Open letter by Amazon workers opposes contracts with immigration and police agencies

Kayla Costa
25 June 2018

Last Thursday, Amazon employees issued an open letter to Jeff Bezos, the billionaire CEO of Amazon, opposing the company's provision of facial recognition technology to police forces, and its contracts with companies tied to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The letter is an expression of popular outrage over police repression and the Trump administration's persecution of immigrants. It is another sign of growing opposition among technology workers to the integration of the technology giants with the police-state apparatus.

On Tuesday, the *New York Times* published a letter by more than 100 Microsoft employees demanding that the company cease its $19.4 million annual contract with ICE.

In addition, more than 4,000 Google employees signed an internal petition opposing the company's collaboration with the military following revelations that it was providing artificial intelligence technology that can assist in targeting for the US military drone program under Project Maven. A dozen employees resigned in protest over the issue. Google was forced to announce that it will not renew the project beyond 2019, though it will continue its collaboration with the Pentagon.

Unlike at Google and Microsoft, it is unclear how many Amazon employees have signed the letter published Thursday. Amazon is notorious for firing all workers who speak out against it.

The Amazon employees' letter refers to the exposure last month by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) that Amazon Web Service (AWS) is providing facial recognition software, named Rekognition, to police departments and private "counter-terrorism" agencies. It states: "We don't have to wait to find out how these technologies will be used. We already know that in the midst of a historic militarization of police, renewed targeting of Black activists, and the growth of a federal deportation force currently engaged in human rights abuses—this will be another powerful tool for the surveillance state, and ultimately serve to harm the most marginalized."

The authors indicate their sympathy with immigrant workers who have faced Gestapo-style workplace raids, separation from family members, denial of their right to apply for asylum and abuse by immigration agents. "In the face of this immoral US policy," the letter explains, "and the US's increasingly inhumane treatment of refugees and immigrants beyond this specific policy, we are deeply concerned that Amazon is implicated, providing infrastructure and services that enable ICE and DHS [Department of Homeland Security]."

The employees point out that ICE relies on software provided by the data mining firm Palantir Technologies, which utilizes AWS Cloud storage infrastructure. ICE's detention and deportation programs use a Palantir intelligence system called Investigative Case Management (ICM). After securing a $41 million contract with ICE in 2014, Palantir developed ICM as a means to integrate intelligence from the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other agencies to establish a massive data bank of personal information.

With the aid of the data collection system, ICE has access to a wide array of individuals' personal information, including school status, personal

© World Socialist Web Site

relationships, employment information, phone records, immigration history, criminal record, biometric traits and addresses. Agents use this information to track down undocumented immigrants and develop cases for their deportation. Palantir also supports ICE's FALCON system, which tracks immigrants and sorts data on "cross-border criminal activity."

The system was first conceived and implemented under President Barack Obama, who oversaw the initial expansion of the program into Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), a branch of ICE focused on cross-border crimes but also involved in mass deportations. HSI played a crucial role in some of the largest workplace deportation raids under the Obama administration, which deported more than 2.5 million immigrants, more than any previous administration.

AWS is also providing Rekognition facial identification technology to police departments in Oregon and Florida. The software allows for real-time analysis of video footage from multiple sources to identify faces in a crowd of people. It transforms police body cameras, CCTV and other surveillance cameras into an omnipresent eye, constantly processing data and identifying individuals in public based on databases of millions of images.

The Amazon employees cite an open letter from 48 civil rights organizations and a petition from the ACLU that gathered 150,000 signatures demanding the end of the sale of Rekognition to police forces.

While there is no public evidence of ICE utilizing Rekognition technology, the software could be implemented to immediately identify undocumented workers for deportation. In a November 2016 speech to an AWS conference, Motorola Solutions chief data scientist Dan Law demonstrated the use of the software with a video that showed police body cam footage being used to identify every person in the officer's line of sight and alert nearby officers when it found a "missing" suspect.

There is also evidence that ICE is using biometric data through mobile devices when it conducts its roundups of immigrants. Last December, the National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild filed a lawsuit demanding that ICE and the DHS respond to Freedom of Information requests about handheld devices used by agents to identify individuals through fingerprints and photos.

The Amazon employees' letter concludes: "We refuse to build the platform that powers ICE, and we refuse to contribute to tools that violate human rights. And we demand a choice in what we build, and a say in how it is used. We learn from history, and we understand how IBM's systems were employed in the 1940s to help Hitler. IBM did not take responsibility then, and by the time their role was understood, it was too late. We will not let that happen again. The time to act is now."

Amazon's provision of such technology to police agencies is part of its complete integration into the military and state apparatus. Amazon is currently hosting cloud storage for the CIA and 16 other intelligence agencies. It is competing with Google and Microsoft to secure a decade-long, $10 billion contract with the military, under which it would provide Cloud services that would underlie the Pentagon's storage and communications, including between combat forces engaged in battle.

There is a direct connection between Amazon's growing fusion with the repressive state apparatus and its brutal exploitation of its work force. The corporate oligarchy, epitomized by Bezos, the world's richest man, is acutely conscious that its profiteering is producing mass opposition in the working class. It is preparing to respond to this opposition with police-state repression.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site