

Union at Google parent Alphabet seeks bigger role for workers

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A labor drive has begun at Google and its parent firm Alphabet aiming to improve conditions for contractors and give employees a bigger role in company decisions

Employees at Google and other units of parent firm Alphabet announced

the creation Monday of a union, aiming for a bigger role in company decisions in a move which steps up the activism brewing in Silicon Valley giants.

The Alphabet Workers Union, affiliated with the Communications Workers of America, aims to represent well-compensated tech workers as well as temporary workers and contractors, according to a statement.

The new labor group is focusing not only on pay and benefits but also a role in ethical decisions by the tech giant and protection from allegedly arbitrary firings for activism.

"We hope to create a democratic process for workers to wield decision-making power; promote social, economic, and environmental justice; and end the unfair disparities between TVCs (temporary, vendors and contractors) and FTEs (full time employees)," the union's website said.

As of the end of December, the union had some 200 members. It will be open all employees at Google and Alphabet units including autonomous car division Waymo, connected device maker Fitbit and life sciences division Verily.

In a New York Times op-ed, the union's chair Parul Koul and vice chair Chewy Shaw said that the focus will be "to ensure that workers know what they're working on, and can do their work at a fair wage, without fear of abuse, retaliation or discrimination."

They said they would press Google on ethical decisions including in the use of artificial intelligence.

"Its motto used to be 'Don't be evil,' " they wrote "We will live by that motto."

The move comes with Google and other tech giants under heightened scrutiny by antitrust enforcers in the US and elsewhere for their growing dominance of key economic sectors.

New deal for tech?

"There is a growing techlash against the large technology companies as they are accumulating great wealth and a number of their workers are unhappy with the high cost of living in Silicon Valley, working conditions, AI ethics, and corporate decision-making," said Darrell West, a fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for Technology Innovation.



Google workers held a sit-in to protest sexual harassment at the company, on

May 1, 2019 at the tech giant's headquarters in Silicon Valley

"Tech employees want a greater say in what is happening and want to see greater social responsibility from the sector. This unionization drive differs from past ones from the industrial era in focusing not just on pay and benefits, but the broader role of technology in society."

Large tech firms, which offer generous compensation to software engineers and other skilled workers, have largely avoided labor drives but have faced growing unrest over workplaces issues in recent years.

At Amazon, which has tens of thousands of warehouse workers, organizing drives have focused on working conditions and safety during the pandemic.

One of the catalysts at Google was the recent firing of Timnit Gebru, a Black artificial intelligence ethics researcher and outspoken diversity activist.

The company also faced a backlash from employees over its involvement with a Pentagon project known as Project Maven, which Google eventually ended.

"This union builds upon years of courageous organizing by Google workers," said Nicki Anselmo, a Google program manager and union member.

"From... opposing Project Maven, to protesting the egregious, multimillion dollar payouts that have been given to executives who've committed sexual harassment, we've seen first-hand that Alphabet responds when we act collectively."

Google's director of people operations Kara Silverstein, said in a statement: "We've always worked hard to create a supportive and rewarding workplace for our workforce."

"Of course our employees have protected labor rights that we support. But as we've always done, we'll continue engaging directly with all our employees."

Arthur Wheaton, a researcher at Cornell University's school of industrial and labor relations, said the union could face challenges if it seeks recognition by the company, needing some 30 percent to force an election and a majority to win representation.

"Union organizing drives take a long time with no guarantees of success," Wheaton said. "US labor law is not very good for workers rights. It is tilted heavily in management's favor."

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