"No Tech for Apartheid": Google Workers Push for Cancellation of Secretive $1.2B Project with Israel

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A national day of action is planned next Thursday as protests grow against Google's secretive $1.2 billion program known as Project Nimbus, which will provide advanced artificial intelligence tools to the Israeli government and military. We speak with two of the leaders of the protest: Ariel Koren, a former Google employee who says she was pushed out for her activism, as well as Gabriel Schubiner, who currently works at Google and is an Alphabet Workers Union organizer. "Cloud technology is extremely powerful, and providing that power to a violent military and to an apartheid government is not a neutral act," says Schubiner on Project Nimbus. The pair also detail how workers are rising up against what Koren says is Google's "culture of retaliation."

Transcript

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AMY GOODMAN: We end today's show looking at protests inside Google over a secretive project to provide advanced artificial

intelligence tools to the Israeli government and military. *The Intercept* recently obtained documents about what's known as Project Nimbus, a $1.2 billion cloud computing contract between Google and Israel. *The Intercept* [reports](#), quote, "documents indicate that the new cloud would give Israel capabilities for facial detection, automated image categorization, object tracking, and even sentiment analysis that claims to assess the emotional content of pictures, speech, and writing," unquote.

Over the past year, workers inside Google have been organized against Project Nimbus. Earlier this week, a video was posted online by a group called Jewish Diaspora in Tech, featuring current Palestinian Google workers. To protect their identity, their comments were read by volunteers.

> **ANONYMOUS PALESTINIAN GOOGLER 1:** Google's Project Nimbus will be a big ugly moment in Google's history and a shameful and embarrassing engagement. Project Nimbus will demoralize and agonize the many Googlers who truly believe and stand for Google's mission and values.

> **ANONYMOUS PALESTINIAN GOOGLER 2:** Working at Google was always my dream job, until I learned about Project Nimbus. I feel like I am making my living off of the oppression of my family back home. If Google truly believes in avoiding unjust impacts through the use of their AI, then why are they choosing to profit from a billion-dollar contract with a government and military which consistently violates international law?

> **ANONYMOUS PALESTINIAN GOOGLER 3:** Countless employees have tried to speak out about the violations the Palestinians have endured and have been intentionally ignored. So when opaque military contracts arise like Project Nimbus, it makes me feel like I am working for the bad guy.

> **ANONYMOUS PALESTINIAN GOOGLER 4:** It has become impossible to express any opinion of disagreement of the war waged on Palestinians without being called into an HR meeting with the threat of retaliation.
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> **ANONYMOUS PALESTINIAN GOOGLER 5:** As a Palestinian, my feelings of marginalization only grew when I began seeing my coworkers issued warnings, just for having empathy for Palestinians.
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> **ANONYMOUS PALESTINIAN GOOGLER 6:** I shared an internal fundraiser in a Google-wide Forum. I was told that the phrase "Support Palestine" was offensive and anti-semitic.

AMY GOODMAN: Again, that video by a group called Jewish Diaspora in Tech, featuring current Palestinian Google workers. To protect their identity, the comments were read by volunteers.

This all comes as a worker at Google says she was forced out of the company for organizing against Google's secretive work with Israel. In her [resignation letter](), Ariel Koren wrote, quote, "Google systematically silences Palestinian, Jewish, Arab and Muslim voices concerned about Google's complicity in violations of Palestinian human rights — to the point of formally retaliating against workers and creating an environment of fear."

Ariel Koren joins us now, along with Gabriel Schubiner, who is a current Google worker, artificial intelligence researcher and Alphabet Workers Union organizer.

We welcome you both to *Democracy Now!* I know, Ariel, this is your first television interview. Can you explain what happened to you, the issues you raised, the organizing that's going on inside Google, and then what took place, why you're out?

ARIEL KOREN: Yeah. Thank you for having us.

So, I first spoke out about Project Nimbus in November at a time during which I was on disability leave. And I returned to the company from disability leave two weeks after first speaking out about Project Nimbus. Myself and Gabriel were two Google workers who publicly opposed these contracts. Immediately after I returned to the company, my second day back, I was notified that the company had made the decision to move my role overseas to São Paulo, effective immediately. I was given 17 business days to accept the move or else lose my role. And even though I had been given supposedly 17 business days, on just the second day my manager was already communicating to the team that I'd be leaving.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Could you put this in the broader context? There have been reports that Google has been penalizing employees who speak out on various issues, and several, in fact, have been fired.

ARIEL KOREN: Yeah, this is a continuation of a larger pattern of retaliation. I think it's really clear that the message Google was trying to send was, you know, we're going to oust this worker to scare other workers from speaking out. You know, the intent was to silence workers, but actually I think the opposite is happening. Yesterday, 15 workers, many of whom are Palestinian, spoke out about the deeply entrenched culture within Google of silencing Palestinian colleagues, silencing people who speak out for Palestinian human rights. Folks spoke out about receiving HR warnings just for identifying openly as Palestinian or for sharing news about what's happening in Palestine. People have been issued pay cuts. They've been issued warnings. They've been threatened by colleagues and by HR. So the culture of retaliation is immense. And I think workers are starting to rise up. We now have five workers who have spoken out publicly with their names, publicly opposing Project Nimbus, as of yesterday, as well.

AMY GOODMAN: And, Ariel, if you can talk about what this Palestinian, Jewish, as well as other workers' alliance — the power of this within Google and how management is addressing this? I mean, you speak Hebrew. You speak Arabic. You speak Spanish. You speak — I mean, you are, to say the least, a polyglot.

ARIEL KOREN: Yeah. So, you know, Gabriel, myself, other colleagues within Google, we started to organize a group called Jewish Diaspora in Tech, that is a group that is really growing in number, and I think in power, as well, that is working in solidarity with the Palestine committee within Google, with Palestinian workers, with Arab and Muslim workers who are allied with Palestinians, in addition to workers across identities. And we formed in response to the fact that Google is weaponizing its, quote, "diversity, equity and inclusion" infrastructure in order to, you know, put forward false narratives of antisemitism that are designed to quelch folks who speak out for Palestinian rights. And this is a tool that Google is using to protect its business interests with Israel, and in this case, to silence opposition to Project Nimbus.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And, Gabriel, could you talk about what — you're obviously a present employee at Google — what the environment is within Google, and the fact that you're with the Alphabet Workers Union, you're one of the organizers, and one of the people who was reportedly sacked at Google was sacked for creating a pop-up message on Google's corporate network simply informing workers of their protected right to unionize?

GABRIEL SCHUBINER: Yeah, yeah. Thank you for bringing that up. I think, as you mentioned, Google has a history of retaliation. And I see that retaliation as an act of fear. I think that Google is afraid of worker power. And Google has continued — they hired union-busting consultants as part of this, right? They're trying to make an example of Ariel.

But, as Ariel mentioned, I think this has actually only strengthened the labor movement within Google. Organizing in tech, I think, organizes both — most strongly around kind of classic labor issues, contracting issues, as well as ethical issues, because Big Tech has such a huge influence on the world. And organizing at Google really didn't start, but I think Project Maven, a contract with the Department of Defense that Google ended up dropping due to worker opposition, really set the tone for how strong tech organizing can be.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Could you elaborate on that, actually? Could you talk about what Project Maven was and how many people were involved in opposing it within Google?

GABRIEL SCHUBINER: Yeah. So, Project Maven was a contract with the Department of Defense where Google was intended to develop custom AI for drone footage, for object identification on drone footage. Thousands of Google employees signed petitions against this. Critically, a team of engineers close to the project threatened work stoppage. And yeah, just huge employee pushback on this project.

In response to that, Google developed the AI Principles. Since then, Google has actually taken many steps to avoid the responsibilities that it publicly commits to through those principles by claiming that cloud contracts are a neutral technology and that the contract — the AI Principles don't apply to these contracts. The cloud technology is extremely powerful. And providing that power to a violent military and to an apartheid government is not a neutral act.

AMY GOODMAN: Gabriel, first, are you concerned about your job, speaking out? Have the Palestinian Google workers — you said just in the last day have come out — have any come out publicly? Ariel is already out, but you still work there. And if you can talk more

about specifically Project Nimbus and why this cloud computing contract is most alarming to you?

GABRIEL SCHUBINER: Definitely. So, yeah, I mean, you know, there is definitely the possibility for retaliation, but I find a lot of strength and solidarity in my organizing connections with Ariel. With the union, we have a lot of support. And really, I feel like I have —

AMY GOODMAN: Ariel Koren and Gabriel Schubiner. I can tell you we have had so much trouble this morning, our guests in the San Francisco studio. First we lost the audio, then we lost the video. Then we got the audio up. You could hear the scratchiness of it. And now we have just lost the visual.

We want to thank our guests for being with us, Ariel Koren, a former marketing manager for Google Education, an Alphabet Workers Union organizer. We also want to thank Gabriel Schubiner, who currently works at Google, speaking out, still as a worker there now, with Alphabet Workers Union organizing. They have taken on Project Nimbus, a project of Google and its — Google's relationship with the state of Israel.

That does it for our show. I should say also, you can sign up for our daily news digest email by texting "democracynow" — one word — to 66866 today. And you can watch and listen when you want to subscribe to our podcasts in English and Spanish. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts today.

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Karran, Hany Massoud and Mary Conlon. Our executive director is Julie Crosby. Special thanks to Becca Staley, Jon Randolph, Paul Powell, Mike Di Filippo, Miguel Nogueira. I'm Amy Goodman, with Nermeen Shaikh. Stay safe.