

Google employees protest plans to build censored search engine in China

Andre Damon
18 August 2018

Hundreds of Google employees have protested the company's moves to build a censored search engine in China, the *New York Times* reported Friday.

The *Times* article follows an August 1 article by the *Intercept* reporting that the company has secretly devoted a team of engineers and developers to constructing a search engine that would comply with China's strict regime of Internet censorship.

Google famously ended its search operations in China in 2010, protesting the country's strict demands that users be prevented from accessing critical websites and topics. But it has dropped all such scruples in the more recent period.

Google CEO Sundar Pichai confirmed the existence of the operation, known internally as Project Dragonfly, at an all-hands meeting with employees on Thursday. At the same time, he sought to downplay the revelation, saying the company was not "close" to rolling out the product and that Google's expansion in China was "slow-going and complicated."

The letter by employees does not address the substance of the "moral and ethical issues" raised by Project Dragonfly, but demands that the company provide employees with more information about the tools it is developing. "We urgently need more transparency, a seat at the table, and a commitment to clear and open processes: Google employees need to know what we're building," the letter concludes.

The letter and Thursday's meeting follow the publication of an open letter in April, signed by over 1,000 employees, demanding that the company end its collaboration with the Pentagon on artificial intelligence systems designed to power the US military's drone warfare program.

Google was forced to backtrack, nominally canceling the "Project Maven" program and adopting a set of

ethical guidelines for the use of artificial intelligence. Its collaboration with the US military, however, has intensified, and the company is in the running for a massive Pentagon contract, known as "Project Jedi," to host a large portion of the military's technical infrastructure.

The news of Google's efforts to create a censored search engine for the Chinese has elicited denunciations from sections of the US press, which have scolded the company for collaborating with a "totalitarian" government. In fact, Google's proposed censored search engine in China represents a development of, not a departure from, its overall trajectory.

In April 2017, Google responded to intensifying pressure from the US political establishment and intelligence agencies by implementing a censorship system in the United States targeting principally left-wing, anti-war and socialist organizations.

At that time, Google Engineering Vice President Ben Gomes announced changes to the company's search algorithm aimed at promoting "authoritative" news sources over "alternative viewpoints." By using search evaluators to train the company's artificial intelligence system, the company has down-ranked domains presenting an "alternative viewpoint... unless the query clearly indicates the user is seeking an alternative viewpoint."

The effect of these measures has been a massive down-ranking of left-wing sites, particularly the *World Socialist Web Site*, whose search traffic from Google plunged by 75 percent.

Google gave no explanation as to which sites were being targeted and why, and told reporters that its rating system was free of political bias. In the ensuing year, this approach has been embraced by other technology giants, including Facebook, whose CEO,

Mark Zuckerberg, said earlier this year that the company would reduce the propagation of what it called “fake news” instead of simply removing it, because such censorship was a “sensitive issue.”

Google’s claim of being free of political bias in its downgrading of websites is a lie that has been fully exposed by its increasingly aggressive efforts to decrease or block readers’ access to sites that promote oppositional information and viewpoints.

The development of a search engine that completely blocks a set of terms and domains at the request of a government is simply the next step for Google’s censorship regime. Pichai has made clear that the project will go ahead despite political pressure not only from employees, but also from sections of the political establishment that fear it may cut across their anti-China policies.

The United States is locked in a bitter dispute with China over its technology sector, with Washington seeking to block the growth of smart phone makers Huawei and ZTE, while promoting the expansion of US technology firms such as Google in the Chinese market.

The determination of Google to proceed with its China project indicates that the censorship methods Google is developing nominally for China are seen as having utility elsewhere, including within the United States itself.

With sales of smart phones expected to plateau, growth declining in other sectors, and record-breaking fines being imposed by the European Union amid deepening trade and economic tensions with the United States, Google, like other technology giants, is seeking closer collaboration with the American government and other governments to bolster its revenue stream. And with the United States, China and other countries increasingly focused on domestic repression and military expansion, this collaboration inevitably takes the form of partnering in police and military operations.

The ultimate outcome of Google’s efforts to create a censored search engine in China may well rest on high-level state negotiations. As the *New York Times* wrote: “The Chinese government could nonetheless use Google as a chip in its negotiations with the American government, which has been critical of the way China limits market access for United States technology companies. By letting Google’s search engine back into China, the Chinese government could give

President Trump a political victory, earning some good will.”

Regardless of the outcome of the talks, it is clear that Google has no objection to state censorship and is willing to collaborate with any government, whether Trump’s America or Xi’s China, to implement it.

In the midst of a deepening crisis of the world capitalist system, every ruling class internationally, fearful of growing left-wing and socialist opposition within the working class, is seeking to implement and expand state censorship of the Internet. We urge workers all over the world to take up the struggle against state censorship by contacting the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact