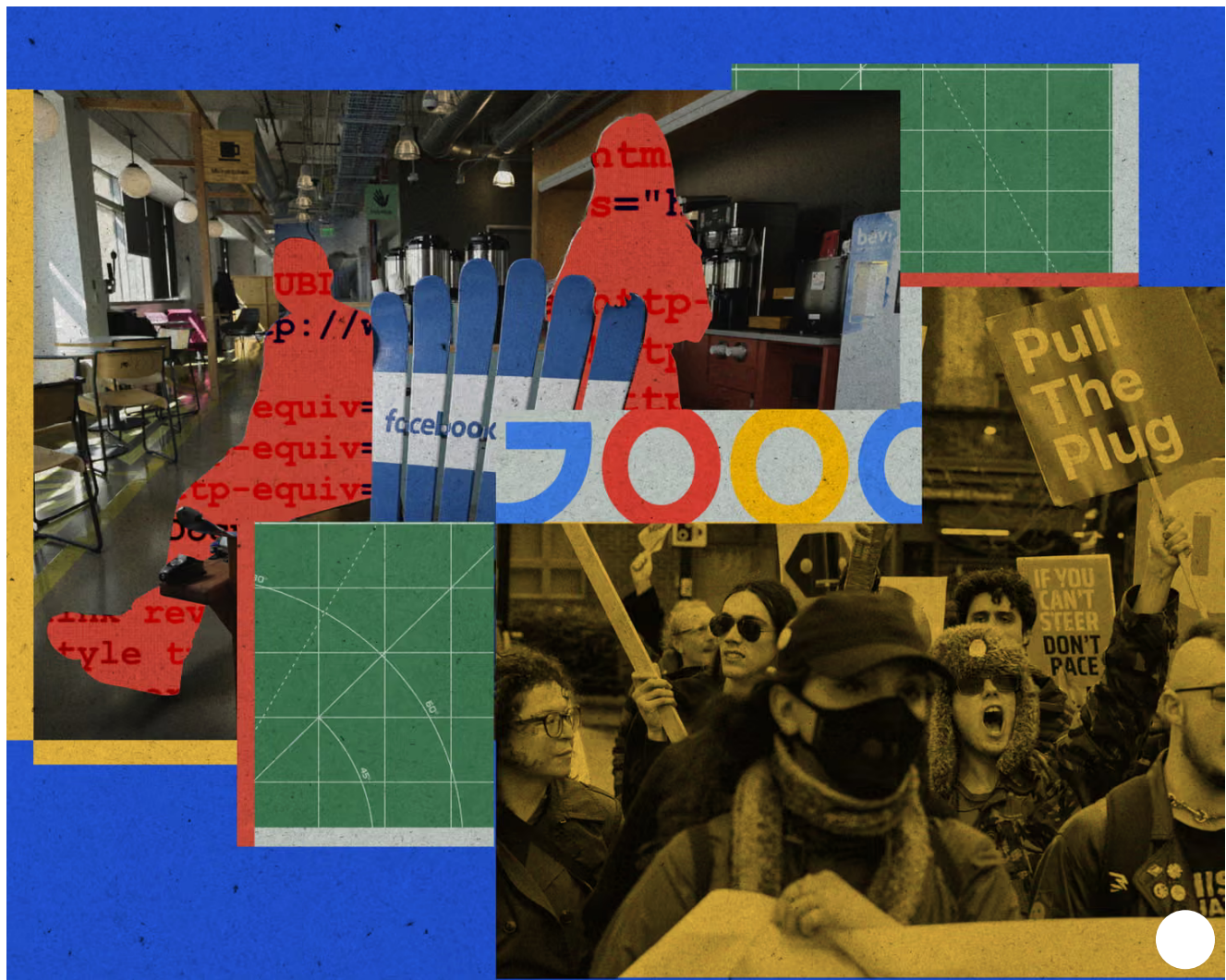




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For decades, the technology industry was a fortress that labor unions couldn't breach. Tech workers already had cushy compensation packages, dream benefits like unlimited vacation and free lunch, and a flat corporate hierarchy that made engineers feel as powerful as their bosses, all of whom dressed down in sneakers and hoodies. So why unionize?

Now, that fortress is cracking from the inside. Unions have become increasingly popular for tech employees. After [months of mass layoffs tied to artificial intelligence](#) and mounting anxieties about how it's being deployed, some tech workers say they've been saddled with higher workloads while facing the threat of job loss caused by the very products they're building. Workers from Google DeepMind and Meta in the UK are also objecting to how their companies' AI products are being used, such as for [military purposes](#) or to [monitor employee productivity](#). Those same workers are now attempting to unionize.

On the frontlines of AI's rollout in the workplace, tech workers have often been the first to feel its effects - including job loss, [employee surveillance](#), increasing workloads, and uses that conflict with employees' values. These problems aren't unique to software companies, though, and how Silicon Valley workers fare could serve as a bellwether for what's coming as AI spreads to other industries.

A [Meta](#) employee who was part of a recent union drive in the UK said, "It's about us having a voice in all of the operations of the company, from products to employee experience." The employee spoke to the Guardian on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal from their employer.

After Meta cut thousands of workers in May and piloted a program tracking their activities, some employees felt power had tipped toward their employer. Forming a union, the Meta employee said, "is the best way to actually show up as owners, and take our seat at the table".

The push toward tech unionization has been building for years and includes workers at the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter and Microsoft-owned gaming company ZeniMax, as well as the Alphabet Workers Union (AWU), which represents more than 1,400 workers across Google, YouTube and Waymo.

The latest AI-driven developments will drive more organizing efforts, AWU

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In a statement, [Google](#) DeepMind said it was in the “early stages” of the process to recognize the union and plans to “continue to engage in good faith”. Meta didn’t comment.

As companies continue to cut, tech workers face a stark reality sharply at odds with the job security they once took for granted. “When I first started in tech, you could leave a job and have another one by the week with better pay,” said John Chadfield, a former tech worker who co-founded United Tech and Allied Workers (UTAW), the UK’s only union specifically for tech industry workers. Now, engineers are realizing they don’t have as much power as they once thought, he said. “You might be well paid, but you are still workers.”

“This sense of privilege and immunity for tech workers – that is gone,” said Simone Robutti, a member of Tech Workers Coalition, an international grassroots tech labor network that’s been growing as companies restructure around AI. “It’s clear that with very few exceptions, tech workers are as replaceable as other workers.”

Meanwhile, employees using AI aren’t necessarily experiencing the efficiency boosts the tech promised to deliver. In a recent survey of information technology workers across the University of California campuses, 65% of people reported taking on more work due to a vacant position. Managers expect AI to fill some of those gaps, but people just end up doing more work, said Max Belasco, a business systems analyst at the University of California, Los Angeles school of Law and union member. And despite the additional responsibility, only 22% of people said they felt secure in their jobs, the survey showed.

AI was a main driver to unionize in spring, Belasco said.

“We want to see the UC embody a new way of approaching technology that isn’t just an echo of the consultant-driven layoffs that you see inside of [Silicon Valley](#) or the idea that AI can just be this cost-cutting measure,” he said.

University spokesperson Heather Hansen said the school system was focused on using AI “thoughtfully and responsibly to strengthen its operations”. Decisions about how it uses AI are guided by “operational needs” and “privacy, security, and policy considerations”, she said.

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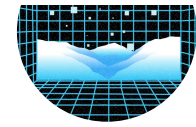


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Unions aren't the only way to set up these kinds of guardrails, but "when employees begin organizing, it's often a signal that they don't feel heard through the channels that already exist," said Katie Hawkes, an organizational psychologist whose doctoral research focused on tech labor union participation.

She witnessed this during her time at X, where employees spoke up about ethical issues like hate speech on the platform but lacked the means to pressure management. "Ultimately, like every company, leadership retained complete decision-making authority," she said.

Still, for years, tech workers resisted unions. Chadfield said he started trying to organize tech workers a decade ago, but no one seemed interested. Workers felt reasonably happy, and "in the conversations I was having with people then, it was just like, 'That's a ridiculous idea. We don't need one,'" he said.

Then, in 2018, thousands of Google employees organized to protest against the company's involvement in Project Maven, a Pentagon initiative that used machine learning to analyze drone footage. The action was surprisingly effective, and Google **dropped the contract** months later, though Palantir picked it up and continues it to this day. A few years later, in 2021, Google employees formed the Alphabet Workers Union. In 2022, Amazon warehouse workers also formed a union, which the company has fought tooth and nail to not formally recognize.

Within the last few years, though, Chadfield said white-collar workers were increasingly interested in union representation - even at companies like Meta,

where he said UAW did not even have a chapter. "Until recently

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including some at ZeniMax, severance benefits were spelled out in the contract.

“Building even simple protections over issues like job security is an ongoing effort,” said Autumn Mitchell, a quality assurance tester who was laid off by ZeniMax. “Having a union means having negotiating rights over issues like layoffs, which is more than what a lot of people are working with right now in game development.”

Kickstarter, which formed one of the first company-wide tech unions in 2020, negotiated a new contract in 2025 that included a four-day workweek, a minimum salary for all workers, protections against replacing full-time workers with contractors, and an agreement that management cannot replace roles with AI. Though some employees were skeptical of organizing six years ago, its latest win is an example of what can be achieved with a strong union, Robutti of Tech Workers Coalition Global said. And it’s a lesson that applies beyond the tech industry.

“The best time to unionize was always yesterday,” he said. “The second best time is today.”



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