Google worker fired for pro-Palestinian protest: "Workers are the ones that have the power to stop the genocide"

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On Tuesday, April 16, Google had nine of its employees arrested for staging sit-ins at the company's offices in New York City and Sunnyvale, California, to demand that Google cancel "Project Nimbus." The $1.2 billion contract with Amazon and the Israeli government provides cloud services and artificial intelligence (AI) to the Israeli military.

In total, 28 workers were terminated for participating in the anti-genocide protest. The *World Socialist Web Site* is demanding the immediate reinstatement of all those fired and the dropping of any charges against those who were arrested.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke Friday with Zelda (they/them), 23, who worked as a software engineer for Google and was one of the workers who were arrested and terminated in New York City. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Clara Weiss: Can you describe what happened?

Zelda: On Tuesday, April 16, Google workers in the Sunnyvale office in California and one of the New York City offices began a sit-in at 12:00 p.m. EST and 9:00 a.m. PST. I can describe more about what happened in New York City. At 11:55 a.m., we announced the sit-in. We did worker testimonies, we did some readings of poems, including Refaat Alareer's "If I must die." Within the first hour, everything was pretty calm. There was a crowd that was growing; a crowd of Zionists also started to be present.

Everyone who was involved in the sit-in was a Google worker. At one point, security said "That's enough; you have to leave." There were four of us who were saying, "We are not leaving until this project [Nimbus] is dropped." Security is actually not allowed to put their hands on us so there was no way they would remove us. And there came a point when they said that law enforcement was being notified. Between that point and the point when the four of us were removed, we were there for 10 hours. Google seems to have arrested at the Sunnyvale office and the NYC office around the same time. In NYC those of us who were not going to get up until the project was dropped were basically just hanging out at the office. We engaged with supportive workers who would come by. We would always warn them that there is a potential for retaliation.

We had just finished eating some food that friends had brought for us when NYPD showed up at around 9:45 p.m. We were quite surprised because we had not heard communication from friends outdoors that they had seen NYPD coming in. When they were escorting us down an elevator to the garage, it turned out that they had parked the NYPD van in the garage, likely because they did not want there to be video footage of Google workers being arrested as there was at Sunnyvale, where the arrest was live-streamed. We dealt with NYPD incompetence for three hours, and eventually we got released. We had a very supportive jail support group outside. It was very powerful to see that many people come together in support of what we were doing.

CW: Can you speak more about "Project Nimbus" and Google's complicity in the genocide?

Z: The "Project Nimbus" contract was signed in 2021 between Google, Amazon and the Israeli government to provide the Israeli military with cloud computing and AI, which includes facial recognition, sentiment recognition, tracking, etc. When this campaign launched in 2021, the name No Tech for Apartheid came from the very obvious use that this AI would have for the surveillance of the Palestinians. I found out about "Project Nimbus" about six months ago, and when I learned about the work of No Tech for Apartheid, I immediately became very involved.

In terms of Google's ties to the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF), for a long time we knew that the IOF were part of the negotiations over the contract. There was a lot of miscommunication—no, intentional lying, and a lack of transparency—by Google about the military nature of the contract. *Calcalist* reported that the Israeli military intervened and did not want to go with Oracle because they did not have the cloud computing needed for the military. And when they went to Google, I was very concerned that they were changing the messaging. Clearly, the IOF had geared the contract away from Oracle to Google because of its military cloud capabilities.

Last Friday we found out from *Time* magazine that new deals were being discussed with the Israeli Defense Ministry. They were talking about building out the Israeli Defense Ministry's cloud architecture. It was spoken about very carefully even in this internal document [that *Time* magazine based its report on]. I am pretty sure that they said, "Let's follow up on this somewhere else, not on the corporate channel." Like a lot of things that we're seeing at Google, it's very secretive. These were deals that were being discussed just a couple weeks ago in March, in the face of all the atrocities that we see being carried out against the Palestinian people.

That created a lot more conviction for all of us who had been planning this action for months, because we got confirmation that Google was negotiating with the Israeli military despite multiple statements from their spokesmen to the contrary. And just last week Google also announced a new contract with the US Department of Defense. Increasingly we are seeing a move by Google toward militarization that just a few years ago had sparked opposition from workers and the creation of the network that we are still building.

CW: What are the sentiments and views among Google workers about the company's ties to the Israeli military?

Z: A lot of Google workers are afraid to speak up at work. Google expressed a lot of Israeli sympathy after October 7, and there was never any expression of Palestinian sympathy in the wake of the genocide. Because of that I've noticed that workers are just very concerned about bringing any conversation about this to the workplace.

I should add that another reason for the fear to speak up is that there are some Zionists, who have held a lot of control over the narrative around "Project Nimbus." We were constantly told that opposing "Project Nimbus" was antisemitic and that any expression of anti-Zionism was also antisemitic. Antisemitism and anti-Zionism were being conflated. Workers might not know much about the long history of Palestinian oppression and resistance, and they were afraid of being called antisemitic. I know that nothing I have done in organizing opposition to "Project Nimbus" and building power at Google was antisemitic. But I think it is understandable that people might not feel ready for such actions without knowing more about the Palestinian cause for liberation.

I have been very vocal about how messed up I thought the contract was, and I have spent a lot of time talking with everyone around me at the office. I started tabling in the office back in November, I wanted there to be a steady, vocal, visible presence of dissent for this contract, in the office. I realized that people do not know enough about Google complicity in the genocide. My focus with the tabling was to inform people about the project that Google has with the Israeli government. In my tabling, I had a handwritten sign that was taped to my laptop, and leaflets with informational material. Because I have been very present in the office, I think people started to talk a lot more to me. People were sometimes not surprised about the contract but did not know what to do about changing the way that Google works.

Tech is definitely a more privileged base. There are some who did not want to think about the genocide and their complicity and their labor being one of the weapons in the genocide. The sit-in was meant to be a signal to workers: You cannot look away from the impact of your labor on the world. We withheld our labor, not only in response to this contract but also to add agency and control and direction to how our labor is used. I did the sit-in because I wanted to show to workers: You don't have to just do what you are being told. We should be valuing human lives over profit at all times.

In the past few days, I have gotten an immense amount of messages in support of what I did. Many are very upset about what Google has done. I think that speaks to the power of an action like the sit-in. Workers are very riled up right now, not just because of Google's complicity in the genocide, "Project Nimbus," but also because of how Google is retaliating against employees for speaking out against the contract.

Especially this week—we have been seeing students at Columbia a huge amount of fascist repression taking place due to the resistance that workers and students have been posing against these capitalist institutions that are way more about making money and profit, even if it means being complicit in war crimes and investing in weapons that are being used against the people of Gaza. I think the way forward is to continue to mobilize workers. Workers, above all, are the ones that have the power to stop the genocide. The past six months have seen a lot of direct action that have been somewhat disconnected from labor. We see how people are putting themselves on the line which is inspiring in ways, and it's important to build resistance to power.

But I think we need to bring that resistance to the workplace, and we need people deeply committed to not have their labor weaponized in ways that we do not agree with.

The way forward is also beyond the traditional union system that we have, especially in the US. Google is an international corporation that itself supercedes the nation-state. I personally don't understand why our organizing has to be within the confines of the nation-state system. We have to be fighting the battle in the US, Canada, Britain, Australia—these are all countries where Google has offices. What will lead to the end of the genocide is an understanding and principled commitment to exercise worker power in the face of all these atrocities. Google AI depends on engineers. The same goes for weapons systems. Workers need to not build those weapons. I often think about the white phosphorus bombs being built and created here in the US, in Arkansas. How is it that the use of these weapons is a war crime, but their production is not?

People often forget that our labor here in the United States absolutely has an impact on people throughout the world. There needs to be a working class solidarity that supersedes the nation-state system; it cannot be confined to working class solidarity nationally. Working class people everywhere have to be incredibly disciplined about making sure that our labor is not hurting other people throughout the world.

CW: What situation are you facing now after being fired from Google?

Z: It is quite stressful to think about finances, but I will say that I worked at Google, and I think that people who work in tech are actually in the best position to take the kind of risk that we took with our sit-in.

The reality is that a lot of other people cannot simply stop working. We do not have the structures in place to ensure that people have healthcare, have a roof over their heads, have something to eat.

There is working class people, and there is a ruling class. And even though at Google people make more money than the rest of the world. At the end of the day, we do not have control over our labor.

I know that the doors have been closed by this—which is this job, and I would not be surprised if there are other jobs that I will not get because of this. I will just say that these are not meant to be jobs for me to work at. I am thinking a lot about the kinds of technology that are needed to serve for resistance purposes. A lot of our tech is terrifying to think about being in the hand of corporate power.

I heard a few weeks about the NYPD having requested all information of a Twitter account being handed over about a subpoena. Twitter informed the owner of the account but that was a decision the company made, it is not a decision that the owner of the account could make. Twitter decided to inform the account, but what if Meta did not want to tell this person?

There is this massive amount of data being collected and I fear a lot our reliance on corporate systems of engaging with the internet. I want to be able to carve out a space for technology to resist that and also teach people about what that technology could look like. We are building it irresponsibly without being conscious of what we are building. I'm guided toward thinking about the things I am building [as a software engineer] and to reflect about it afterward.

There is an absolute need for slow programming. People need to be slow and intentional. There is a real need to educate people about this. I recently watched the movie *Oppenheimer,* and I have so many thoughts about it. It feels very relevant right now when we are seeing AI being used for genocide. That is the weapons of mass destruction today. And I do not think enough people have made those parallels and realize that we are seeing this again now.

CW: Thank you very much for the interview.

Z: Thank you. The reason I like doing such interviews is that connection to other workers. I think they need to feel that they can trust fellow workers to take some risk and when they do what is necessary to end this genocide.

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