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Google Protest Leader Leaves, Warns of Company's Unchecked Power

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-16/google-protest-leader-meredith-whittaker-is-leaving-the-company>

Meredith Whittaker, who helped lead employee protests at Google over the search giant's military work, artificial intelligence and policies, is leaving the company.

In a blog, she warned that the internet giant's AI software and huge computing resources are helping it expand in unsettling ways.

"Google, in the conventional pursuit of quarterly earnings, is gaining significant and largely unchecked power to impact our world (including in profoundly dangerous ways, such as accelerating the extraction of fossil fuels and the deployment of surveillance technology)," she wrote in a [blog](#) on Tuesday. "How this vast power is used — who benefits and who bears the risk — is one of the most urgent social and political (and yes, technical) questions of our time."

Whittaker helped spark a broader uprising among workers at some of the world's largest technology companies, including [Alphabet Inc.](#)'s Google, Microsoft Corp. and

Amazon.com Inc. They are concerned these corporations are gaining too much power through AI-powered, machine-based decision making that has flaws and little or no accountability.

Over the past year, some staff at Google erupted in protest, prompting the company to drop a Pentagon AI contract and a censored search project in China. Whittaker, who led Google's Open Research group, was one of the most outspoken voices. She was one of six women who organized massive walkouts after reports that Google paid handsome sums to executives accused of sexual harassment.

A Google spokeswoman said Whittaker resigned. "Google will continue to work with policymakers, academics, the tech community and other leaders from across industries as we tackle these important issues, in addition to providing transparency into how we're putting our [AI principles](#) into action," she added.

For tech investors only focused on money, Whittaker's departure may be good news. Employee protesters have become an obstacle for technology companies bidding for lucrative government cloud computing deals in areas such as the military and customs and border control. If the protests wither, it may mean Google and other big tech companies pursue such contracts more aggressively.

Other Google protesters were saddened by Whittaker's resignation, but hopeful that their attempts to hold large tech companies accountable will continue.

"Our movement has moved into a new phase," said Irene Knapp, a senior software engineer at Google. "Those of us who remain

at the company have been focused on disseminating knowledge and teaching our organizing skills to new people. I am sure that Meredith would not be leaving if she didn't know that she's accomplished that, and I know that I very much feel she has. We're set up for the long haul."

While at Google, Whittaker also served with AI Now, a research institute at New York University that she co-founded. The group often criticizes businesses and government agencies for using AI systems, like facial recognition, in policing and surveillance. Whittaker also publicly denounced some Google decisions, including the appointment of Kay Coles James, a conservative think tank leader, to an AI ethics board. Google soon nixed the board.

"People in the AI field who know the limitations of this tech, and the shaky foundation on which these grand claims are perched, need to speak up, loudly. The consequences of this kind of BS marketing are deadly (if profitable for a few)," Whittaker [wrote](#) on Twitter on Sunday.

In April, about six months after the big employee walkout, Whittaker and another protest leader, Claire Stapleton, said the company was [retaliating against](#) them for their role in the activity. In an email to colleagues, Whittaker said her Google manager told her to "abandon [her] work on AI ethics" and blocked a request to transfer internally. At the time, Google denied it retaliated against Whittaker.