

The Kickstart of a New Wave of Tech Activism

By Dani Kritter, J.D. Candidate, 2021 | February 24th

On February 18th, employees at the crowdfunding platform [Kickstarter](#) narrowly voted to unionize and marked the first step toward organized labor representation in tech. While it is uncertain whether unions comprised of software engineers will take off, [Kickstarter United](#) represents a new vision of unions as vehicles to hold employers accountable for ethical decisions.

Labor organizing had been a source of tension at Kickstarter for months. The unionization push began in 2019 after the company became embroiled in an [internal debate](#) over whether to allow a fundraising campaign on its site for a comic book that included images of people punching Nazis. Employees eventually convinced Kickstarter to keep the project alive. In the process, they discovered the importance of formalizing their voices to have a say in ethical issues. After months of organizing efforts, Kickstarter management drew [high-profile criticism](#) after it fired two organizers. A software engineer who voted to form Kickstarter United last week hailed the decision as “a first step to the sustainable future in tech.”

The success of the Kickstarter union could be a catalyst for organizing efforts at other tech companies, such as Google and Amazon, fraught with employee activism over issues such as climate change and sexual harassment. However, Kickstarter has long positioned itself as a more progressive and mission-driven company than these tech behemoths. For example, Kickstarter is a [public benefit corporation](#), meaning that its corporate decision-making can be based on maximizing public good rather than shareholder profits alone. Furthermore, many of the artists and creatives essential to Kickstarter’s customer base [threatened to boycott](#) the platform if it quashed the unionization effort. While it may have made business sense for Kickstarter to allow a union vote, [other tech firms](#) have taken a harder stance against unions.

Regardless of whether Kickstarter United will lead to a Google United, it is undeniable that the union vote represents the latest manifestation of tech activism: unionizing around ethical ideals. For example, [Kickstarter United](#) plans to include terms for equitable pay, diversity in hiring, transparency, accountability, and inclusion in its union contract. While most unionization drives center around improving pay, hours, and benefits, Kickstarter demonstrates that unions can also be formed with the goal of aligning management ethics with employee voices.

