't the case. But your book, really. Lays it out just broadly, let's just start with that. What what does being a Luddite actually mean?

Brian Merchant: Yeah. Yeah, it's a big mischaracterization and it's lasted decades and decades, so certainly no one should feel bad about getting the term wrong. It's like the default now. But a Luddite is not anti tech. Technology. The original Luddites were a lot of them were technologists themselves, right. They were technicians. They knew exactly how the technology of the day worked. They had their hands on it. They were hackers. You could even argue in their day. But what they protested was the way that it was being used by bosses. Against them. So the way that it was being used to sort of exploit them or to degrade wages or specifically to take their jobs or to move their jobs into factories against their will. So a latite is somebody who protests and exploitative use of technology. Then you know, very justifiably so.

Sam Seder: Do you and and I want to get, I mean you've you've written a, you know, an excellent history of. Of of of the Genesis of this, and how you know. What? How that battle? Was waged at the time. I want to get into that, but do you think and maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, but do you think that that the reason there that it was not a mistake? That we misinterpret the term Luddite, that the sort of the, the, the class issue associated with it, the exploitation associated with it had been drained from the popular understanding of what that word meant and it just became some old fuddy Duddy. Who was just. Afraid to change his or her ways.

Brian Merchant: Yeah. No, 100%, you could even go as far as to say it was. Of propaganda effort by the crown and by sort of the elites of the day to very intentionally paint Luddites in in this way and you know the victors. Write the history books so they, you know, the crown sort of. And we'll talk about all this, I'm sure. But they they raised. Troops, 10s of thousands of troops. They occupied the districts where the Luddites were rebelling, and they put them down by force. And all this was accompanied by this sort of PR campaign, where the crown was issuing proclamation. Saying, oh, you know these these deluded men they know not what they do. They're probably under the influence of some malign force and, you know, they were really painting them as backwards looking and dumb from the get go. And if you think about, you know, who

that benefits, you know, if you're somebody who might protest the way technology is being used to sort of slash your wages. The profit, somebody else then? Yeah, it's real. Really, really convenient to have a word in your pocket to have a term in your pocket. Oh, he's just a letter that you can write them off and dismiss those complaints. Dismiss those real concerns with what's happening and sort of dismissed them. And that's been that's basically been the case ever since. For for 200 years. The the elite class has had this very handy way of dismissing anybody who protests A potentially exploitative use of technology, or, you know, or or a system of control that is being used against them, and they can trot out the term loud and it's worked for decades and decades.

Sam Seder: And so the story, the your story basically starts in the early 19th century as we're starting. To see these. These new technologies rolled out at the time. Obviously, these new technologies really had. More to do with sort of. The manufacture of textiles more than anything else but tell, set the stage for us.

Brian Merchant: Yeah. So you. Can kind of consider this to be the dawn of the industrial revolution. So we're not quite yet at the stage where you have the classic sort of portrait of the cities with choked with smog and just lined with the factories and it we're we're sort of at the early stages where that is taking shape. So in the 1700s you have a series of machines. That are invented with the explicit purpose of sort of saving labor or doing the work that that somebody might do, or at least automating it as we would call it today, that term didn't exist. Then they would call it mechanization, but things like the spinning Jenny, the water frame, things that are producing. Yarn things that are producing knit goods, things that are producing woven goods, things all to do with cloth production. Basically and then after sort of the the Lassie fair movement and Adam Smith comes along and kind of makes an explicit case for why you should divide labor and into into sort of a a system that would become a factory system. A lot of entrepreneurs and and sort of industrialists of the day. Sort of take this as a as, as as a as a starting pistol as a firing gun to really start relentlessly kind of organizing work into a factory system where before. For for hundreds of years, you still had the machinery and you still were working with machinery, but you would do it in your home or in a workshop if you were a cloth worker and cloth workers were the biggest industrial worker base of the entire nation. It was. It was cloth workers, textile workers. You know and and agricultural workers that was, that was pretty much the base of of Britain's major major workforce. And they were working in the domestic system and you had a pretty decent life, right? So if you were working in the cottage at home term cottage industry comes from this period because it was pretty nice. You're working with your family, you can sing songs, you're working with your friends, you can take a break when you want to. You can stroll in your garden. You're not, you know, at the whims of somebody else. So. At that turn of the century about, we start to see an accelerated drive. In the early 1800s we we start to see this push by entrepreneurs and and and sort of factory owners and people sort of interested in making a lot of money in kind of tearing. Up this old. Set of social contracts that used to govern life. Used

to sort of. Make a community tick in favor of moving a bunch of jobs into one factory where they had control where they could amass all these machines. Some of which had kind of been around some. Of which were new, but the biggest thing was the way that they were being put to use, and that was to sort of automate this work and instead of. Getting skilled workers, they would really try to get, you know, child laborers or unskilled workers, migrant workers, vulnerable workers to sort of do the work. So you still needed people to run the machines. But it it was a way to cut the cut, the cost of the labor by sort of getting somebody who could, who wasn't skilled, who hadn't trained in the trade, who would churn out and, you know, an inferior product. But you could make more of them. So yeah, the what I see it. Yeah, go ahead.

Sam Seder: Well, before we get into Luddites, I'm just curious how much of that so-called entrepreneurship was a? Was pressured is the wrong word, but fed by the growing sort of like slave trade in the US and the increase in production in cotton that starts, you know, around 18. 100 the late 17. Through the next five or six decades? Yeah. Because you're going from something like I can't remember, you know, a couple 100,000, you know, bales of cotton a year to like millions of bales a year over the course of those decades. So as that, like, sort of picking. Capacity comes because. We're getting more and. More slaves in this country, the cotton gets. Nicked it, gets financed from up north in this in this country, and then shipped to, for for essentially, you know, to be produced in in Britain.

Brian Merchant: Yeah. So the two trends are just intensely and and and deeply related, they are happening at the same time. And in fact I I dedicate a chapter in the book to sort of the the automation of the cotton production trade. And and I call it one of the the great sort of original sins of automation and one of the greatest sort of technological unintended consequences in all of history. This side of of the atomic bomb. Probably because when Eli Whitney was building the cotton gin he. At least out outwardly, was saying when I build this this device that's going to automate sort of the process of of basically cleaning, cleaning cotton and preparing it for for export use it. That required a lot of slave labor and he believed that. You know, if we automate this process then we can get rid of all those, all those jobs and it will. It will probably be a a great boon to to the project of abolishing slavery. So that's one reason you should back this up. Is not what happened at all, of course. Like actually at that point when he's developing this machine, the institution of slavery was kind of at a vulnerable point. There was a strong abolition. Movement and in the and sort of the case for relying on slavery was was waning, but he and he invents. This machine starts trotting it out to the southern cotton. Users and what happens it it it, it just blows up the amount. The demand for cotton because now it can speed the process by which it's cleaned. So you need a lot more input and all of a sudden it just the the demand for for more enslaved people explodes because you have to have more people picking the cotton. So basically it gives slavery. A new lease on life for another 50 years at that point. And these the the plantation owners are actually taking cues from the British factory system that had been imported first from England and into and then into the West Indies. And then we

see it arrive in the United States, where they're they're really dividing labor in a much more intense way. And they have the overseers. Really ratchet up the amount of sort of contact that they have with the enslaved people, really driving them much harder. We see this transition to a system where it was still awful. The slavery was always awful, but you know this the the enslaved people were expected to. Sort of pick and produce cotton on their own terms, and then you see this the the the gang system of slavery where it's really sort of organized like a factory. And then this huge surplus of cotton then goes, is exported back to England, where boom, they have a huge surplus of raw materials that now they need more people. And more machinery to produce, so that in turn feeds sort of the rise of of especially the the Manchester cotton industry, where they have to sort of, you know. Well, there there's a big. Opportunity, quote UN quote to sort of produce more more cotton goods. So they really start seeing mechanization ramp up ramp up there.

Sam Seder: I'm just going to wonder if we ever have seen an increase a. An introduction of technology where it supposedly will eliminate certain. Bad elements, whatever within the production chain. But in fact what they always do, it seems to me is just increase productivity in whatever is the easiest way possible. And that invariably means we keep that bad thing and maybe often like. Multiply it. You know I. I mean, we could see it from everything, you know, faxes, you know, when faxes were introduced like this is. Gonna save you know you time at work, but in fact that time just ends up getting gobbled up. It's all it always seems to be that dynamic.

Brian Merchant: Yep, always since day one. This is the story of automation. It promises the elimination of of the the human element that you know and and it promises A streamlined, sleek sort of, you know, production system that's going to be great because, you know, we're going to eliminate. These you know. These repetitive, dirty, dangerous jobs that that, that people have to do and and it'll be great we'll replace. It almost never is that the case. There are always not only unintended consequences, but you know the the employer or the the. The boss who's who's? Instituting these, you know, nine times out of 10, this is being instituted. By a company or a corporation whose primary drive is to maximize profits, so he's not going to let. Any of those productivity gains go back to the worker. He's going to capture, capture them all himself. I mean, even John Maynard Keynes, like the most famous and influential economist of the last one. 100 years he. Thought that the that the the way that the that the trajectories were pointing of of automation and and technological. Productivity, he thought. By the time the the 21st century rolled around, that humans would be working at a 10 hour work week. If that if they wanted to, because he saw how productive machinery was and he saw it, you know, just the the potential there. But of course, that's not what happened, of course. The owners captured all those gains, profited mightily off of them, and just ratcheted up the amount of work that that most people had to do. This has been the case since the first factories made by the 1st the the grandfather of the factory, Richard Arkwright, who I talk about in the book. I kind of call him the first tech Titan. It's a loose term, but I think it works and he

was basically using children to to to produce yarn with his automated water frame and instead of, you know, lessening the burden on the previous population that was making yarn. It's this far more laborious and dangerous. Work regimen that's you know, he because he just keeps ratcheting up the amount of productivity that he expects to see. And you can draw. A clear line all. The way through today with, with Amazon, with all of these productivity gains that they hope to get by having this intense sort of, you know, it's this worker surveillance software where they kind of gamify the workplace. And you have to, you know, they basically treat you the worker, like a robot where you have to hit X number of productivity goals and you get points for doing this or that or you and you lose them if you take too long to go into. Bathroom. So there's always, you know, new regimens that are promising to sort of, you know, bring some great benefit through technology. And almost always if the worker is not involved in the process of how that technology is developed or deployed, if they have no say in how it's actually going to be used in their workplaces and in their lives. Then it will be used essentially against them and they will have to fight to claw back those gains. Sorry.

Emma Vigeland: It it seems like that is the concern really with AI right now, right? I mean you can copy and paste this historical conversation into. To the current context, we're like 95% of the articles I see about artificial intelligence are either it's being promoted by somebody who is a Google executive when you click on the bio, or it's about we really need to be worried about how artificial intelligence could take over the world and become smarter than humans. Like like as if it's a sci-fi book versus the very practical realities that you are engaging in, which is the anti worker element and that's largely glossed over unless you're reading some sort of leftist.

Brian Merchant: Yeah. No, 100%. Yeah that, I mean, that's exactly what I think that their intent is is to move the goal posts so far down that we're that they want us worrying about whether or not it's going to become Skynet and not the more mundane things that it's built to do, which is basically workplace automation. That's what they're trying to get it to do. I mean, if you look at so all these companies in the last few. Months have just. Ratcheted up this huge valuation. You know they're getting more and more money from Amazon, from Google, from Microsoft. They're all investing in these AI companies or starting there. Own and the only way that they can really ever hope to sort of turn a profit. It's not going to be through some like some, you know, guy messing around and making a few images every week on Dolly or something. No, they're gonna have to sell this to enterprises, to companies. They're gonna have to. Sell enterprise to. Your software that promises some degree of Labor. Savings of automation. So while they're talking about. Oh, you know, we don't want AI to become sentient and and murder us all on the world stage. They're going around and talking to medium sized small businesses, tech companies going, hey, you know, our copilot system could probably automate 1/3 of your software staff right now. Your software development team. And they're going, they're doing that over and over and over across the country. And they're making this promo. You know, it's not always

true. You know, it's not like that. The AI is ready to be unleashed and to just take the jobs, but that's the. Case that they're. Making they're basically making the case that they can, you know, cut your cut your headcount at your at your at your, in your staff, they can they can automate jobs, they can save you money through. You know through software. Commission and that's going to be the pitch it's going on mostly behind closed doors right now. But you talked to an illustrator, A copywriter, someone who does freelance work, they're on the front lines of this. They'll say already they've seen the amount of, you know, work that they've their clients are asking them to do, has already diminished to say if they're an illustrator and they used to work with a big company that, you know, made their. Ad decks with an with an artist. Now they can use mid mid journey. And especially if it's not public facing, where they're not going to get called out on it, that's where a lot of this stuff.

Sam Seder: Is already turning I. I mean I think that's what I appreciate about, you know, the looking back to the origins of the rollout of this, because it makes it really clear, it's clearer in that moment. It seems to me. That this is the the the enterprise that is rolling this thing out. Whatever it is, the the guy who's you know, trying to produce clothes. At the turn of the century. There is a political decision that is being made. It is, you know, how are we going to deploy our resources within the context of this enterprise and when this new element comes in, are all the people involved in the enterprise going to share in the benefits of that new? Element that new element being the what the the machine and the invariably. You can see it right here why people talk about the need for democratizing the workplace is because you have one person or one entity or one potential benefactor of the multiple benefactors associated with that. The community, the workers, the customer and the the owners. And and then maybe subsequently, she. Holders, and invariably it goes to the owner and the shareholder period. End of story.

Sam Seder: Much and is.

Sam Seder: Often leveraged to take more away from the customer, more away from the community and more away from the worker, not just even leave them at status quo. But let's let. Let's talk about. George Miller, since we're we're back, we're back there. Who? Who was that guy? And and what did he do?

Brian Merchant: Yeah. George Miller was a a young man in his early 20s who had just finished the the seven years of apprenticeship that you had to undertake to become part of the cloth trade, which it's important to say like. So these are. You know, difficult and skilled trades. To learn but these. Are also kind of like controls. That are that are on the industry to to make sure that you know it's it's somewhat regulated and he emerges from those seven years. He also did a detour, a stint, you know. Fighting, fighting the war. That was there's a decades long war that was going on and he he's a veteran of the war against Napoleon and he kind of comes of age just at this moment where all of these entrepreneurs and industrialists are sort of are really kind of hitting the gas on on factorization on automation. On using machines to sort of clumsily do the work that he's done, and he's sort of, you know, built his

entire life around or has the expectation of of of his life, he's such a young man. And he is also kind of he's very charismatic, he's very he's well liked in town and he also has a like a pulse on, you know, what's going on in the community and what he sees really alarms him and depresses him and sort of enrages him because he sees sort of very clearly. The way that things are going and that that's the factory owners are setting up shop outside of town and they're concentrating labor, they're concentrating profits at the direct expense of people. You know, down the street and to your point, that's one reason that. I was so drawn to this example is because it does sort of really make it renders things in a pretty stark light. It's pretty, you know, we don't have globalization, you don't have these sort of super diverse economies you, you know, a lot of these cloth districts had towns where that was, that was the good work in the town you went to, you went to work as a cloth. Professor or a finisher or a Weaver, you learn the trade and you know, of course there were other trades that were associated, but that was the heart of the trade. You couldn't really. Change. It's not like you know, things today get a little bit muddied up where it's like, oh, you know, if something you know, if you're a a taxi driver and you've spent 50 years, you know, learning the back, the streets of New York and along comes Uber, you know, people say like, oh, well, why don't you just go get another job this, you know, I feel like kind of clarifies just what what is going on throughout all those sort of like. Debs, of of globalization and and sort of the the Merk that that is cast over the economy today because you don't have another choice in in in those days you see the factory that's taking all the jobs. It's right down the street. You see your friends who now cannot feed their families. And to them, this is an immoral choice. It is not complicated, they said. They're stealing our bread because they're building a machine. And the point is to make money at the expense of somebody else. And it was not, you know, this it was not. It was not like, well, they're innovating. So, you know, what are you gonna? No, it's. We could have figured out. Way to balance this, but instead somebody made the decision to hit the gas to accelerate the rate that they were making profits at the expense of somebody else. So this is what Mellor says, right? He says, you know, if we don't put a stop to this, the tendency is all one way and pretty soon there's going to be nobody left in this country. Except these, these elite few people and everybody else, you know, kind of scrambling for scraps. So he. He becomes one of the one of the leading Luddite figures and we can talk about the Genesis and the movement of all that but. He fights back, basically.

Sam Seder: I want to. I just want to make this one note too about the how because of the the sort of starkness of this example, the one thing that occurred to me too is that you also at that time did not have the excuse of like, well, a company has a fiduciary responsibility to maximize the profit for their shareholders. So what else are they going to do? Like it it, it shows that in fact we probably have statutes that say that now. So that people can't say you have a choice and like those, they're there to have basically taken the idea that we have a. Choice with these things. Yeah. And just in the way that a government is really just a a, our our economy is political. We

decide how we're going to redistribute. Value in our society every day, that's all that's going on. It's just a series of decisions as to who's gonna be the winner, who's gonna be the loser, and everything else is just sort of like built to obfuscate that those series. The choices and when you go back and look at the corporation, the businesses at that time, you realize these are just choices and you know people who are participating on mellers side are saying like that's a bad choice for us and. There is no. Laws that say you have to do it this way or that way that will come later, so that that obscures the fact that these choices are being made. And it it's because it's a private industry, it's even that less democratic, although you. Know things were. We still had. Ways to go in terms of democracy at that time. I mean, we still do, but now, but but yes, talk about the Genesis of the luddites and Ned Ludd as it were.

Brian Merchant: Yeah, and just a quick point there too. 100% that there are a series of choices and I would just underline that that extends to the technology too, how we build technology, how we position it, who we decide benefits and profits from it. Those are all choices human choices made by these people too. So it's. Not like it's it's a separate realm where we have this like bottled lightning and we have to figure out, oh, what do we? No, we can we choose every step of the way how we build that stuff and how we want it to sort of factor into society and that is what the Luddites were were protesting against because they saw the the machinery. That was being used to sort. Just exacerbate inequality to kind of lead to suffering of some at the benefit of a few and. They said we. Are not even in the day they were not against all machinery, or even the specific machinery. They're just against how it was used. And they said we are against the machinery. That's hurtful. The commonality and that quote really has stuck with me because. You know, it's a pretty good barometer to gauge, you know, whether whether a technology is gonna, you know, is going to be something that's going to either cause protest or or or is going to be good for, for people at large. Is it hurtful, the commonality? And if it, you know, and they? A number of machinery that they felt was and that was the machinery that they ended up smashing, and the way that they smashed it is this so in 1811, all the stuff we've been talking about today comes to a head. It's the the technology has reached a point where a lot of the entrepreneurs are are interested in. Really sort of organizing it in their factories and and sort of really sort of hitting the gas on deploying. But there's also this big this big trade depression, because there's a war going on with France, and it was one of the very first sort of trade sanctions imposed by a government. The British Crown puts a trade sanction on any, and England cannot do business with anybody. That's an ally of France. So that cuts off some of its biggest. Export markets so all the cloth districts are immediately hurt. Meanwhile, they're still being taxed for the wars. Everybody who you know, all the workers and and and people who pay taxes are being taxed for these endless. Ours. And there's a there's and then there's a bad trade harvest. So I mean, there's a bad crop harvest. So you have these three kind of things all sort of converge. And what do the industrialists and entrepreneurs do when they see this, the trade at a point of weakness, will they say now is the perfect time to just do even

more automation? And they really start accelerating it, trying to throw people out of work when they're already suffering. And at this point, it's just more than a lot of the cloth workers can take, and I should also point out that they've spent the last 10 years lobbying Parliament, saying, look, we need a minimum wage, we need some protections. Can you at least uphold the regulations that are on the book that all these entrepreneurs are tearing up? You know, you can imagine. Uber coming into the city and saying, oh, we're not a taxi company, we're a software company, so we don't have to play by the rules. Same story 200 years ago. They they said, Oh well, we don't need to follow The Apprentice rules. We don't need to follow the cloth count rules. We're using technology. The game has changed. And so it falls on deaf ears and Parliament, who just wave all that away and eventually just tear up all the regulations on the books in 1809. So 1811 backs against the wall. The cloth workers. Turned to this tactic of last resort and that is machine breaking and it's not this crude dumb, you know, like the machine hit it. I smash it. No, it is this tactical. Well, this strategic sort of mode of resistance where they spent. Months and months preparing for this and what they would do is they start writing letters to the the most offensive tech factory owners in town saying. We know you've got 100 of the obnoxious machines in your factory, or however many, and if you don't take them down, you'll get a visit from Ned LED's army. And if the factory owner took them down, they'd be fine. But if they didn't, then the Ned Ludd's army would in fact show up under the cover of night. Either they'd slip through the windows or they'd hold the overseer up at gunpoint and they'd go in and they'd break just the machines that were being used to automate and degrade their work. They'd leave all the other machines in place, they'd smash them, and they would say. If you if you try to bring them back, we'll come. We'll return and we'll do the whole place. But if they didn't then then they would be fine. Then they would. They would leave. And this sort of tactic, you know, all these letters would be signed by General Ludd or Ned Ludd and and King Ludd even. But Ned Ludd was this. Fictitious person he was. Said to be a, an apprentice cloth worker, a kid who was overworked by his master and who didn't, didn't want to spend every day toiling at his master's command. So he just kind of slacked off and his master went to the magistrate and had him whipped. He got mad, he smashed the machine and he fled into Sherwood Forest. Where he started building an army. It's probably an apocryphal story, and this is the same district this was in Nottingham. I should add from the land of Robin Hood. So there's this tradition of descent of rebellion and Ned Ludd and Robin Hood. They sound very similar, so it was probably just made-up to be this mythic figure. But all of these, all of these cloth workers. Start organizing under this banner and it's this very distributed, decentralized movement, not unlike kind of occupy or or or Black Lives Matter today where you have an objective, you have A tag. Stick and you have sort of a belief system and it can be emulated in all the cloth districts across England without any like sort of central organizing committee or anything. So these attacks start ramping up and you know, it's unclear exactly how connected they were. They probably talked a. Little bit but. By and large, it's this

extremely grassroots movement. It's at this extremely. Sort of or, but it, but it is also very organized and it's very ferocious, and it is also extremely popular because the. Cloth workers are. Not the only ones who don't like the the factory. They don't like inequality and all these things, so it becomes this huge popular movement where people are cheering the Luddites in the streets as they go about their machine breaking.

Sam Seder: And we should say, I mean, just so that people get a sense of the book, you basically follow a bunch of different individuals and tell this story through the perspective of different individuals. But give us just a sense, you know, jumping forward. Like, how does this? You're uh, end more or less and or does it ever really? I mean, these issues are ongoing, but this particular era where. There was like. What brings it to a close at least? That chapter of the. Of this dynamic.

Brian Merchant: Yeah. Well, so initially it's very successful. Some factory owners waved the white flag and have sympathized with the workers all along and have had to go along with it to sort of keep up with the with, with, with the most ambitious factory and us and so on and so forth. So they knocked some victories, which really scares the crown, really. Scares the industrialist class. They don't like how popular everybody is, and we talked a little bit upfront about this. Propaganda campaign that was paired with the military occupation. So the three things that really end up crushing the movement are are that the that, that military occupation sort of they they start sending just troops anywhere. There's a Luddite disturbance or a Luddite movement. They just occupy the districts. Where, where, where cloth is made or where there may be targets and. It's actually pretty ineffective for a long time, but you still basically have like garrisoned towns in in the middle of England. It's the largest domestic occupation in in British history, at least to that point. So 10s of thousands of troops, militia men, mercenaries and then the crown makes it a crime. Punishable by death just to break a machine. In order to to try to subdue the Luddites, notably, as you said, there's other characters. One person I follow is Lord Byron and he stands up and gives this big sort of vociferous opposition to the this act to make it a punishable by death to break A-frame. He he loses out, but he remains a Luddite. Supporter probably the most famous one in the day, so it's a crime punishable by death to break A-frame. You have occupied military districts. And eventually the Luddites kind of hit a wall and and one of them goes too far and and and assassinates a a factory owner. And they start to lose the popular sentiment too. But essentially they are crushed. They're crushed by the state. And it's again one of the first times where you really see this. Alliance, where it's it costs the state an immense amount of money and resources to deploy troops to put down the workers who are again fighting for their right to earn a living to a right to to make, to make enough money to feed their families and the state sides. With the industrialists sides with the the the tech Titans quote UN quote. And those alliances are drawn and. They pretty much. Hold to this day and the Luddites are hung in mass. When they're finally discovered, there's a big battle that the Luddites lose and it kind of. You know the the. Movement is snuffed out by the by the power of the state and the resistance and the ethos of leftism lives on for for years after afterwards,

and sort of sabotage and industrial sabotage is inaugurated as a tactic and a lot of the strategies and the solidarity are really important in. Forming sort of middle the working class consciousness and there's that we could talk about any of those offshoots in that outgrowth. But yeah, they're they're crushed by the state pointedly.

Sam Seder: Maybe the best. Way to to to talk about those out outgrowths is to, you know, we should note that. Literally a couple. Hours ago has announced that the UAW came to at least the tentative agreement with GM after announcing, I guess it was yesterday or over the weekend or. Still, an agreement with Stantis. This is on the heels of an agreement with Ford and it. Seems like. One of the most successful sort of like strikes union demands in modern history. You know, maybe at least in the past 50 years, I think maybe for sure in the past 50 years it seems 25% pay increase is just sort of like the top line. Figure over the course of the three or four five year contract depending on, you know all the details we're going to get a little bit. Are, but how much of you know how much of of of of that type of unionism, in particular one that is really sort of aggressive and more democratic? I mean, the UAW had a big sort of they were under a consent decree that brought about this administration. Sean fame, which you know, feels a far more democratic, both in structure and processes, but also just in disposition. Like he is much more in tune to the membership. It feels like from the outside than we've seen in the past. How much of that is a sort of a, I guess a, you know, a descendant of the Luddite movement.

Brian Merchant: Yeah, I mean, so when the Luddites were rising up, one of the reasons they had to rise up, I didn't mention was that it was illegal to form a union. There were laws on the books called the Combination Acts. So if you. You know, trying to collectively bargain and say, hey, you know, we're gonna we're, we're all agreed on this. We won't work for this much less, right. You could you could be thrown in prison. So part of the ad growth of the of the Luddite movement was the was the reform effort by that helped was really spurred by some of the folks that I follow in the book. Ravener Henson, who was a Luddite himself, but. Also was really interested in, you know, pulling the levers of reform and he really fought to the bitter end and with ultimately some success to get those combination acts repealed and we saw sort of the beginnings of the of the Union movement take take rise. But there's a really, really good lesson from the Luddites. In the. So being militant can work. You don't need to actually smash machines, but the the industrialists and the sort of the elites of the day were terrified of the Luddites. A lot of them gave in and offered demands because they had they had power, and they were popular. And you know, we've seen, as you know, as you mentioned with with Sean Fain and the. Previous sort of leadership of of some of our unions had had not wanted to, you know, mix it up too much. They had not wanted to push against the the companies. There had been. It had gotten pretty slack. So I think seeing these sort of more, I mean it's not it's not militant but it's a lot more confrontational. It's a lot more. Sort of. You know, they're they're they're leaning into their power a lot more. And I would also point out, you know, one of the big things was that the companies were trying to say, like, well, you know, we have

new technologies, right? Where you're gonna be working with batteries and electric cars. And that's not as hard to produce. So we need to pay you. Less and one of the things the Union did was stand up and say absolutely not. This is still labor. This is still this is this is still very labor intensive and skilled work just because it's a new technology does not give you the right to say it. You know that you should be paid less or take more work off the table. Same thing with the WGA. I would say that that's another modern example of a very successful. Tinged strike because they saw the studios saying that, well, we want to be able to use AI to write scripts and and you know, and and and then you can, you know, maybe we'll let you rewrite them for a lesser fee. And they drew a red line and I argue, and I think I did argue in one of my columns that yet this that's Luddism in the modern day. You don't need a hammer. You just need to reject. That you know is going to be an exploitative use of technology because they knew they knew the studios were not going to, like, write a whole movie with AI. They were just going to write a blueprint. Bring it to them and say, OK, well, you can get a rewrite fee for this, but we'll own the rights. You don't get residuals. You don't get all this. And it was mostly a way to try to break labor power to try to degrade conditions. And they drew that red line in the WGA and they said no, they said absolutely not. If somebody's going to use AI, we're going to have control over how it's going to be used. The studio can't do it. We'll make that decision and kind of amazingly, they won that they won that right to sort of control that part of the labor process. So that's a huge victory. And I think one that you know is extremely inspiring cause we're going to see a wave of these fights coming down.

Sam Seder: Do you think that the legacy of the Luddites or the lessons that come out of there are, are that that tactic of militancy that they had? Or was it the? Did they represent a a new way of of? Of understanding of the benefits slash increase in productivity and who gets. Who gets a piece of that? Who shares in that? The so-called benefit? If it's, if the if, if the sharing of that benefit goes to. You know all. The the parties, the constituencies involved in that factory or whatever it is, that production line or just one narrow 1. Narrow beneficiary or or is it?

Brian Merchant: Both. Yeah. I mean, I think it's a little bit of both, but. I think it's more the latter. I think it's. It is in. Fact like you should be encouraged to question how technology is going to be used in your workplace, in your life, in your, in your daily routine. Like is it who is, who is a given technology going to serve? Is it going to serve you the worker or is it going to serve your boss at your expense? And it's giving I think. People license again, especially this is really important in this era where for so long. You've been taught that progress is equal to technology. It's Silicon Valley is the bringer of all of these. You know, great technological gifts and you know to question or to resist them is it is was unthinkable for so long. I mean, we've seen some of that change with the tech lash and and so forth, but there's still a lot of people. We're very resistant to. Even say like well, wait a minute. Like this seems like a. This seems like an awfully raw deal, and we're seeing that I think with thanks to the writers and to a number of the other sort of folks who are pushing back on this right now, we're

seeing that facade start to crack. Because the Luddites are exactly saying what you pointed out, Sam, it's it's. Asking if this technology is going to be used for the end of exploitation and giving license to refuse it to oppose it, to draw a red line and giving us more say over how we want technology to be used in our lives because so often, as you said at the top, it's being used by folks who are hoping to. Just just profit off of it at our expense. It's that simple. If the if the control only goes. To the VC class to the tech Titans of our day, to the managerial class. The people who are. Using technology for the express purpose of profit, then you can pretty well into it the outcomes and and who's gonna? Who's gonna be affected by that? So I think that Luddites have given us a good example. An important example to look at the way that it's being deployed in society or even in our specific workplaces, and to question it, and it's OK to question it. It's OK to be a Luddite. And in fact, there's great power in being a Luddite.

Sam Seder: Brian Merchant, Tech columnist at the Los Angeles Times, author of Blood and The Machine the Origins of Rebellion against Big Techs. Thanks so much for your time today. We'll put a link to that at majority dot FM and our podcast and YouTube descriptions really enjoyed it.

Brian Merchant: Thanks so much.

Brian Merchant, Sam Seder & Emma Vigeland
How Luddites Showed Us The Politics Of Machinery w/ Brian Merchant
Dec 30, 2023

<majorityreportradio.com/2023/10/30/10-30-what-the-luddites-can-teach-us-w-brian-merchant>
This is a simple automatic transcription mostly to help the video show up in searches on the topic of luddite history.