

YouTube Music workers laid off while speaking before Austin, Texas city council

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On February 29, Google laid off its entire YouTube Music team of workers while they were speaking before a televised city council meeting in Austin, Texas. The workers were responsible for curating themed playlists and reviewing song metadata in support of the YouTube Music group. They worked for Google contractor Cognizant, although a court recently ruled that they were co-employed by Google.

The workers were active in the Alphabet Workers Union (AWU-CWA), informally known as the Google Union, which includes 1,400 workers across the US. They voted to join the AWU-CWA in April of last year and were particularly active against Google's decision to end remote work. While Cognizant claims the layoffs were simply due to the end of their contract with Google, it is highly likely they were targeted for organizing against the tech giant.

However, the firings also come in the context of a massive jobs bloodbath across the global economy but concentrated particularly in the technology sector, which has laid off more than 310,000 people since the start of 2023, according to layoffs.fyi. Google alone has announced more than 13,000 layoffs, including 3,500 contractors from YouTube from Cognizant and Accenture in May of last year.

In January of this year Google announced it was laying off hundreds of workers in its Augmented Reality division, which produces hardware such as Google Pixel phones and Fitbit smart watches, as well as its personal assistant division.

No doubt, Google is hoping to automate the work done by human curators through new artificial intelligence technologies. Music analytics has been increasingly automated with artificial intelligence being used extensively at big name music streamers, such as Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music, YouTube and

Sound Cloud.

Google has committed to investing \$2 billion into the OpenAI competitor Anthropic, according to CNBC news. In January Google CEO Sundar Pichai announced that the company would “remove layers [of its workforce]” in order to free up funds for “investing in ... [the company's] big priorities.” This follows its December 2023 launch of its AI chatbot Gemini, which was intended to be the “biggest upgrade yet” to its AI chatbot Bard.

Cognizant is a multinational information technology company based in India and was first founded in 1994. It had a net income of \$2.29 billion in 2022 and employs over 300,000 employees globally, 200,000 of which are in India. It has units throughout Europe, China, the Philippines, Latin America and elsewhere. It ranked 194 on the Fortune 500 list for 2022.

Cognizant has contracts with large corporations, such as Nike, the Volkswagen Group, Microsoft, with whom it is working to “infuse generative AI into healthcare administration,” according to the company.

It has also established its own “Advanced Artificial Intelligence Lab” in San Francisco, which, according to its website, “will focus on advancing the science and practice of AI through innovation and development of intellectual property and AI-enablement technologies.” The lab is part of Cognizant's announcement last year to invest \$1 billion in “generative AI.”

According to the AWU-CWA, workers at YouTube Music make as little as \$19 an hour with minimal benefits. Many are forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Jack Benedict, a YouTube data analyst and member of the Alphabet Workers Union, noted that YouTube Music workers had struck last year in opposition to YouTube's “return-to-office” policy, which threatened

the jobs of remote workers who did not live near the office. Benedict added that in September they launched an Unfair Labor Practices strike over YouTube's refusal to bargain with the union. Google still refuses to negotiate a contract despite an NLRB ruling that this violates US labor law.

The city council passed a non-binding resolution calling for Google and Cognizant to negotiate with the YouTube Music Content Operations Team. The workers, who planned to stay and celebrate the passage of the resolution, instead had to go to their offices to retrieve their belongings.

As of this writing, the CWA has made no reference to the highly provocative firings on its website. Their Facebook page merely re-posted a release from the Alphabet Workers Facebook page without comment.

Cognizant has claimed that this was a routine contract expiration, that workers are still Cognizant employees, and that workers would receive seven weeks of paid time to "explore other roles within the organization." It claimed the timing of the contract expiry was "purely coincidental."

A Google spokesperson made similar claims. The far more likely explanation is that the company was making an example of the workers for their participation in last year's strikes.

But in spite of the courage shown by Google workers, the CWA is concerned only with developing the same incestuous ties with management as it has long held at traditionally unionized workplaces. The bureaucracy has routinely sold out major strikes by telecommunications workers, including in 2016 at Verizon and last year at AT&T.

In recent years, the CWA has expanded its presence among tech workers and software developers. One major beachhead in the video game industry was established with the founding of the Game Workers Alliance, which has a significant presence at game publisher Activision Blizzard.

The CWA shut down a strike at one of the company's subsidiaries in January of 2022. It then endorsed Microsoft's takeover bid for Activision Blizzard in return for a neutrality agreement that it would not deter the union's organizing efforts. Earlier this year, Microsoft announced it would cut 1,900 jobs at Activision Blizzard.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes the firings at

YouTube Music and demands the workers be immediately reinstated. But in order to wage a serious fight against job cuts, workers must enforce democratic control over their struggle and fight any attempts at a sellout by the union bureaucracy through rank-and-file committees.



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