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EMPLOYEES WANT AN ETHICAL WORKPLACE AND A GROWING NUMBER ARE WILLING TO PROTEST TO GET IT

BY **DANIEL MORITZ-RABSON** ON 7/19/19 AT 9:59 AM EDT



When a group of Amazon workers in Shakopee, Minnesota, walked off their jobs to protest working conditions earlier this week—right in the middle of Prime Day, the company's biggest sales event of the year—it was just the latest example of employees very publicly pushing back against the business practices of the companies that hand them their paychecks.

Over the past year at least a half dozen major companies have faced employee protests (in a couple of cases, several times) and the pace seems to be accelerating. Last month, in a highly publicized demonstration, hundreds of workers from home goods company Wayfair walked out of their Boston office to protest the reported sale of furniture slated to be used in a Texas detention center that would hold up to 1,600 migrant teenagers. Days later, in the latest in a series of employee protests against Google, workers asked organizers of the San Francisco Pride Parade to remove the company as a sponsor, citing its failure to properly regulate harassment against the LGBTQ community on YouTube and other Google products.

In addition to prior activism from employees at Amazon and Google, Microsoft, Uber and Lyft workers have publicly challenged company policies in the last year.

These employee protests not only appear to be increasing in frequency but also seem to be acting as a catalyst, with nationally covered mobilizations potentially encouraging employees at other companies to demonstrate, experts in corporate reputation management told *Newsweek*.

"Episodes like the Google and Wayfair walkouts and others likely empower other employees to model similar behavior," Anjali Lai, a senior analyst at market research company Forrester Research, told *Newsweek*.

Research shows that millennials want to work for companies that show corporate social responsibility. To accommodate employees seeking companies that take a stand on social issues, many large, publicly visible businesses seeking to clearly define their political stances by wading into controversial debates. In 2016, for example, Apple and eBay were among the 68 companies that joined a legal effort to block a North Carolina bill, which was later repealed, affecting transgender individuals.

"In the past, companies would publicly say we are neutral and just focus on legislation that was directly related to either the company or their broader industry. Now we see companies that are trying to influence legislation, elections and policy making that are related more to their value statements," Daniel Korschun, an expert on social corporate responsibility at Drexel University, told *Newsweek*.

"As companies are extending this net wider and including issues that are related to corporate values, they're simultaneously raising expectations from employees and customers about how they should behave," Korschun says.

In fact, when challenging employers, workers at Microsoft, Wayfair and Amazon have explicitly cited company mission statements, pointing out perceived contradictions and stated values and actions.

Whatever has motivated the various protests, the results have been mixed.

Google employees, perhaps, have been the most successful in achieving at least some, if not all, of their goals. Last June, for example, the company said that it would not extend Project Maven, a Defense Department contract that used artificial intelligence to analyze drone video images. Employees had objected, saying their work could be used for lethal purposes. The company also ended forced arbitration for sexual harassment claims after a worldwide walkout.

Microsoft similarly altered policies for handling discrimination and harassment after employee complaints.

But protests often fail. Wayfair, for one, did not yield to employee demands, issued in a letter that preceded the walkout, that the company stop business with contractors involved in the operation of migrant detention facilities on the U.S.-Mexico border and establish a code of ethics for business to business sales.

Nor did Microsoft agree to employee demands, outlined in February, that the company end a contract with the Army. Microsoft workers said in the open letter detailing their complaints that the company had crossed into weapons development and that the system being developed was "designed to help kill people."

But even when the workers don't achieve the concessions they're asking for, a protest can have an impact by potentially affecting the way current and potential employees feel about the company—and often not in a good way, experts say.

Data from [LinkedIn](#) indicate that younger employees will consider taking a pay cut to work at a company whose values align with their own. Given the premium placed on employer values, protests that depict company culture as repressive could deter prospective talent.

Further, employee sentiment can affect the productivity of current employees, according to Forrester. Eighty-five [percent](#) of employees who share the values of their company are productive at work, it found—13 percentage points more than the overall employee productivity rate.

"I always tell companies that the best tactic for them is to engage and listen [to employees]," Brayden King, a professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University, told *Newsweek*. King noted that workers may eventually leave if they aren't satisfied with the company's response.

The conditions that lead to protests render employer responses even more important. Public demonstrations often occur when employees have exhausted internal methods of raising concerns and hope to exert more pressure on the management. If employees feel the business is dismissive and hasn't adequately considered their demands, that employer response can foment further discontent and lead to future protests.

"In the shorter term at least, once a stakeholder sees the company as acting hypocritically, it spills over into that relationship," Korschun said. "For employees, they'll scrutinize their contract with the company much more closely."

Some protesters say that, instead of engagement, they have experienced retaliation, aggravating their concerns, furthering their scrutiny and affecting morale.

A Staten Island Amazon employee said he was fired after criticizing the company and [leading](#) unionization efforts, although the company maintains that the worker violated a "serious safety policy." Meredith Whittaker and Claire Stapleton, [organizers](#) of a global Google walkout over the company's handling of sexual harassment, said they experienced backlash for their activism.

Stapleton, who had worked at Google and YouTube for 12 years and helped organize the walkout, quit in June. Whittaker, who had worked at Google for 13 years, left this week. Organizers of the walkout experienced "implicit or explicit pressure to leave and/or stop being so outspoken," problems transferring roles and senior personnel discouraging activism, Stapleton wrote in an email to *Newsweek*.

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Google told *Newsweek* that its employee relations team conducted a thorough investigation of her claims and found no evidence of retaliation.

What is clear, Stapleton believes, is that despite the chilling effects of alleged retaliation employees will not be deterred from future action. She says that, workers today want to be "on the right side of history—taking strong, clear moral stances—and not just maximizing revenue."



Demonstrators shout slogans and hold placards during a protest at the Amazon fulfillment center in Shakopee, Minnesota, on December 14, 2018. A group of Amazon workers in Minnesota demanded better working conditions during a protest outside one of the retailer's warehouses.

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