Organizing for Your Ethical Principles

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Employer deliberately elided
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Content warning:

Abstract discussions of sexual harassment, racial and disability discrimination, state-sponsored violence, concentration camps, and genocide

Not my employer's opinions.

Close your eyes.

Open your eyes.

1. Why organize?

Working Conditions

Examples:

- Pay and leveling
- Unjust treatment
- Excessive hours
- Harassment/discrimination
- Hostile work environment

Many other examples.

Product Ethics

Examples:

- Discriminating against minorities
  - Poor accessibility
  - Machine learning bias
- Aiding in unlawful acts
  - Volkswagen (fraud)
  - La Liga (eavesdropping)

Or both -- e.g. **collaborating with ICE**. *Many other examples.*

Ethics of Tech Ecosystem

Examples:

- "Independent" contractors & gig economy
- Cafeteria workers and bus drivers
- Gentrification
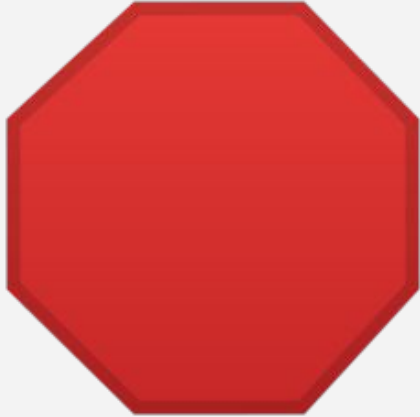- Digital divide
- Tech lobbying

Many other examples.

Intersections

Is it okay to ask someone to work on a project that harms or excludes them, or **harms or excludes members of a group they belong to**?

Is it okay to subject external-facing employees to receiving **abuse on the company's products** due to poor product design?
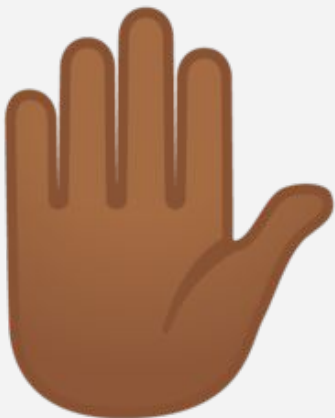
Intersections

What about family back home in another country?

Is it okay to build concentration camps?

What about crimes against humanity?

We are already at this point.

Your Ethics Matter

Unjust treatment of employees is not okay.

Unjust treatment of users of technology is not okay.

Unjust treatment of our neighbors is not okay.

We can change tech, together.

How do we fix this?

I've had a few successes.

15 years in tech

2 years as a manager (now no longer)

Queer transgender woman of color

Labor organizer & activist for 8 years

Activism covered in *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *Gizmodo*, *Bloomberg*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, and other media.

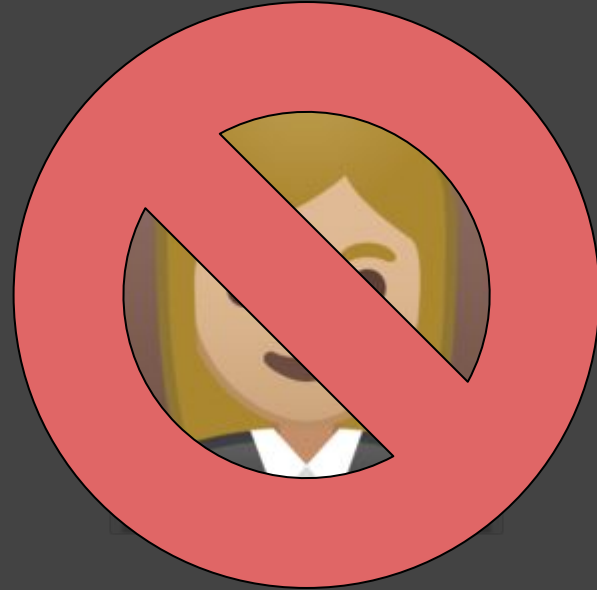# I'm tired and need your help.

How you can help me

1. Why organize?
2. Risks & protections
3. Organizing best practices
4. Resources

2. Risks & Protections

I am not a lawyer.

Company Cultures

"Do good" principles.

Companies claim to want vigorous sharing, debate & employees coming forward about issues.

Make use of your company's cultural statements.

Industry Ethics Codes

ACM:

Promote fundamental human rights *and each individual's right to autonomy.* ***Minimize negative consequences****, including threats to health, safety, personal security, and privacy. When the interests of multiple groups conflict,* ***the needs of those less advantaged should be given priority****.*

IEEE:

Hold ***paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public****, strive to comply with ethical design and sustainable development practices, and* ***disclose promptly factors that might endanger the public*** *or the environment.*

Engineers are valuable

Replacing an engineer costs $x00,000

GDPR.

Collective action & solidarity

Protected Concerted Activity

National Labor Relations Act (1935)

Available to non-supervisors in the US

"Two or more employees acting together to improve wages or **working conditions**" [no union required]

Forbids "adverse action against employees because of their protected, concerted activities"

nlrb.gov/rights-we-protect/protected-concerted-activity

Title VII

Civil Rights Act (1964)

Available to **all** employees, including supervisors.

Requires "opposing unlawful employment practices"; membership in group discriminated against not required

Forbids retaliation.

eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/retaliation-guidance.cfm

Whistleblowing

Federal employee whistleblower protections are weak :(

Private sector not covered, except public health/safety risks.

Risk of collateral damage.

Be prepared to resign or lose your job.

Be prepared for the worst.

Remedies are retrospective.

Retaliation often happens.

What is your backup plan?

What is **our** collective plan?

To the executives+managers: Is your company prepared to handle ethical escalations?

Change is worth the cost.

3. Successful Organizing

1. Early awareness

Changing decisions is easier before shipping

Fast iteration/feedback

Listen to colleagues & customers

Diverse networks matter

2. Building Employee Networks

Communicate outside your working group

Mailing lists, social media, and in-person gatherings

Include people different from you

Actively listen and empathize

Build trust

3. Venting vs. Problem-Solving

Listen vs. fix

Emotional vs. rational content

Safe places to vent "in person"

Advocacy != venting

The New York Times rule

4. Identifying Decision-Makers

Don't attack the messenger/team

Ask exploratory questions ("If not you, who would know?").

Develop sources in management

Cultivate allies among leadership

5. Effective Persuasion

Assume good faith

Assumptions, priorities, values, & engagement may differ

How can the result be achieved differently?

No pitchfork mobs or attacks against strawpeople

Be trustworthy.

6. If all else fails...

Break glass:

- Employee petitions
  - Succinct, clear ask
  - 5% = credible threat
- Media engagement
  - Public pressure entrenches execs/PR
  - Situationally powerful.
- Complaints to regulators, directors, & shareholders
  - Less well-trodden territory
- Strike or Quit

7. Avoiding Burnout

You are not your employer.

It's okay to take a step back.

Progress can take years.

Form long-term working groups.

8. Virtuous Cycles

Ethics is an integral part of our job.

Ethics crises are a process failure.

Continuous {integration, deployment, **ethics**}

We need robust, reusable infrastructure.

—

"Crises are simply a scarcity of time and attention."
--@EmilyGorcenski

—

**Be proactive.
Prevent crises.
Pick fights carefully.**

4. Resources

Acknowledgments

Emily Gorcenski, Yonatan Zunger, Yana Calou, & anonymous organizers

Thousands of my coworkers.

Nitasha Tiku & Kate Conger who believed us and told our stories.

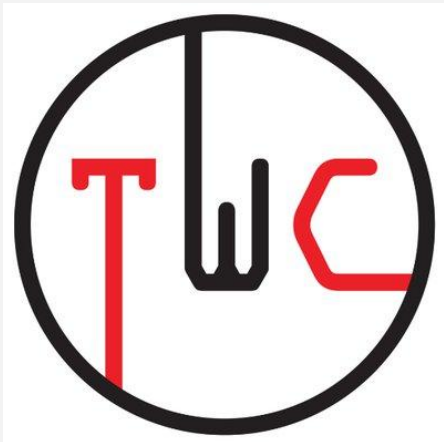Amélie Lamont, Kelly Ellis, Erica Baker, Julie Pagano, and Susan Fowler.

Coworker.org

Helped Google employees develop an organizing and media strategy around workplace safety.

Helped REI, Starbucks, and Publix employees campaign for better working conditions.

Can help you!

Tech Workers Coalition

Response to Lanetix employee layoffs.

Solidarity for cafeteria workers at Facebook unionized by Silicon Valley Rising.

Can help you!

Journalists

Know reporters' beats and angles.

Write out talking points.

Reporters aren't scary.

Talk to me for recommendations.

Thank you, and rise up! #TechWontBuildIt

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Q&A:
Chatham House Rules