Google illegally spied on workers before firing them, US labor board alleges

Google violated US labor laws by spying on workers who were organizing employee protests, then firing two of them, according to a complaint to be filed by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) today.

The complaint names two employees, Laurence Berland and Kathryn Spiers, both of whom were fired by the company in late 2019 in connection with employee activism. Berland was organizing against Google's decision to work with IRI Consultants, a firm widely known for its anti-union efforts, when he was let go for reviewing other employees' calendars. Now, the NLRB has found Google's policy against employees looking at certain coworkers' calendars is unlawful.

"Google's hiring of IRI is an unambiguous declaration that management will no longer tolerate worker organizing," Berland said in a statement. "Management and their union busting cronies wanted to send that message, and the NLRB is now sending their own message: worker organizing is protected by law."

Spiers was fired after she created a pop-up for Google employees visiting the IRI Consultants website. "Googlers have the right to participate in protected concerted activities," the notification read, according to *The Guardian*. The company said Spiers had violated security policies, a statement that hurt her reputation in the tech community. Now, the NLRB has found the firing was unlawful.

“This week the NLRB issued a complaint on my behalf. They found that I was illegally terminated for trying to help my colleagues,” Spiers said. “Colleagues and strangers believe I abused my role because of lies told by Google management while they were retaliating against me. The NLRB can order Google to reinstate me, but it cannot reverse the harm done to my credibility.”

Google, once known as the happiest company in tech, has been roiled in scandal in recent years. The company paid former executive Andy Rubin $90 million in the wake of a sexual harassment investigation, which set off a wave of protests at offices across the globe. More than 20,000 employees and contractors participated in the walkouts.

Workers have also protested the company’s decision to work with the Department of Defense on Project Maven, an AI initiative that could help the US improve its drone strike capabilities. In 2018, more than 3,100 employees signed a petition urging CEO Sundar Pichai to pull out of the project.

In a statement emailed to *The Verge*, a Google spokesperson said: “Google has always worked to support a culture of internal discussion, and we place immense trust in our employees. Of course employees have protected labor rights that we strongly support, but we have always taken information security very seriously. We’re confident in our decision and legal position. Actions undertaken by the employees at issue were a serious violation of our policies and an unacceptable breach of a trusted responsibility.”

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