

# The Google walkout is a watershed moment in 21st century labour activism

By [Michael Walker](#)

8 Nov 2018

That 20,000 Google employees walked off the job last week is a watershed event, a hugely significant symbolic development for labour relations in the 21st century.



©\_fla – [123RF.com](#)

Granted, the action itself was limited. More than seven out of every 10 Google employees did not take part. The walkout was for just a few hours, and the protesters returned to their desks with nothing resolved in their favour. Their only win was Google's chief executive agreeing to meet with organisers to "review a plan that would address" their key demands.

But this is Google, supposedly the best company to work for in a sector renowned for luring the brightest and best with large salaries and excellent conditions. Google's median salary (US\$161,409) is the highest [of any company](#). Like most high-tech workers, very few have seen any need to join a trade union.

Their walkout, which surpassed organisers' expectations of [1,500 participants](#), shows collective organisation is still needed for employees to get a real say in their workplaces.

It also underlines a few important lessons for the labour movement. First, there is a change in the issues that younger workers care deeply about. Second, new technology has huge potential for labour organising.

## Cracks in the Google veneer

Google consistently tops rankings as the best place to work or the [most sought after employer](#). A less attractive truth beneath the veneer has been revealed.

The spark leading to the walkout from 40 Google offices around the world was a [New York Times article](#) revealing the kid-glove treatment given to three Google executives accused of sexual misconduct. One case included a US\$90 million golden handshake.

What incensed Google employees in particular is the company's use of "mandatory arbitration". This is when employment contracts prevent workers from seeking remedies in a court of law, forcing them to use company procedures instead. The Google case confirms what common sense tells us: internal channels will be more favourable to the company than to employees.

Mandatory arbitration clauses have become a [significant issue](#) in US employment relations in the past 20 years. More and more employees are excluded from full access to employment law protections.

Furthermore, even complaining often invites retribution. According to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, retaliation by an employer is by far the most common form of workplace discrimination, accounting for [41,097 of the 84,254](#) charges the agency received in fiscal year 2017.

At Google, employees say human resources policies have disadvantaged complainants and enabled management to brush sexual harassment issues under the carpet.

“We’ve waited for leadership to fix these problems, "but have come to this conclusion: no one is going to do it for us,” the [Google walkout organisers explained](#). “So we are here, standing together, protecting and supporting each other.”

## Millennial values

Many of Google’s employees are in their twenties and thirties. The protest underscores the values younger people are bringing to work. Consider their five key demands:

- an end to forced arbitration
- a commitment to ending pay and opportunity inequity
- a clear, uniform, globally inclusive process for reporting sexual misconduct
- promote the company’s Chief Diversity Officer to answer directly to the CEO

- appoint an employee representative to the company's board.

These concerns show a generational shift in attitudes. It's one reason the #MeToo movement has caught on.

A [Deloitte survey](#) of 10,000 "Millennials" (born between 1983 and 1994) shows they expect organisations to be ethical, to want to enhance their employees' lives and careers, and to make a positive impact on society and the environment. They value a diverse and inclusive workplace.

## Self-organisation

In echoes of other recent tech protests at [Uber](#) and [Deliveroo](#), Google's un-unionised workforce self-organised the walkout using message boards, messaging apps and social media – ironically the very tools made by Google and the other tech giants.

I've written about [legies-unions-are-considering-for-their-survival-78992](#) "digital unionism" before. The scale of what the Google walkout organisers managed in a few days without outside assistance underlines both the opportunity and threat of new technology. Unionism is also being "disrupted" in the new economy. Like other "old economy" businesses, unions have to adapt to survive. If they don't perfect digital unionism, others will step in and do it themselves.

## Collective bargaining ain't dead

The bottom line is that human resources policies that purport to be there for the benefit of employees must be genuine. No one likes a one-way street, least of all when a unilateral process is purportedly a mechanism for employee voice. People [want a genuine say](#) over their working conditions.

Even from a completely self-interested perspective, companies that ignore this risk unpredictable blow-ups. Think Uber, Deliveroo and now Google.

Maybe it's time for Google to follow in the steps of other tech companies that have [negotiated collective agreements with their workers](#).

In Sweden, the services union Unionen has signed a collective agreement covering the most unlikely workers: YouTubers, the people who generate YouTube content, to ensure they receive reasonable compensation. That agreement was not negotiated with YouTube but with the United Screens talent development agency.

If YouTube content generators, who are not even employees, can have a collective say over their working conditions, surely Google's white-collar office workers can too.

*This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Walker is a PhD candidate researching worker voice at the University of Technology Sydney.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>