

LinuxWorld Conference highlights corporate interest in alternative computer operating system

Mike Ingram
18 August 2000

This year's LinuxWorld Conference and Expo in San José, California took place as US software giant Microsoft faces a court-ordered break-up and only days after the European Union served notice of a number of antitrust actions against it in Europe.

Not surprisingly, the conference drew the attention of technology writers keen to gauge the extent to which Microsoft's woes have benefited the Linux operating system. It would be more correct to reverse the question and ask to what extent are Microsoft's troubles bound up with increased interest within the computer sector in Linux and other open-source technologies?

Central to the anti-trust action against Microsoft is a fear by the US government that the company's unrivalled control of the software market has led to a stifling of technical innovation that leaves the US unprepared for the next major advances in computer technology.

Even prior to the Microsoft case there was an increased commercial interest in Linux and the open source technology on which it is based. Unlike Microsoft Windows and other proprietary operating systems, Linux is the product of the collaborative efforts of thousands of volunteer programmers around the world. Not only the finished product, but also the source code is made available on the Internet for anyone to download and modify. The only requirement is that any new applications derived from the source code be made available for free.

The advantages of this type of system go far beyond that of cost. Because the source code is readily available, the Linux operating system can be easily modified to work on new devices that are emerging, such as Internet-ready mobile phones, hand-held

computers and set-top boxes for Internet access via a television. One of the main contentions of the US Justice Department is that Microsoft, in the interest of defending the dominant place of the desktop or personal computer, has sabotaged such new technologies.

It was widely understood that the proposed break-up would generate increased corporate interest in Linux. This has been borne out in a number of significant announcements at or around the LinuxWorld Conference.

Computer manufacturer International Business Machines (IBM) announced August 15 that it has strengthened its alliance with Linux distributor Red Hat. This will provide funding for programmers from both companies to integrate Red Hat's version of Linux with several IBM applications, including DB2 database software, Lotus Domino group projects applications, Tivoli management software, WebSphere e-business software and a collection of small-business software for Linux.

The same day, Dell Computer chief executive Michael Dell delivered the keynote speech to the LinuxWorld Conference. He declared, "The open-source collaborative development model is built to succeed in the Internet age, it makes much more sense than the proprietary model."

Dell announced that the company would be examining the viability of Linux as a desktop operating system, in addition to the servers it already ships pre-installed with Linux. Dell is currently in talks with Eazel, a company made up of former Macintosh programmers working to make Linux easier to use and keep up-to-date.

Earlier, Hewlett Packard (HP) announced that it had elevated Linux to the position of a “strategic operating system” alongside HP's own version of Unix, HP-UX and Microsoft Windows. HP general manager Jim Bell, who recently created the Open Source and Linux Operation (OSLO), said HP-UX will go on high-end servers (such as those running critical database and e-business applications) that require top reliability and performance, and Linux will be used for building Internet infrastructure such as Web servers.

An indication of the problems confronting Microsoft can be seen in the projected release of the new IA-64 chip from Intel. Soon to be renamed the Itanium; it is the first new generation chip to be introduced since the Pentium in 1994. It promises greatly increased speeds and a massive leap in memory over even the most advanced Pentium chips. In the past, Microsoft would have been the only company to get advanced plans of the new chip. This time around, Intel has been sharing its blueprints with most of the main Linux developers and has even taken an equity stake in some of them.

An additional advantage for Linux is that the first use of the chip will be in computers designated as servers, which is where Linux works best. According to Netcraft, which surveys over 18 million active servers on the Web, Linux runs 30 percent of all web servers, while Windows 2000 and NT run 28.3 percent. The Linux operating system has already been tweaked to work well with other types of chips such as Sun's Sparc and Compaq's Alpha, whereas Windows was never designed to run on those chips.

It is not only in the server market, but also in its traditional base of home user and business desktop computers that Microsoft faces an increasing threat. In the past, Linux was hindered in the desktop market by its awkward installation, a lack of software applications for these target users and no easy-to-use configuration programmes.

A central announcement at LinuxWorld was the establishment of the Gnome Foundation, which seeks to address this. Gnome is one of the graphical interfaces available as a front-end for Linux. Its main rival is KDE, which ships with Suse Linux, one of the leading distributions in Europe. Made up of an alliance of several major players, including Sun Microsystems, VA Linux Systems, Collab.Net, Compaq Computer and IBM, the foundation looks set to establish Gnome as a

standard. Sun Microsystems has contributed 50 programmers towards the foundation and says it will adopt a future version of Gnome as the user interface for its own proprietary operating system Solaris.

Gnome Foundation board members will also include companies involved in the development of Gnome, such as Red Hat, Gnumatic, Nenzai, Eazel and Helix Code. The Free Software Foundation, a pioneer of open-source software, and the Object Management Group, an organisation devoted to developing standards for programs to work together, will also be included.

Some within the open-source movement fear that the commercial interest in Linux could lead to the software being hijacked and the emergence of new proprietary systems. Such concerns are legitimate. In their quest for greater profit, the likes of IBM, Dell and Compaq are embracing open-source technology. With new appliances such as mobile phones and wireless devices emerging at a fantastic pace, manufacturers are demanding software that can be modified and extended, i.e., that they have access to the source code.

As any one of these companies gains a leading position, however, such demands for “openness” and “standards” will be cast aside. In their place will come lawsuits to establish ownership of the new technologies. This would not be the first time an open architecture has been hijacked for commercial gain. Early Unix programmers, who had gained their skills through the highly informal cooperation that was prevalent in the industry in the 1970s, saw much of their work taken from them when AT&T began laying claim to intellectual property rights relating to Unix.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact