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Through solidarity and ethics, workers can guide the ethics of tech giants.
by Lilly Irani, written for New Scientist on Dec 5, 2018

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SOCIAL movements have long been sounding the alarm about the influence of tech giants, and now tech workers are joining them. Over 4000 Google workers called out their employer last year over Project Maven, which offered access to their powerful AI to process drone surveillance and target people for killing. Workers at Amazon, Microsoft, SalesForce, and Accenture called on their companies to stop providing services to government agencies that criminalise migrants, blacks, and the poor. Earlier this month, 20,000 Google workers walked out over revelations that the company gave protected or paid millions to abusers and harassers in the senior ranks. And since last August, Google workers have been in a protracted struggle to drop Dragonfly, the company's search engine developed with the censorship and surveillance capabilities requested by the Chinese state. The fight is about refusing to build what Professor Safiya Noble has called "algorithms of oppression".

Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Apple make some of the key technologies that carry our voices, record our memories, and sculpt public attention. And very few of us have a view into these black boxes -- the complex, tangled up digital systems that shape our lives.

There are two kinds of people who have distinctive insight into the effects of these black boxes. First, the marginalised: communities targeted by predictive policing and police surveillance, people living under drone strikes in the Middle East, trans people moving through risk scoring body scanners, and those denied access to social entitlements when IBM replaces social workers' as arbiters of judgment , to name a few. Second: tech workers. Whether data entry workers, programmers, or customer support workers, they know more from the inside about how the levers work and where companies are taking technologies than most of us ever could.

Companies have responded to resistance and critique with an appeal to ethics. Google and Microsoft both issued ethical principles in the aftermath of #techwontbuildit. In response to pressure by movements, Google has now promised not to build weapons technologies or produce surveillance in violation of international norms. The right to practice these very ethics are what tech workers are asking of their employers. They have intimate knowledge of the power and limitations of technologies, seeing the calculative uncertainties and mess masked for the rest of us by a clean user interface or a numeric score. But individuals acting alone have very little ethical agency. It is the demand of thousands that translates an ethical judgment into a democratic reality. And it is resistance in many in different forms -- walkouts, work slow downs, refusals to build -- that holds companies accountable to their stated ethics or what is right

beyond them. And it is only via the solidarity between those marginalised and those with their hands on the levers of the machine, along with the broader public, that we can take democratic control of the technologies that shape our lives.