Robotaxis, disabled with traffic cones on their hoods in San Francisco

In July 2023 Safe Street Rebel, a San Francisco street-activist group, launched a “Week of Cone,” teaching people to disable Cruise and Waymo robotaxis by setting a traffic cone on the hood, which left a car standing with its hazard lights on until someone took the cone off; one member said they had coned about a dozen.

By the Clerk · 5 July 2023 · 4 min read

CASE:	BAS-0020
SUBJECT:	Safe Street Rebel, a San Francisco activist group, and those who took up its call
OBJECT:	Cruise and Waymo robotaxis, autonomous vehicles
DATE:	5 July 2023
PLACE:	San Francisco, California
FILED:	20 October 2026
GRADE:	CONTEMPT · ORGANIZATION
AGGRAVATING:	spectacle, repetition

Facts

In the summer of 2023 Cruise, a spin-off of General Motors, and Waymo, a subsidiary of Google’s parent Alphabet, were running driverless taxis in San Francisco, and the California Public Utilities Commission was to vote on 13 July on letting both expand them, TechCrunch and Fortune report. Safe Street Rebel, a group the San Francisco Standard calls “anti-car, pro-pedestrian safety and pro-transit,” had found that a traffic cone set on a robotaxi’s hood stops it. In a video posted in the first week of July, the group showed how, and called the campaign the “Week of Cone”; the post Fortune embeds is of 5 July. The car, the Standard writes, citing the activists and the videos, goes into shutdown, its hazard lights on, until the cone is removed or a company technician resets it.

The video asked viewers to do the same: “First, find a cone—they’re everywhere. Then gently place it on the car’s hood. Make sure the car is empty. It’s really fun and anyone can do it.” It was later gone from TikTok, which did not answer Fortune’s questions about its removal, and went on circulating elsewhere.

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TechCrunch reports that people were sending the group pictures of their own coned cars, and the Standard that others had taken the practice up. One member told the Standard they had coned about a dozen cars. Cruise's cars were coned most, the Standard writes, there being more of them.

The group set itself rules, the Standard and NPR report: no car with a passenger in it, none on bus routes or in front of bus stops. NPR went out with its members one night, for a report published in late August. They came on e-bikes, in face masks, and would not give their names because it is unclear whether disabling a driverless car is legal. A car pulled up with people inside, and they let it go. Then an empty Waymo turned a corner; they put a cone on its hood, and it stood in the middle of the street with its lights flashing.

That month California allowed both companies to expand and to run their robotaxis around the clock, NPR reports. Neither Cruise nor Waymo told NPR why a cone stops their cars.

Statements

Safe Street Rebel, in its video, as TechCrunch quotes it: "These companies promise their cars will reduce traffic and collisions, but instead they block buses, emergency vehicles and everyday traffic." And, as TechCrunch quotes it: "Hell no. We do not consent to this."

The member who spoke to the Standard: "It's like the state has decided that these things are going to be deployed in San Francisco without the consent of the city or the people in it." And on the week's end: "People might just keep coning them, if not as a form of protest, then just for joy."

An organizer, to NPR: "We thought putting cones on these was a funny image that could captivate people. And one of these self-driving cars worth billions of dollars of venture capital investment money and R&D just being disabled by a common traffic cone." And: "We don't really need traffic cones to show how vulnerable they are."

Waymo, as TechCrunch quotes it: "Not only is this understanding of how AVs operate incorrect, but this is vandalism and encourages unsafe and disrespectful behavior on our roadways. We will notify law enforcement of any unwanted or unsafe interference of our vehicles on public roadways."

Cruise, to TechCrunch and Fortune, citing its free late-night rides and its meal deliveries: "Intentionally obstructing vehicles gets in the way of those efforts and risks creating traffic congestion for local residents." It told Fortune and the Standard the cones had little effect on its fleet.

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, per the Standard, said on Twitter that it did not endorse anything that would disable more autonomous vehicles.

For the record

The cone was the point of the image: a machine worth billions in investment, in the organizer's words, stopped by the most common object on the street. What it stops is the machine: per NPR it confuses the car's sensors. NPR's correspondent called the empty Waymo the group's "next robot victim."

Waymo said the activists had misunderstood how its cars work, and did not answer NPR's question of how a cone stops them. The cars stopped.

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Mitigating circumstances

Nothing was broken. The cone was set down “gently,” as the video asked, and lifted off again; TechCrunch writes that a vandalism charge would probably not stick, vandalism meaning damage. The group left out cars with passengers and cars on bus routes, and the campaign’s stated aim was to bring residents’ comments to the commission before its vote. Its complaint had support from the city’s own side: San Francisco’s fire chief, Jeanine Nicholson, told the Washington Post, as Fortune reports, that her department had logged 66 incidents with the cars since May 2022, among them cars running over fire hoses and entering active fire scenes. A Harvard visiting fellow, David Zipper, called “active protest” a “reasonable response,” TechCrunch reports.



SOURCES

1. Rebecca Bellan, Robotaxi haters in San Francisco are disabling the AVs with traffic cones (archived), TechCrunch, 6 July 2023
2. Kevin Truong, We spoke to one of the activists ‘coning’ Cruise and Waymo robotaxis in San Francisco (archived), The San Francisco Standard, 7 July 2023
3. Chloe Taylor, Angry San Franciscans are sabotaging Waymo and Cruise robotaxis with one simple trick (archived), Fortune, 10 July 2023
4. Dara Kerr, Protesters, armed with traffic cones, are immobilizing driverless cars (archived), NPR, 28 August 2023

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