

Google's spiralling labour unrest and antitrust lawsuits spin trouble for the tech giant

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Abstract: More than 200 workers at Google and its parent company Alphabet formed labour union for US and Canadian offices in January 2021. Protest over working conditions and business practices have been growing at Google over the years. In 2018, Google came under severe criticism from its employees for firing a black artificial intelligence and ethics researcher. In June 2018, thousands at Google staged a walkout to protest against the handling of sexual harassment cases and lack of transparency. The multi-million payouts to executives accused of sexual harassment further raised concerns among the employees and led to raising voices towards discriminatory work practices. The tech giant appears to have been embroiled in various controversies over the years. Employee's opposition to some of its projects have been another reason for the growing unrest among the employees. Google has been making multiple efforts to ease the situation. Google CEO Sunder Pichai acknowledged that the company is struggling with internal transparency issues and changes were made in the policies too, to garner the trust of the employees. While Google employees seek accountability, the brain drain at Google has been fairly alarming. The recent exit of Samy Bengio once again raises concern over Google's handling of employee's concerns and bringing about the much needed transparency. CEO Sunder Pichai thus has a tough task ahead in rebuilding employee trust and steering the company away from the bureaucratic culture that seems to have been growing at Google.

Key words: Employee relations, Ethics, Transparency, Antitrust lawsuits, discrimination, labour unrest, Sexual harassment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Google, an American technology company was founded in 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin who studied together at Stanford University. Google started as an online search engine but now offers enterprise solutions, internet services, smartphones, tablets, notebooks, maps and navigation services etc. The company started its upward trajectory from 2000's when it became the default search engine for Yahoo. Though it parted ways with Yahoo in 2004, it by then became synonymous with web search. Google's parent company Alphabet was formed in 2015. On being made a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc., its senior vice-president Sunder Pichai was given the charge of Google and continues to be its current CEO. Company cofounders Larry Page and Sergey Brin became the CEO and President of Alphabet respectively[1].

Google, once considered as the happiest company in tech, is now facing challenges on multiple fronts. Despite being a global leader as a digital advertiser, Google has been facing the wrath of people both within and outside the organization. Minor issues at Google were being reported over the years, however troubles deepened from 2016 when Donald Trump was newly elected the President of United States of America. The aftermath of the election set off a series of backlash for the tech giant. Google, Facebook and Twitter came under criticism for letting Russian trolls use

these platforms to spread fake news. Also over the next two and half years the company's culture seemed maladapted to the political, social and business settings. There was growing distrust and disillusionment among the employees. Google's internal social network witnessed trolls and amplified debates impacted the rationalist culture. Discussions over gender and diversity which formed part of the free thinking forums ended in heated debates leading to warnings being issued to the employees for being disrespectful and disruptive. One such warning to its chrome engineer Kevin Cernekee described as a shrewd far-right provocateur, led to him filing a charge with the National Labour Relations Board alleging retaliation by Google for his political views[2]. In 2017 another employee Damore wrote a 10 page memo explaining the biological reasons for there being fewer female engineers at Google. This was on hearing organizers discuss about extra job interviews and suitable environments being provided to women and underrepresented minorities. Damore believed this was in violation of Google's meritocratic hiring process, a finely tuned system built to identify objectively qualified engineers. In 2018, 20,000 employees of Google staged a large scale walkout in protest against the \$90 million dollar payout to former Android head Andy Rubin accused of sexual harassment. Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt in one of his interviews to Wired stated that "You

need these aberrant geniuses because they're the ones that drive, in most cases, the product excellence"[3]. The culture of valuing some more than the others negatively impacted the organization. This massive walkout led to Google recruiting IRI consultants known for discouraging union activity.

II. CASE PRESENTATION

In November 2019 Google sacked four employees on grounds of violating data security policies. The tech giant however was accused of persecuting them for attempting to unionize staff [4]. Google's attempt to clamp down on freewheeling employee discussions on internal forums led to large scale unrest and walk outs by employees. It's decision to monitor and intervene in forums upset many. Google's Walkout for Real Change which managed the staff protest in 2018 over sexual misconduct stated that Google retaliated against them and that policies on data security were only tightened as a cover to sack employees. From an organization recognized as a modern workplace to rising dissent among the employees the world over, the change at Google had been dramatic. The transparent relations between the workers and management seemed to be dwindling. In December 2020, Google's respected AI researcher Dr. Timnit Gebru claimed she was fired, though Google claimed she had resigned. The issue related to a research paper Gebru co-authored that examined the limitations and weaknesses of AI model used for language analysis[5]. By January 2021, more than 400 employees of Google formed a worker's union named Alphabet Workers Union following the sacking of an employee of color who criticized the hiring policies at Google's parent company Alphabet. The unionization of Google employees was a first among tech employees in the region. Parul Koul and Chewy Shaw announced the formation of the union in an article in the New York Times. Dylan Baker, a software engineer stated that this was the first union for and by all tech workers. He also stated that they will elect representatives and make decisions democratically. Google, which began as a small tech company with a "Don't Be Evil" mantra, had quickly become one of the most influential companies in the world. Alphabet, Google's parent company had more than 120,000 workers. The union however was representing a fraction of the company's more than 260,000 full-time employees and contractors and aimed to give structure and longevity to activism at Google and had not been formed to bring the employer to the negotiating table as stated by the workers [6]. Chewy Shaw, an engineer at Google and the vice chair of the union's leadership council, stated that the union was a necessary tool to sustain pressure on management in order to change workplace issues. In response, Google's director of people operations, Kara Silverstein, also issued a statement saying "the company had always worked hard to create a supportive and rewarding workplace for our workforce and employees have protected labor rights that

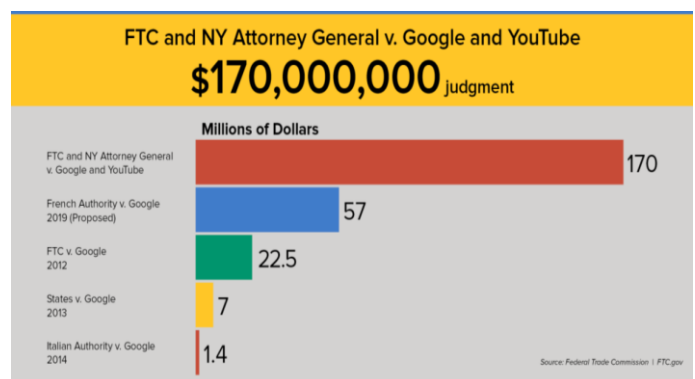
we support. But as we've always done, we'll continue engaging directly with all our employees."

In February 2021, yet another Artificial Intelligence leader Margaret Mitchell was fired for allegedly posting a tweet critical of Google's handling of the Gebru case. Both women had voiced concerns about censorship at Google and campaigned for more diversity. However, Google maintained that Mitchell was fired for moving files outside the company [7]. High profile ousting's haven't ended at Google. The latest has been Samy Bengio, the high-ranking employee who worked in the Artificial Intelligence division with Gebru and supported her during her exit. His 14 year stint at the organization ended in April 2021. Google had witnessed multiple resignations since December 2020 and Samy's exit is a huge loss to the organization. However these are not the only issues the tech giant faces. The employees of Google had also opposed numerous projects undertaken by the tech giant. They accused the company of planning to build a special search engine for China, of taking up unethical government contracts like drone targeting for the military while still keeping the technology secret even to Googlers working on the project [8].

III. DISCUSSION

While on the one hand Google's employee-management relations appear to be straining, on the other hand Google has been facing massive antitrust lawsuits. Google had come under scanner for its dominance since 2011 and in 2013 an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) was concluded without taking any action. However with Google's rapid growth under Alphabet, it dominated the digital ad market along with rival Facebook. Antitrust regulators in Europe imposed multibillion dollar fines on Google and forced it to change its policies. Google has multiple other lawsuits filed against it (Figure 1). In September 2019, Google was charged a whopping \$170 million for violating Children's privacy law. The Federal Trade Commission alleged that YouTube through its video sharing service collected personal information of the children without having sought consent from the parents, thereby violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA).

Figure 1. Major Privacy judgements against Google



Source : Federal Trade Commission(FTC),

https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/u52513/major_privacy_judgements_against_google.png

In December 2020, 10 state attorney general in Texas filed a lawsuit alleging that Google teamed up with Facebook to rig auctions and fix prices to crush competition to acquire and maintain monopoly [9]. Around the same time, another multi-state anti-trust suit was filed against Google alleging that Google through its anticompetitive contracts illegally maintained monopoly in search advertising and its dealings have impacted news publishers [10]. In January 2021 Streaming video site Rumble filed a lawsuit against Google in California for at least \$2.0 billion alleging abuse of monopolistic power by Google stating that the tech giant was unfairly tilting the search engine results toward 'YouTube' [11]. It alleged that Google was unlawfully creating and maintaining its monopoly. There are multiple other lawsuits filed by competitors, publishers, advertisers, and consumers against Google's anti-competitive tactics aimed at monopolising online search and advertising markets. In an unending onslaught of lawsuits, one more addition in February 2021 has been from HD Media LLC owner Doug Reynolds who held Google responsible for his depleting ad revenue. This federal lawsuit is a first by a news outlet [12]. Google has been facing criticism from all fronts. It has been pulled up by US lawmakers for its data collection techniques, its video app YouTube runs rampant misinformation and there are ethical concerns being raised by its employees.

IV. CONCLUSION

Over the last few years Google's image has been marred by various allegations by not just its employees but also from competitors and other organizations across US and Europe. From being known as one of the best organizations to work at, Google is now struggling to garner the trust of its employees. Millions in payout to those accused of sexual misconduct, lack of transparency, ethical issues, discrimination, workplace harassment are just some of the concerns raised by employees. Then there are the multimillion fines imposed on the tech giant for its anti-competitive tactics and monopolistic behaviour, thereby adding to the already existing troubles for the organisation. Google's CEO Sundar Pichai has a tough task at hand. Building employee trust is foremost before this tech giant which prides itself for its talent pool witnesses a brain drain never seen before in its history. Google, which was once considered as the most employee friendly company needs a major rejig in its human resource policies to salvage its image before it loses its grip and is crushed under the pile of lawsuits and loss of valuable assets.

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