

Tech Workers Learn to Say No to Unethical Projects

By Sarang Shah, J.D. Candidate 2021 | October 20, 2018

Corporations from their inception have been construed as a nexus of stakeholders, including employees and consumers. They are given the blessing of the State to pursue a commercial, [yet publicly necessary enterprise](#). Nevertheless, that view of corporations has given way to a more transactional model wherein employees, in exchange for their wage, have ceded their right to exercise their natural stake in their employer. Since the 1970s, a concerted attack on unions and a grand bargain between management and shareholders has meant that even employees who do care to exercise a say in the direction of their company have had their voices drowned out.

But, in the tech industry, a tight labor market where talent attracts a high premium, workers are starting to raise their voices in a way that employees in other industries haven't. For example, tech workers have started to push back against working on projects they believe are unethical. The [New York Times](#) highlights the case of Dr. Jack Poulson, a research scientist for Google who ultimately quit after discovering the company was working on a search engine that would comply with China's strict censorship requirements. For companies like [Google](#), [Facebook](#), and [Amazon](#), a significant burden of ethical deliberation has fallen on tech workers to determine how to exercise their power to achieve a moral, sustainable future for their industry.

Organizations, such as the [Tech Workers Coalition](#), have tried to build an alliance among engineers and more precarious contract workers in order to exert pressure on managers and shareholders to pursue projects more in line with the employees' and companies' declared values. Nevertheless, even for this privileged class of workers, the deck is still stacked against them. For one, organizing is much harder than ever before, especially in an industry that champions individualism and a take-it-or-leave-it approach with employees who disagree. It also remains unclear whether tech workers should form unions or [innovate forms of partnership](#) more suited for an increasingly service-based economy.

There may also be a role for policy in empowering tech workers and others to exercise their voice in partnership with business owners. For example, organizations, such as the Oakland-based Sustainable Economies Law Center, are working [to champion worker-owned cooperatives](#) as a future corporate model. Furthermore, Senator Warren [has been advocating for](#) more German-style codetermination as a solution [while the Labour Party of the UK has been](#)



[advocating](#) that a third of company board seats must be reserved for employees.

Some employers may view tech workers raising their voices as an insurrection, but in the broader historical narrative of what corporations are and the purposes they serve as legal instruments, we're merely seeing a return to the norm. Or, perhaps we may see a more harmonious vision of stakeholder sovereignty, employees, managers, and shareholders alike, in a time replete with moral quandaries.