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Unions in Tech:

Securing Worker's Rights in Computing

Until 2020, video game development company CDProjekt Red could do no wrong. After a decade of adapting Andrzej Sapowski's novel series The Witcher into video game format, with The Witcher 3 winning dozens of "Game of the Year" awards, CDProjekt Red was held in esteem by just about anyone in the video game industry. Following the 2019 failed launch of EA's video game Anthem and the ensuing negative press about overworking tech employees, CDProjekt Red's CEO and co-founder Marcin Iwiński sought to cement the opinion of his company by publicly distancing them from the practice, all but promising to make the process of "crunch" optional for his employees, especially with regards to their upcoming major project Cyberpunk 2077

"I actually would [like] for us to also be known for treating developers with respect. ...

We've been communicating clearly to people that of course there are certain moments where we need to work harder ... but we want to be more humane and treat people with respect. If they need to take time off, they can take time off. Nobody will be frowned upon if this will be requested," (Schreier, Kotaku).

As a result, as Cyberpunk 2077's release date approached, public fervor built up exponentially, as one of the world's most respected developers with a history of extreme quality claimed that they were also trying to be the one of the best employers in the industry.

Setback after setback seemed to plague Cyberpunk 2077 however, and as CDProjekt Red pushed back the release date from April 2020 to September, then September to November, cracks in this narrative started to emerge. When Cyberpunk 2077 launched in November 2020 to a slew of negative reviews, reporters went on a hunt to answer the question burning in the industry's mind: Why? An answer came swiftly. CDProjekt Red had implemented a policy of mandatory six-day work weeks months before its release (Schreier, Bloomberg). There were reports of developers working nights and weekends for over a year (Hall). In short, by overworking their development team up to 80 hours a week for nearly a year, CDProjekt Red had done the unthinkable: They released a sloppy product, not only ruining their decade-running image as the best in the business, but also cementing a growing opinion in tech, that the industry is more concerned with profit than respecting its labor force.

So, what does this mean for the future of tech? I believe it means that one of the future ethical dilemmas in the field is the same ethical dilemma fought for centuries: The establishment, maintenance, and defense of worker's rights from encroachment by the business class. I also argue that, as a historical struggle, the best method of doing so is using a historical method: unionization. More importantly, a majority of the workforce agrees with me. In a 2021 survey by Protocol, in partnership with the consultation firm Morning Consult, 50% of tech workers are somewhat to very interested in joining a union in their workplace (Kramer). More than 60% of millennials surveyed said they were interested, and there is speculation that even more upcoming gen-z employees will be interested in unionizing (Kramer). Even now, unions such as the Alphabet Workers Union, Mobilize, Mapbox, and the New York Times Tech Guild are steadily growing in membership (Kramer). As for what I or any other prospective employee can do to prepare for this, I would recommend doing the first thing any worker should do, regardless of industry: familiarize yourself with the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). An amazing resource for this is "www.laborlab.us,"

a comprehensive site containing a breakdown of all your rights as an employee seeking unionization in the United States (Labor Lab). And as far as my preparation for this, I feel fully prepared to engage with unionizing my co-workers, regardless of where I work. As a Boeing employee before college, I engaged in several unionization drives, and I am extremely knowledgeable about my rights as a worker, as I recommend anyone be.

The ACM Code of Ethics supports this viewpoint as well: Section 2.3 clearly states that it is our responsibility as computing professionals to know and respect existing rules pertaining to professional work (ACM). Furthermore, Section 1.1 states that we “should consider whether the results of [our] efforts will respect diversity, will be used in socially responsible ways, will meet social needs, and will be broadly accessible,” (ACM). As unions lead to better diversity, lower inequality, reduced wage disparities amongst protected classes, and increased worker retention, I would say wholeheartedly that unionization in tech is firmly rooted in the ACM Code of Ethics (EPI). And while the bible is decidedly anti-union, whether it be God commanding people to work 6 day weeks (Exodus 20:9), submit wholeheartedly to even the worst employers (1 Peter 2:19), not question a boss’s right to do anything they please (Matthew 20:1-15), be content with meager wages (Luke 3:14, Philippians 4:11-13), obey your employers without question as if you were working for the Lord (Colossians 3:22-24, Ephesians 6:5-8), suffer indignity at the hands of employers and not retaliate (1 Peter 2:18), not unionizing yourself with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14), etc., thankfully we enjoy the freedom of self-determination and democracy, including the ability to determine our own labor standards in line with our rights as workers.

Moving forward in tech, especially as a growing labor market, we as workers will have to wrestle with increased demand for our labor. It will fall on us to protect the rights of not only ourselves but future workers against employers that would cast aside those rights to meet that

demand. Unionizing, in my opinion, is the best way we can do so, and I would encourage everyone to familiarize themselves with our rights as workers. While the bible would disagree, the ACM Code of Ethics calls for us to take up this fight, for everyone. It's important to do so, because if CDProjekt Red is any example, even the most respected employers will try to take them away.

Works Cited

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