

Microsoft workers demand end to contracts with US border agencies

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In the latest expression of widespread public opposition to the Trump administration's illegal immigration policies, more than 100 Microsoft employees signed an open letter to CEO Satya Nadella published on Tuesday, calling on the company to immediately cancel its contracts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The letter makes reference to the Trump administration's policy of separating parents from children and detaining toddlers in cages inside internment camps. It declares that Microsoft must put "children and families above profits. Therefore, we ask that Microsoft cancel its contracts with [ICE] immediately, including contracts with clients who support ICE. We also call on Microsoft to draft, publicize and enforce a clear policy stating that neither Microsoft nor its contractors will work with clients who violate international human rights law."

The letter came a day after the exposure of Microsoft's efforts to cover up evidence of its collaboration with ICE. On Monday, the company's website temporarily removed parts of a January 24 blog post by General Manager Tom Keane that gloated about the company's work with the agency. The section was later re-added only after Bloomberg requested an explanation for the change.

Keane's post declared that Microsoft's Azure Government program would now be able to host ICE's "most sensitive unclassified data." This was "a critical next step in enabling ICE to deliver such services as cloud-based identity and access," he said.

ICE agents who carry out mass round-ups of immigrant workers and their families would be able to "make more informed decisions faster," while Azure Government would enable them to "process data on edge [mobile] devices or utilize deep learning

capabilities to accelerate facial recognition and identification."

The post noted that ICE "is currently implementing transformative technologies for homeland security and public safety, and we're proud to support this work with our mission-critical cloud."

In a separate comment quoted by IT news site Meritalk, Keane specifically highlighted the use of facial recognition technology. "The facial [recognition] is very interesting because cognitive [computing] with a neural network in cloud allows someone who's not a data scientist, not even a technology person to begin providing feedback and making this thing very smart very, very quickly," he said.

The section of Microsoft's website advertising its facial recognition technology states that it allows users to "search, identify and match faces in your private repository of up to one million people."

On Monday, the company released a statement declaring that it was not working with ICE on projects "related to separating children from their families at the border," and that "we are not aware of Azure or Azure services being used for this purpose."

Responding to this statement, the Microsoft workers' letter declares: "This does not go far enough. We are providing the technical undergirding in support of an agency that is actively enforcing this inhumane policy. We request that Microsoft cancel its contracts with ICE, and with other clients who directly enable ICE. As the people who build the technologies that Microsoft profits from, we refuse to be complicit. We are part of a growing movement, comprised of many across the industry who recognize the grave responsibility that those creating powerful technology have to ensure what they build is used for good, and not for harm."

This is a reference to growing opposition by Google

and other technology workers to the integration of the giant technology corporations into the repressive apparatus of the state, including the police and the military.

On June 1, Google was forced to announce that it will not renew its contract with the Pentagon for Project Maven after 2019. Under the program, Google has provided the military with artificial intelligence software to analyze drone surveillance footage that can be used to improve the illegal US drone assassination program that has killed thousands of people in Syria, Yemen, Pakistan and elsewhere. More than 4,000 employees signed an internal petition demanding an end to the program, while at least a dozen employees have resigned in protest.

Google, like Microsoft and Amazon, remains massively integrated with the Pentagon and government. All three companies are competing to secure a \$10 billion contract to administer the Pentagon's new Joint Enterprise Defense Initiative Cloud computing infrastructure. The winning bidder will be responsible for communications between US nuclear submarines, special operations commanders and jetfighter pilots engaged in battle.

Amazon is currently hosting the Cloud infrastructure for 17 US intelligence agencies. It is also supplying police agencies and private intelligence contractors with facial recognition technology, called Rekognition, which can provide real-time analysis of footage from CCTV, police body-camera and other video sources and identify and track individuals using a database of tens of millions of photos.



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