

The Original Luddites

British textile workers protested new tech 200 years ago—and lost.

AFTER TRAINING FOR FOUR TO seven years, they were among the economy's most employable workers, known for their skill and acuity. Then came a new technology that accomplished much of their work without them. They soon found themselves unemployed. In their stead, employers hired an influx of cheap, low-skilled workers.

No, we're not talking about 2025. We're talking about 1812, when a group of skilled textile workers—think lace makers and hosiers—took center stage in Nottingham, England, to protest

new technologies that produced textiles faster and with less labor. Their leader, Ned Ludd, was portrayed as a Robin Hood-like figure (he hailed from the same region) who strove to save jobs that are unfamiliar to us today, like croppers, who trimmed the fuzzy nap on wool to create attractive garments.

The new clothing produced by cutting-edge technology was not great. Factory-made socks were prone to developing holes within a year or two, unlike the handmade versions that might last a decade. "Machines were producing shoddier articles, more cheaply, and displacing workers," says Kevin Binfield, a Murray State University professor and author of *Writings of the Luddites*. The artisans petitioned Parliament on the grounds that the poorly made garments ruined the reputation of the craft—much as today's creatives, offended by so-called "AI slop," take issue with its low-quality, unoriginal content.

Today, of course, the term "Luddite" refers to

someone opposed to new technology, but the original Luddites were less concerned about new equipment than they were about being replaced by less skilled workers. As the movement spread through parts of England, so did violence: Luddites attacked entire mills, but were eventually crushed, both physically and economically, by the government's military (perhaps you've heard the saying "poor as a stocking knitter"). The industrial revolution forged ahead.

Luddites were also the original work-from-home contractors, known for constructing garments from their own weavers' cottages. They did not respond well to their employers' sudden demand that they make cloth in factories. The class of worker impacted by Luddite-era mass automation—mostly skilled artisans—closely mirrors the modern artists, translators, graphic designers, copywriters, and others impacted by generative AI. "They're remarkably similar," says Brian Merchant, author of *Blood in the Machine: The Origins of the Rebellion Against Big Tech*. "Luddites were protesting for autonomy, control, and freedom." ▮

English laborer Ned Ludd leading a so-called "Luddite Riot."

Skilled textile workers took center stage in the protest movement.

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