Collective Action in Tech

Organizing in the tech industry

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Amazon workers begin to gather in front of the company’s headquarters during September’s climate strike. Photograph: Elaine Thompson/AP
Agenda

1. The rise of tech organizing in the late 2010s
2. Why are tech workers organizing?
3. Tactics for organizing tech workers
Collective action in tech is a project to advance the tech workers movement
Archive

Collective Action in Tech

Unionizing is a tried and true way for workers to build and maintain power in the workplace. Each union is a reflection of the needs and circumstances of the workers who build it. This is a collection of all publicly documented tech unions in the US—36 and growing. We hope this collection clarifies approaches that might work well for your union drive and inspires even more creativity across the tech labor movement.

This project attempts to document all collective action from workers in the tech industry. Contribute to our archive.

Currently, there are 506 collective actions documented.

Friday, April 29, 2022
About 100 Amazon warehouse workers at Shakopee, Minnesota staged a walkout. They protested the low wages and lack of time off for Eid. Their demands include to bring back a $3/hour pay raise and unlimited volunteer time off for religious events. Members of The Awood Center joined them in solidarity.

amazon protest strike pay and benefits working conditions shakopee-minnesota-usa inhouse workers blue collar workers

Wednesday, April 20, 2022
Separate from the unionizing employees in New York, retail workers at an Atlanta Apple Store have filed with the NLRB for a union election, with wages being the main reason for unionization. The organizers say that they don’t make a living wage. Over 70% of the 100 eligible workers have signed union authorization cards, and they would be represented by the CWA.

cwa apple union drive pay and benefits working conditions atlanta-georgia-usa inhouse workers

https://data.collectiveaction.tech/
What is a collective action?

(1) "Collective"

- Must involve a minimum of two employees
- The cause and/or issue should be relevant to a broader public

(2) "Evidence of action"

- Must involve an attempt to present the cause and/or issue outside of the immediate group and their managers
- Actions may be either internal (available or visible only to other employees) or external (available or visible to the broader public). Actions should not be the initiated by company management.

(3) "Tech workers".

- Defined as current or recently employed (within the last year) workers in the tech industry
- Tech industry includes but is not limited to information technology, Internet, hardware, software.
- Does not include: digital media or the video game industry. Does include online retailers.
- Academics whose research concerns technology and students or interns who are preparing to enter the tech industry can be considered tech workers.
Total collective action in tech in the U.S.
Key issues in the tech industry
Perceptions

Tech workers:

- Make six-figure salaries,
- Have flexible work schedules,
- Are often provided free dining,
- Entered the industry to *change the world*

What could they be organizing for?
Some fundamental causes

Tech workers are workers!

- Limited agency in their work (what they build, who they build for)
- Disillusioned with what their company claims to represent
2016-2020 — Ethics-based demands

Tech workers engaged in collective action to:

- **Oppose unethical contracts** (eg. Google open letter against Project Maven, Microsoft protest against collaboration with ICE)
- **Lift up other communities/workers** (eg. contract workers, workers in another country, less privileged workers in the same company)
- **Demand greater accountability of company products** (eg. racist algorithms)

Note: the harm that workers are protesting is _external_ to their working conditions
2021-present — Workplace demands

Tech workers engaged in collective action to:

- **Protest layoffs** (eg. Google NYC protest against latest wave of layoffs)
- **Unreasonable management** (eg. NYTimes Tech workers 1-day strike against management union-busting behavior)
- **Improve working conditions** (eg. NPR Tech workers, Mapbox, Kickstarter union campaigns)

Note: the harm that workers are protesting is *internal* to their working conditions
## Changes in the kind of collective action

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Resources For Tech Worker Organizers

- Tech workers are workers
- Most organizing tactics common the US labor movement work for them too!
- Material, positional differences do create some particular hurdles
  - Remote Work
  - Several decades of abundance (for some)
  - Wall-to-wall organizing
  - Product of one worker’s labor is a tool to surveil another
Resources - Layoff Guide

What To Expect

- Don’t rely on fair or reasonable treatment from the company. Hope for the best but plan for the worst.
- You will likely lose access to all company systems before being notified that you are terminated.
- Assume everything you do on work accounts and work devices is traceable and monitored.
- Your manager is obligated and incentivized to follow instructions from leadership. Do not assume your manager will be willing or able to help you, even if they want to.

Know Your Rights

- Some states require employers with over 100 employees to give 60-90 days advance notice. Check if your state has adopted the WARN Act (aka min-WARN act).
- Some states have single party consent laws that allow you to legally record audio. You are acting as the single consenting party. If you can, record your meetings so you have evidence if you need it in the wrongful termination. If you’re not in a single party consent state, get creative. Have a friend join one of these states hop on the phone to help you record and document any layoff

Notes on Surveillance

- At no point should you plug any type of External storage (SD card, HD, thumb drive) into your work device. This is traceable and monitored.
- Sending Google Docs from Gmail to personal accounts probably violates your agreement with the company, even if those documents do not contain sensitive information. Downloads and sharing to other accounts or creating links is monitored and can be used to justify “for cause” termination.
- Twitter is analyzing Google Drive data and looking for anomalies. Downloading or sharing in bulk will trigger an investigation.
- One of the safest ways to capture documentation is to simply snap a pic from your personal phone.
Resources - Remote Organizing

DMs OPEN
WINNING REMOTE ORGANIZING

Against Organizers:

“Don’t have union Slack on your work computer, don’t open your outreach spreadsheet on your work-computer.”

-Kathy (New York Times Tech Guild)

“After a while, we got confirmation from our G Suite admin in the office that our Google Hangouts are end-to-end encrypted. We decided that was safe enough. Once we got that confirmation, we just started having those organizing calls on the work Google Hangout. And then on the video call, we would ask for their personal cell phone number and email address where we’d send our FAQ document and Union Slack invite links. Sometimes, before we got off the call, we would drop those links in the chat box in the Google Hangout itself.”

-Angela (New York Times Tech Guild)

It is important to keep your efforts out of sight of management until you have the strength in numbers to all publicly stand together. Real security comes from a super majority of union supporters. Keeping your efforts a secret from your bosses for as long as possible gives you more time to talk to your coworkers on your own terms, without anti-union propaganda flooding the workplace.

Once workers are united, anything is possible. For instance, a few unions are already negotiating groundbreaking anti-surveillance clauses into their first contracts.

“It’s like when the contract is concluded, we will have a legally binding agreement that our bosses can’t key-log you and then be like, ‘hey, you spent an hour doing union stuff during the workday.’”

-Bjorn, Digital Media United (NPR)

REACHING OUT TO YOUR COWORKERS

“As we went remote, everyone’s experience became drastically atomized.”

-Ben (Code for America: CFA Workers United)
Resources- Role-Playing Game

FAccT 2022 (Seoul, South Korea)
Resources - Editorial

April 5, 2022
A Worker Perspective with Christian Smalls (Amazon Labor Union)
The leader of the first union in Amazon's history gives his thoughts on what makes for a successful campaign.
— Wynn Chan

June 5, 2022
A Worker Perspective with Shay Culpepper (NY Times Tech Guild)
"Everyone should be organizing in tech."
— Hyatt Dirbas

August 4, 2022
A Worker Perspective With Willy Solis
"It's really important for workers to gain back power and the only way to do that is to organize."
— Gig Workers Collective
— Hyatt Dirbas
Supporting campaigns

- Embedded Organizer Program
- Ad-hoc trainings
- Collaboration with EWOC
Questions?

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