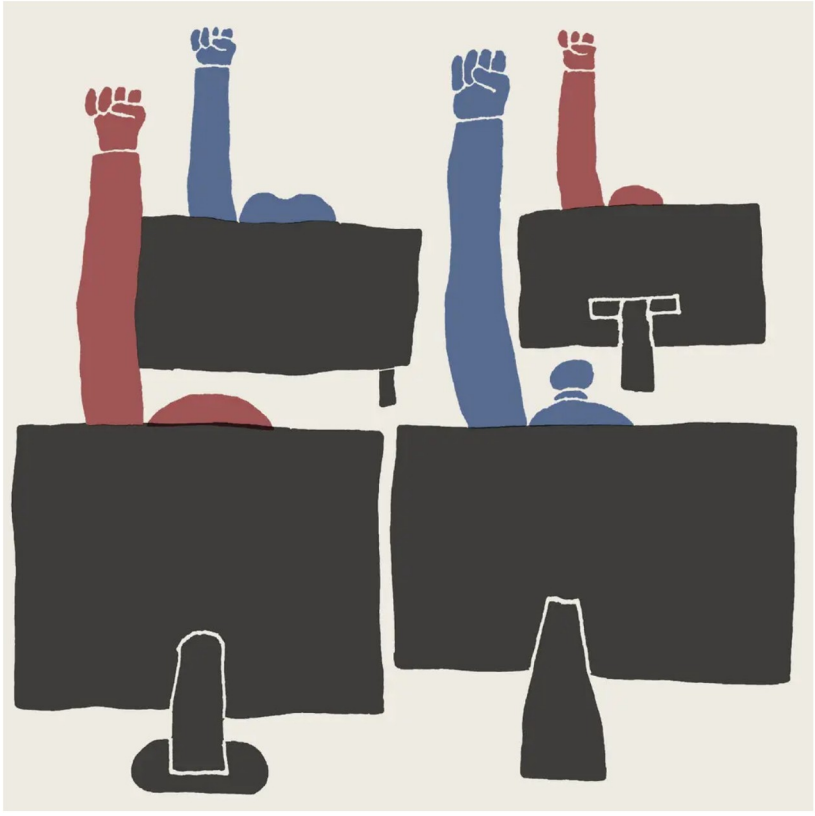
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OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Tech Workers Have Fears About A.I., Too. They Can Do Something About It.

May 18, 2026,
1:00 a.m. ET



Nathaniel Russell

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By Kate Andrias
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This month, U.K.-based workers at Google DeepMind, the company's artificial intelligence research laboratory, decided to unionize. One of their motivations was concern that their employer was supplying A.I. tools to militaries.

In April, more than 600 Google employees sent a letter to the company's chief executive, Sundar Pichai, demanding he refuse any Pentagon contract that would deploy Google's A.I. for any classified work — to ensure it couldn't be used for lethal autonomous weapons or mass surveillance, or in other "inhumane or extremely harmful ways." "The only way to guarantee that Google does not become associated with such harms," they wrote, "is to reject any classified workloads."

Across the tech industry, the people who understand A.I. most intimately — the ones who write its code, train its models and watch its capabilities expand in real time — are increasingly alarmed by what they are building and for whom. Some, like the Google employees, are concerned they are contributing to dangerous military developments. Others worry that A.I. poses a threat to jobs — their own, as well as in industries as far-reaching as the arts, media, law and banking. Still others are frightened by the privacy implications of the new technology.

By organizing, they are insisting that the people closest to A.I.'s development should have a voice in its direction. They can see risks before regulators, lawmakers or the public can. Listening to them is not just a matter of workplace fairness. It is essential to our society's ability to govern the direction of A.I.

Tech workers' anxieties about the social impact of their work are not new. In 2018, Google employees organized a large campaign against the company's involvement in Project Maven, a Pentagon initiative using machine learning to analyze drone footage. They circulated an open letter, asked pointed questions at company meetings and created an online group to raise concerns and discuss ways of protesting. It worked. Google eventually announced it would not renew the contract.

Employees across the tech industry got the message — if they acted collectively, they could exercise real power over what their companies build. Contracted Google workers in Pittsburgh would vote to unionize in 2019; Kickstarter employees formed one of the first companywide tech unions the following year; the Alphabet Workers Union launched in 2021; and The New York Times tech workers voted overwhelmingly to unionize in 2022. A labor movement among tech workers is no longer theoretical.

And yet, despite all this activity, tech worker organizing has not scaled. Private-sector union membership across all industries in the United States has fallen to six percent, even as nearly 70

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percent of Americans approve of unions. The professional and technical-services sector is even less unionized than the private sector as a whole — only 1.3 percent.

What explains the gap? The standard answer points to culture. Tech workers often see themselves as professionals aligned with management, not laborers facing exploitation; they identify with their companies' purported missions of driving innovation and solving complex challenges; they are well compensated and enjoy conditions that other workers envy.

But recent research suggests that the tech industry's unique professional culture can also enable collective action. Tech workers often choose their careers at least in part because they believe technology can benefit society. When their employers violate that belief by building drone targeting systems, supporting immigration enforcement agencies or harvesting workers' expertise to train their replacements, many experience it as a profound betrayal.

Turning those frustrations into sustained organization requires grappling with legal obstacles. Unlike in much of Western Europe, where workers are unionized at high levels and can bargain as an entire sector to address problems in their industries, in the United States the legal system makes organizing and bargaining exceedingly difficult. The National Labor Relations Act, the federal law that governs organizing and bargaining among private sector workers, promises to protect the right to unionize but often fails to do so in practice. Employers can delay union recognition for months or years through multiple legal challenges. When they illegally fire workers who organize, a disturbingly common practice, or fail to bargain in good faith, the penalties are so weak that they are nearly nonexistent.

Even where unions exist, the law requires employers to bargain only with their own employees; it does not require bargaining to benefit all workers in a sector or a supply chain. This structure is especially ill suited for responding to concerns raised by A.I., which is built through chains of engineers, contractors, cloud workers, data annotators, content moderators and vendors spread across firms.

Despite the obstacles, American tech workers have more power than they may realize. Tech workers, especially engineers building generative A.I., are expensive to hire, expensive to train and difficult to replace. They understand the systems they are building better than the regulators trying to govern those systems, better than the executives deploying them and certainly better than the pundits debating their consequences. When they act collectively, they can help safeguard not only their own interests, but society's interests more broadly.

Workers in other industries have shown what that kind of leverage can accomplish. Hollywood writers and actors did not wait for

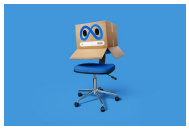
Congress to solve the threat of generative A.I.; they used strikes and collective bargaining to win rules over how studios could use scripts, voices and likenesses. Earlier in history, autoworkers transformed what were low-wage jobs into the backbone of the middle class, and their organization's leadership went on to support the civil rights movement. Worker power can do more than improve individual workplaces: It can reshape an industry's obligations to the public.

If we want A.I. policy that actually works for the public, then decisions cannot be made by executives and investors alone. Workers must have a say in what they build, whom it serves and how it is used. If they do, the rest of us will have a better chance of living with technology governed by democratic values, not merely by corporate and military imperatives.

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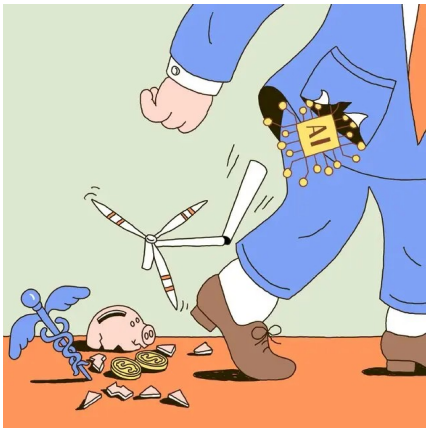
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