# DeepMind employees in UK organise union over ethical concerns with Israeli defence contracts



Employees at Google DeepMind in the United Kingdom are organising to form a union in response to the company's provision of artificial intelligence (AI) technology to defence organisations linked to the Israeli government. Approximately 300 staff members based in DeepMind's London offices are seeking to join the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

This latest push towards unionisation follows reports highlighting Google's involvement in providing cloud services and AI systems to the Israeli Ministry of Defence. The issue has generated considerable unrest among employees, who previously expressed opposition to similar governmental contracts. Notably, in the previous year, 28 employees were terminated after protesting a cloud contract with the Israeli government.

The move by DeepMind employees fits within a broader evolution of activism amongst technology workers, transitioning from informal protests to more formalised union structures. This trend began around 2018 during the Google walkouts, which addressed concerns such as sexual harassment and military contracts. The DeepMind initiative is aligned with developments like the formation of the Alphabet Workers Union in 2021. This union reportedly includes over 800 members who advocate not only for traditional labour rights but also for ethical business practices.

Other companies in the technology sector have seen similar unionisation efforts. Kickstarter employees established the first tech union in February 2020, with groups at Glitch and Vodeo Games following suit. The involvement of the Communication Workers Union with DeepMind exemplifies the increasing support large, traditional unions are offering to digital sector workers. For instance, the Communication Workers of America has launched specific campaigns such as the Campaign to Organize Digital Employees (CODE) to facilitate organising in tech firms.

A central ethical conflict underpinning the DeepMind unionisation campaign is the controversy surrounding Project Nimbus. This is a $1.2 billion contract encompassing Google, Amazon, and the Israeli military. The contract has been criticised by a number of employees because of concerns that the technology could be used for surveillance and alleged rights violations affecting Palestinians.

In 2021, over 90 Google employees and approximately 300 Amazon employees signed a letter opposing Project Nimbus for these reasons. The activism has encountered significant resistance internally; for example, Google employee Ariel Koren reportedly resigned under pressure following her role in opposing the contract, with over 750 colleagues signing a petition protesting perceived retaliation against her. Opposition continued into 2023, when Google employees staged protests at a Cloud conference, including physically blocking entrances and distributing materials outlining their objections.

These conflicts highlight an ongoing tension between the commercial interests of tech companies in securing lucrative defence contracts and the ethical concerns of employees regarding the humanitarian implications of their work, particularly in AI technologies.

Beyond specific contracts, the DeepMind unionisation effort reflects a more profound transformation in tech workers' sense of identity and their relationship with employers. Historically, technology firms characterised themselves as ethical employers with family-like cultures. However, repeated failures to meet ethical expectations have led workers to reconsider their roles, increasingly viewing themselves as empowered collective employees rather than isolated individuals within a corporate culture.

Statistical data corroborates this shift: documented tech worker actions rose from 61 incidents in 2017-2018 to over 230 between 2019-2020. The growing awareness among tech professionals of the societal consequences of their labour, especially in artificial intelligence, reveals a growing divergence between companies’ public ethical commitments and their operational priorities.

Workers have also shown a willingness to risk their careers to uphold ethical principles, with multiple reports of employees facing retaliation after speaking out against contracts they believe support human rights infringements.

The Tech in Asia publication is reporting on these developments, outlining how DeepMind employees' unionisation movement illustrates a significant change in how tech workers engage with their employers and the responsibilities they feel towards society.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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