

Google female employees say the company is punishing them for their anti-corruption activism

Women helped organize a global walkout at Google. Now they say they've been demoted and reassigned.

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Google employees in Boulder, Colorado, listen to speakers during the global Walkout for Real Change on November 1, 2018.

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Google employees who helped organize a [global employee protest](#) in November are now saying the company is punishing them for their activism.

Claire Stapleton, a marketing manager at YouTube, said she was demoted and told to take medical leave, even though she wasn't ill. Meredith Whittaker, an artificial intelligence researcher, said she was reassigned and told to stop her well-known research on AI ethics. Both women detailed their experiences [in an email to coworkers this week](#), which was [shared with journalists at Wired](#) and published Monday.

Stapleton and Whittaker are two of seven employees at the tech company who organized a massive protest, called the [Google Walkout for Real Change](#), that prompted 20,000 Google employees and contractors in 50 cities to walk off the job on November 1 to protest the company's handling of sexual harassment allegations.

The walkout was just one part of their strategy. Organizers had put together a list of demands for executives to address what they considered "rampant" sexism and racism at the company. CEO Sundar Pichai has agreed to make some policy changes, but employees are pushing for more. They've pressured the company to [ban mandatory arbitration](#) clauses in labor contracts, and supported efforts [to improve pay and benefits](#) for contract workers.

Now employees say some of them are paying a price for speaking out.

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“My manager started ignoring me, my work was given to other people, and I was told to go on medical leave, even though I’m not sick,” Stapleton, who has worked at Google for 12 years, wrote [in the email](#). “Only after I hired a lawyer and had her contact Google did management conduct an investigation and walked back my demotion, at least on paper. While my work has been restored, the environment remains hostile and I consider quitting nearly every day.”

A spokesperson for Google denied the allegations.

“We prohibit retaliation in the workplace, and investigate all allegations. Employees and teams are regularly and commonly given new assignments, or reorganized, to keep pace with evolving business needs,” she wrote in a statement to Vox. “There has been no retaliation here.”

Stapleton and Whittaker also said in their email that retaliation isn’t always obvious, and urged their coworkers to continue “pushing back.” “If we want to stop discrimination, harassment, and unethical decision making, we need to end retaliation against the people who speak honestly about these problems,” they wrote.

They invited their colleagues to meet with them Friday to share their own stories and come up with a plan. That plan will likely involve publicizing their stories, as employees have done in the past, knowing that publicity is often the most effective way to get the company’s attention.

Google employees are shifting the levers of power

Tech workers in Silicon Valley aren’t unionized, but in the past two years, they’ve learned the power of organizing. Google employees have changed company policies related to sexual harassment, the ethical use of artificial intelligence, and the treatment of contract workers.

But the most visible display of their influence happened on November 1, at exactly 11:10 am in time zones across the world. [About 20,000](#) Google employees and contractors in 50 cities walked off the job in a coordinated protest. The Google walkout started at Google’s offices in Tokyo, then Singapore, before staging massive walkouts across Europe and the East Coast of the United States.

The walkouts, which made headlines all over the world, reflected [increasing internal frustration](#) with Google’s corporate culture.

Employee anger reached a tipping point in October, when the New York Times [published an article](#) detailing how Google paid millions of dollars in exit packages to male executives accused of sexual harassment, while staying silent about the misconduct.

That included a \$90 million payout in 2014 to Andy Rubin, the creator of the Android phone, who allegedly coerced a female subordinate into performing oral sex on him. (Rubin denies it, though a Google investigation found the claim credible.) After leaving, Google invested in his next business venture, according to the Times.

Google has not denied the allegations in the article. Pichai and Larry Page, a co-founder of Google and CEO of its parent company, Alphabet, [apologized in an email to company employees after the article was published](#). They also said that the company had fired another 48 Google employees over sexual harassment claims in the past two years, but that none of those employees received payouts (that number does not include Rubin, who left in 2014).

But that wasn’t enough to satisfy many of Google’s 94,000 employees, who have complained of rampant sexism, racism, unethical government contracts, and a general lack of transparency at the company.

“We’ve waited for leadership to fix these problems, but have come to this conclusion: no one is going to do it for us. So we are here, standing together, protecting and supporting each other,” wrote several of the walkout organizers in an essay [published the morning of the walkout](#) in New York magazine. “We demand an end to the sexual harassment, discrimination, and the systemic racism that fuel this destructive culture.”

They made five specific demands. A week later, Pichai [agreed to make some changes](#).

The protests reflect concern about the company’s ethics

The Google employees who organized the walkout say their frustration with the company has been building for years and that the allegations revealed in the Times article represent only a fraction of the stories employees have to tell.

“We share them in hushed tones to trusted peers, friends, and partners. There are thousands of us, at every level of the company. And we’ve had enough,” wrote the organizers.

The protests reflect a deepening moral crisis within Google. Thousands of tech workers at Google have been

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questioning whether the company has “lost its moral compass” in the corporate pursuit to enrich shareholders.

In April 2018, more than 3,000 Google employees protested the company’s military contract with the Pentagon — [known as Project Maven](#) — which involved technology to analyze drone video footage that could potentially identify and kill human targets.

About a dozen engineers resigned over what they viewed as an unethical use of artificial intelligence, prompting Google to let the contract expire in June and leading executives to promise that they would never use AI technology to harm others or cause human suffering.

A few months later, [an investigation by the Intercept](#) revealed that Google is secretly working on another questionable project: a censored search engine for Chinese officials in Beijing.

The search engine under development, known as Project Dragonfly, is designed to hide search results that China’s authoritarian government wants to suppress, such as information about democracy, free speech, peaceful protest, and human rights, the Intercept reported.

The new search engine would also track a user’s location and would share an individual’s search history with a Chinese partner, who would have “unilateral access” to the data. This includes access to a user’s telephone number, according to an employee memo [obtained last week by the Intercept](#).

After the news of Dragonfly [leaked in August](#), more than 1,400 Google employees signed a letter demanding more transparency and accountability about the project’s potential impact on human rights. The controversy has reportedly prompted at least five Google employees [to quit](#) in protest.

Google executives have defended the Dragonfly project and tried to downplay concerns, saying that it was merely in the exploratory stages.

But then the company planned to bid on another Pentagon contract, known as JEDI, which involved building cloud storage for military data. There are few public details about what else the \$10 billion project would entail. But one thing was clear: The project would involve using [artificial intelligence to make the US military a lot deadlier](#).

In early October, facing mounting internal pressure, Google announced that it would not submit a bid for the contract. By the end of the month, employees got more unpleasant news: that the company had secretly given million-dollar exit packages to executives accused of sexual harassment.

Whittaker and Stapleton, who helped organize the walkout, said the company is now trying to silence them by taking away their job responsibilities. If that’s true, the strategy hasn’t succeeded in keeping them quiet.