

Google says it will not renew Project Maven—but collaboration with Pentagon will continue

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On Friday, Google Cloud CEO Diane Greene announced at a meeting with employees that the company will not renew its contract with the Pentagon for Project Maven following its expiry in 2019. Under the program, which Google entered in September last year, the company has provided the military with artificial intelligence software to perform real-time analysis of drone surveillance footage. The technology allows the Pentagon to develop its illegal drone assassination program that has killed thousands across the Middle East and North Africa.

Yesterday's announcement is a response to widespread and mounting opposition from Google employees and the public to its collaboration with the military. The program only came to light as a result of opposition by employees, of whom approximately 4,000 have signed an internal petition demanding that Google cancel the project contract and institute a formal policy against taking on future military work.

Around a dozen employees have also resigned in protest. A report published on Tuesday by the *New York Times*, based on interviews with current and former employees, claimed the program has “fractured Google's workforce, fueled heated staff meetings and internal exchanges,” and “touched off an existential crisis.” Among the employees who have resigned, one engineer “petitioned to rename a conference room after Clara Immerwahr, a German chemist who killed herself in 1915 after protesting the use of science in warfare.”

The *Huffington Post* reported yesterday that there were discussions among employees this week for a physical demonstration. An engineer who was due to leave the company on Friday posted on its internal online forum—in a thread titled “Maven conscientious

objectors” that includes hundreds of employees—describing Maven as “the greatest ethical crisis in technology of our generation,” and suggesting that employees go to an upcoming Google conference in July with the aim of “making some noise.”

In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, academics Lucy Suchman and Peter Asaro, two of the authors of a recent open letter signed by more than 1,000 academics demanding that Google end its participation in the illegal drone murder program, said they were “gratified to see Google take the decision not to renew its contract for Project Maven, and to make the decision public.” They demanded that Google take “a clear and consistent stand against the weaponization of its technologies.”

“I do think it's significant, in other words, that there was sufficient resistance inside the company that Google has had to respond, and it's posed a tangible obstacle to growing relations with the DoD,” said Dr. Suchman. “The fact that those who entered into this contract attempted to do so quietly, if not actually in secret, shows that they anticipated how contested it would be (and then of course went ahead with it anyway).”

While Google claims it will not renew the contract, it will be involved with the project for the rest of the year, and will continue to deepen its intimate collaboration with the Pentagon. The company will also keep bidding for other contracts with the military not directly involving the use of artificial intelligence. Dr. Suchman added, “I suspect they'll continue to look for ways of sustaining their Pentagon relations and spinning them as benign.”

It should be noted that Google's previous statements

in response to the revelations about Project Maven have been exposed as lies.

Internal emails between Google staff, portions of which were published by the *New York Times*, *Gizmodo* and the *Intercept* over the past three days, show that Google conspired to conceal its role in Project Maven from the beginning.

An email chain including Scott Frohman and Aileen Black—both defense and intelligence sales leads—as well as Dr Fei-Fei Li, the chief scientist for artificial intelligence at Google Cloud, discussed how the company should present the project publicly. Writing under the subject line “Communications/PR Request—Urgent,” Frohman asked for direction on the “burning question” of how the collaboration should be reported.

Li replied on September 24 that Google was “already battling privacy issues when it comes to AI [artificial intelligence] and data; I don’t know what would happen if the media starts picking up a theme that Google is secretly building AI weapons or AI technologies to enable weapons for the Defense industry”—i.e., precisely what Google is doing. Li said the issues would be “red meat” to the media.

Google eventually decided to silence reporting on the collaboration altogether. It also reached a non-disclosure agreement with the Pentagon, requiring that public communications first be approved by Google. Black also noted that the contract was “not direct with Google but through a partner,” ECS Federal, in order to conceal Google’s role.

Greene, who pledged yesterday not to renew the project, has also absurdly claimed that the program cannot be used for “lethal purposes.” This is directly contradicted by an email published yesterday by *Gizmodo* from Frohman, in which he calls Maven a “large government program that will result in improved safety for citizens and nations through faster identification of evils such as violent extreme activities and human rights abuses”—code words used by the Pentagon for activities justifying drone strikes.

Greene also previously claimed that the project was “small” and only worth \$9 million. Another internal email from Aileen Black and published by the *Intercept*, however, shows the project was expected to grow rapidly, and “as the program grows expect spend is budgeted at 250 M per year.”

The real significance of Project Maven for Google is to secure a foothold into the tens of billions of dollars available in the arms race between the world’s major powers to incorporate Silicon Valley’s technology to develop next-generation weaponry, and to gain a competitive advantage against the other technology giants. The other bidders for the contract included Amazon and IBM.

All three companies, along with Microsoft, are competing to secure a \$10 billion contract to build and administer Pentagon Cloud’s computing network. The network has been described by military officials as a “global fabric” for its warfighters. Every submarine, jetfighter, missile launch station and special operations soldier will be connected via computer systems that will be directly administered by one of the giant technology corporations.

The website *Defense One* reported that unlike Amazon and Microsoft, Google has “kept its own interest” in the contract “out of the press,” and the company has “even hidden the pursuit from its own workers.” Participating in Project Maven allowed Google to receive government clearance to host secure government data on its servers, and to compete for further cloud military projects in the future. Another internal email from Aileen Black called the clearance “priceless” for the company.

Google, along with the other technology giants, is intimately integrated into the US military and intelligence apparatus. Google representatives such as vice president Mike Medin and former Alphabet CEO Eric Schmidt sit on US military advisory boards and discuss the use of their technology for major wars and suppression of domestic political opposition. Google changed its search ranking algorithms in April last year to reduce traffic to and censor left-wing and anti-war websites, including the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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