



THE ELECTRONIC INTIFADA

Campaign against Project Nimbus gathers steam and supporters

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Protesters in San Francisco block a street to demand that Google drop its involvement with Project Nimbus, a \$1.2 billion Israeli government tech contract. (Calvin Stewart / ZUMA Press Wire)

Years of activism against Google's complicity in Israel's colonial violence against Palestinians have forced the multinational tech behemoth into a rigid moral impasse and exposed the hollowness of its brand.

In April 2021, Google and Amazon were awarded a \$1.2 billion contract with Israel for Project Nimbus, which aimed to streamline all of Israel's government and military operations into one cloud service.

Hundreds of Google and Amazon workers opposed the deal out of the conviction that such an undertaking would [bolster](#) (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/12/google-amazon-workers-condemn-project-nimbus-israeli-military-contract>) “further surveillance of and unlawful data collection on Palestinians” and “expansion of Israel’s illegal settlements on Palestinian land,” as they wrote in the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper in 2021.

In protest, tech workers came together under the banner [#NoTechforApartheid](#) (<https://notechforapartheid.com/#big-tech>), a phrase that has come to serve as both the title and guiding ethos for a broad-based, grassroots campaign against Big Tech’s facilitation of Israeli colonialism and apartheid.

I believe Project Nimbus is the outgrowth of a dangerous trend of US Big Tech companies supporting Israeli settler-colonialism, a phenomenon I refer to as digital/settler-colonialism and further define below.

But I also believe the No Tech For Apartheid campaign’s resistance to Project Nimbus demonstrates the power that labor resistance can play in undermining repressive corporate support for Israeli colonialism and genocide.

On 16 April, No Tech for Apartheid organizers staged [sit-ins](#) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/23/what-is-project-nimbus-and-why-are-google-workers-protesting-israel-deal>) at Google headquarters in New York and Sunnyvale, California.

The California sit-in [took place](#) (<https://www.kron4.com/news/bay-area/sunnyvale-google-employees-stage-sit-ins-to-protest-war-in-gaza/>) at the office of Google Cloud CEO Thomas Kurian and occurred just 24 hours after protesters supporting Gaza’s people [shut down](#) (<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/16/us/pro-palestinian-protests-golden-gate-us-gaza-war/index.html>) the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge and Oakland Interstate 880.

The New York sit-in prompted [several dozens](#) (<https://www.workers.org/2024/04/78174/>) to gather outside Google’s office in the city.

Golden Handcuffs

Both actions marked what one tech worker and speaker at the New York site described as “the first sit-in at a major tech company, and it won’t be the last,” *Workers World News* reported on 20 April.

Given its overlap with the Columbia student encampment for Gaza, the speaker added that the “labor movement and the student movement are the heartbeat of liberation.”

In response, however, Google – whose code of conduct [incorporated](https://gizmodo.com/google-s-don-t-be-evil-motto-goes-to-court-1848138310) (https://gizmodo.com/google-s-don-t-be-evil-motto-goes-to-court-1848138310) phrases such as “don’t be evil” and “do the right thing” – fired [50 tech workers](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/01/tech/google-workers-nlr-complaint-israeli-palestinian-protest/index.html) (https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/01/tech/google-workers-nlr-complaint-israeli-palestinian-protest/index.html) for participating in those protests.

According to reporting by *The Verge*, [a number](https://www.theverge.com/2024/4/30/24145680/google-workers-fired-project-nimbus-protest-nlr-complaint) (https://www.theverge.com/2024/4/30/24145680/google-workers-fired-project-nimbus-protest-nlr-complaint) of the 50 sacked Google workers (some of whom were “non-participating bystanders”) have filed a complaint with the National Labor Review Board.

Zelda Montes, an organizer with the No Tech for Apartheid Campaign and a former Google software engineer, took part in the New York action on 16 April. Montes, who worked on YouTube during their tenure with Google, described an atmosphere in which workers felt disempowered about questioning company decisions.

“The repression wasn’t as in your face as we’ve heard it being at Meta,” Montes told The Electronic Intifada, “but it was still there in a different way. You felt that people weren’t happy with leadership decisions, but that they had no choice but to go along with it.”

Montes described a cultish-like work environment at Google in which the “golden handcuffs” of corporate perks and pleasantries masked how workers were disempowered from challenging the status quo.

Thus, organizing with No Tech for Apartheid, they said, was “important for setting boundaries” that tech workers were otherwise prevented from establishing regarding the ethical applications of the products they worked on.

And despite being one of the 50 workers that Google fired in its retaliatory measure, Montes is convinced their decision was the right one.

“I’m alive. What we’re fighting is tech for genocide. Why does my job matter so much in relation to trying to stop that?”

“Think Again”

Another No Tech for Apartheid organizer who asked to be referred to only as A. described to The Electronic Intifada how Google relies upon workers’ insecurities to pursue its bottom line.

A. worked for Google’s Trust and Safety Team before being fired by the company after the April 16 sit-in. She joined the company after participating in unionization efforts for a non-profit that was only verbally supportive of workers’ rights and that refused to speak out in support of Palestine during the [2021 uprisings](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/east-jeruselems-sheikh-jarrah-becomes-emblem-palestinian-struggle-2021-05-10/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/east-jeruselems-sheikh-jarrah-becomes-emblem-palestinian-struggle-2021-05-10/>), she said.

Upon being hired, she saw that [Google] “was a whole other world, but at the same time, it wasn’t. I realized it was a tiered system, and most of what keeps all of these things going is folks on the lower tier.”

In the lead-up to the 16 April sit-ins, A. decided to hand out fliers in New York, figuring that such a relatively small role would mitigate possible retaliation.

The next day Chris Rackow, Google’s head of global security, sent a [memo](https://www.theverge.com/2024/4/17/24133700/google-fires-28-employees-protest-israel-cloud-contract) (<https://www.theverge.com/2024/4/17/24133700/google-fires-28-employees-protest-israel-cloud-contract>) to all employees disparaging protests and saying the company would not tolerate workplace disruption, *The Verge* reported.

“If you’re one of the few who are tempted to think we’re going to overlook conduct that violates our policies, think again,” Rackow wrote in the memo.

By that point, Google had already fired 28 workers in connection with the sit-ins.

“I was nervous, but I also didn’t think it would apply to me, since I was just flyering outside,” A. said.

But then she noticed that Google security seemed to be wherever she went for the rest of the week, from sitting unusually close at the company café to conducting a sweep of the company gym while she was exercising.

A. told several trusted colleagues she was worried that Google would fire her.

On 18 April, she received email notification that she was being placed on administrative leave.

The following Monday, on 22 April, A. was fired.

Doing the right thing

The 16 April sit-ins followed a 4 March [disruption](https://www.theverge.com/2024/3/8/24094687/google-israel-project-nimbus-employee-fired) (<https://www.theverge.com/2024/3/8/24094687/google-israel-project-nimbus-employee-fired>) by the No Tech for Apartheid campaign at a conference put on by the Israeli publication *Calcalist* and Bank Leumi.

At the time, an anonymous employee who has since been [identified](https://x.com/NoTechApartheid/status/1778884878924403129) (<https://x.com/NoTechApartheid/status/1778884878924403129>) as former Google Cloud software engineer Eddie Hatfield, interrupted a speech by Barak Regev, the [managing director](https://www.allamericanspeakers.com/celebritytalentbios/Barak+Regev/411760) (<https://www.allamericanspeakers.com/celebritytalentbios/Barak+Regev/411760>) of Google Israel.

Three days later, Hatfield was [fired](https://time.com/6964364/exclusive-no-tech-for-apartheid-google-workers-protest-project-nimbus-1-2-billion-contract-with-israel/) (<https://time.com/6964364/exclusive-no-tech-for-apartheid-google-workers-protest-project-nimbus-1-2-billion-contract-with-israel/>). This prompted Vidana Abdel Khalek, a Trust and Safety Policy Employee, to resign.

“No one came to Google to work on offensive military technology,” Abdel Khalek wrote in a resignation email.

Hatfield told *Time* magazine that his firing was intended “to cause a kind of chilling effect by firing me, to make an example out of me.”

Yet Abdel Khalek’s resignations and the April sit-ins reveal that the opposite has occurred. As Google remains hellbent on penalizing scores of workers for literally doing the right thing, more individuals within and in support of the No Tech for Apartheid campaign rise up to disrupt business as usual.

Flagrant entrenchment

I argue that Project Nimbus represents an important node in what I have been terming digital/settler-colonialism. As I use the phrase, digital/settler-colonialism refers to the strategic convergence of Zionist settler-colonialism and US Big Tech, whose own [colonial](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0306396818823172) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0306396818823172>), [racial](https://hyperallergic.com/593074/how-racial-bias-in-tech-has-developed-the-new-jim-code/) (<https://hyperallergic.com/593074/how-racial-bias-in-tech-has-developed-the-new-jim-code/>), and [surveillance capitalist](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/04/shoshana-zuboff-surveillance-capitalism-assault-human-autonomy-digital-privacy) (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/04/shoshana-zuboff-surveillance-capitalism-assault-human-autonomy-digital-privacy>) tendencies and practices have been well-documented.

While these two projects often overlap, they are, at least in theory, somewhat separate from one another, entailing slightly distinct modes of extraction, exploitation and oppression.

To be sure, Google's complicity in Palestinian oppression long predates Nimbus.

Instead of recognizing Palestinian land, Google's geo-spatial imagery and tracking technologies [reaffirm](https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/maps-technology-and-decolonial-spatial-practices-in-palestine) (<https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/maps-technology-and-decolonial-spatial-practices-in-palestine>) Zionist colonial cartographies. Google's search results [actively suppress](https://mondoweiss.net/2021/12/how-google-advances-the-zionist-colonization-of-palestine/) (<https://mondoweiss.net/2021/12/how-google-advances-the-zionist-colonization-of-palestine/>) anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist sites and publications.

But in constituting an arrangement by which US Big Tech so openly and directly simplifies Israel's technical capacity for meting out colonial violence against Palestinians, Project Nimbus represents a flagrant entrenchment of tech hegemony toward the colonization of Palestine, in effect flattening the distinction between Big Tech's digital colonialism and the Israeli state's settler colonialism.

Should Project Nimbus continue, in effect digitally streamlining Israel's current genocide of Palestine, Indigenous elimination would go from a question of strategic convergence to the ethical, political, and ideological lodestar around which Big Tech coalesces.

"The unprecedented scale of death and destruction in Gaza is enabled by tech companies like Google," former Google employees Montes, Mohammad Khatami and Kate Sim [wrote](https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/google-firings-gaza-project-nimbus/) (<https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/google-firings-gaza-project-nimbus/>) in *The Nation* in April.

They pointed out that during the genocide in Gaza, which has been “dubbed the world’s first AI war,” AI-powered target selection systems have [been shown](https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/) (<https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/>) to operate in tandem to profile Palestinians in Gaza as “terrorists” and permit ruthless bombings against civilians.

This meeting-point of digital colonialism and Israeli settler-colonialism is what I define as digital/settler-colonialism.

Michael Kwet, whose concept of digital colonialism was central to my forming my own, [argues](https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-big-tech-behind-israels-digital-apartheid/) (<https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-big-tech-behind-israels-digital-apartheid/>) that expanding worker influence at Big Tech corporations is not enough to make them “do good” because huge multinationals like Amazon, Google, Microsoft and IBM are “best understood as modern-day East India companies.”

I agree with Kwet’s point that the essential operations of Big Tech are congenitally oppressive, colonial-capitalist by nature rather than accident, and that confusing authority with material function risks obscuring this current condition.

The power of narrative

However, I also believe No Tech for Apartheid’s exponentially expanding activism is primed to meet the broader momentum of heightened opposition to Israel’s latest genocide of Palestinians. In addition to the invaluable revelations about the details of Project Nimbus, No Tech for Apartheid organizers are exposing the labor conditions particular to tech and how these can be leveraged in a broader project of anti-imperialist dissent.

Crucial to this is understanding how Google and other Big Tech create a false sense of difference between tech workers and other industries.

“A lot of the work of Big Tech is vendors and contractors, people doing what I did for a fraction of the cost,” said A., who is pursuing a master’s degree in labor studies at CUNY.

“Labor needs to pay attention to tech and realize it’s not just full time software engineers,” A. told The Electronic Intifada.

Gabi Schubiner, one of the founding members of No Tech for Apartheid, worked at Google for seven years before being one of 12,000 employees let go in 2023 in a

[mass layoff \(https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2024/01/18/google-ceo-warns-of-more-layoffs-to-come-what-this-means-for-the-mental-health-of-workers-worried-theyre-next/\)](https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2024/01/18/google-ceo-warns-of-more-layoffs-to-come-what-this-means-for-the-mental-health-of-workers-worried-theyre-next/).

Schubiner told The Electronic Intifada that their experiences working for Google showed them how tech as an industry is purposefully designed to create “a sense of detachment” between workers and insulate against a collective class consciousness through tiered labor categorizations and the allotment of comfort and select privileges (not to mention prestige) to full-time employees. This initially led them to be dubious about the radical potential of straightforward unionization efforts in tech.

But after the 2020 [George Floyd \(https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd\)](https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd) protests and when the first inklings of Project Nimbus reached Google staff, collectives were formed that would eventually lead to the No Tech for Apartheid campaign. Schubiner soon realized the specific potential of channeling tech labor advocacy towards anti-imperialist dissent.

“Tech undermines the material conditions for labor organizing because they draw strict boundaries between workers and extraction,” Schubiner said. “I didn’t want to invest in building with tech workers in a liberal fashion, but mobilizing tech labor organizing towards Palestinian liberation.”

The connections that the No Tech for Apartheid campaign has made and its identification of not just the necessity, but the vast possibilities for resistance are some of its most promising conditions. And once these connections and possibilities are given expression, there is no turning back.

It is for this reason that Montes, who has created an ongoing [archive \(https://notechforapartheidmemory.com/about/\)](https://notechforapartheidmemory.com/about/) of the NOTA campaign, has come to believe in the power of narrative and identify as an organizer devoted to storytelling.

“The power of storytelling is everything,” Montes said. “It’s what can’t be taken away when empire takes over everything else. And it’s what can help us move towards a vision of tech that does the work of helping to liberate rather than helping to oppress.”

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