Organizing for Your Ethical Principles

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Employers deliberately elided

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Not necessarily our employers' opinions.
Based on a chapter of *Seeking SRE*
Content warning:

Discussions of sexual harassment, racial and disability discrimination, state-sponsored violence, concentration camps, and genocide

Screenshots of hate speech and death threats

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Close your eyes.
Open your eyes.
1. Why organize?
Working Conditions

Examples:

- Pay and leveling
- Unjust treatment
- Excessive hours
- Harassment/discrimination
- Hostile work environment

Many other examples.
Product Ethics

Examples:

- Discriminating against minorities
  - Poor accessibility
  - Machine learning bias
- Aiding in unlawful acts
  - Theranos (fraud)
  - La Liga (eavesdropping)

Or both. Many other examples.
Ethics of Tech Ecosystem

Examples:

- "Independent" contractors & gig economy
- Cafeteria & contingent workers
- Gentrification
- Tech lobbying

Many other examples.
Intersections

Is it okay to ask someone to work on a project that harms or excludes them, or harms or excludes members of a group they belong to?

Is it okay to subject external-facing employees to receiving abuse on the company's products due to poor product design?
Tech's Ethical Crisis

Tech ethics focus has been insufficient and too late.

Ethics codes are not enough.

The ethics crisis isn’t a trolley problem.

Distal causes are not the issue.
ICE Software always recommends DETAIN

*not an actual data pipeline

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Link between FB activity and anti-refugee violence in Germany

Violence in Chemnitz as leftist and far-right protesters clash

Neo-Nazis and leftist protesters took to the streets of Germany’s Chemnitz after a murder involving migrants. Saxony police mostly managed to cope with sporadic violence, although the protests caught them by surprise.
Your Ethics Matter

Unjust treatment of employees is not okay.

Unjust treatment of users of technology is not okay.

Unjust treatment of our neighbors is not okay.

White supremacy is not okay.

We can change tech, together.

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How do we fix this?
We've had a few successes.

15 years in tech

2 years as a manager (now no longer)

Queer transgender woman of color

Labor organizer & activist for 8 years


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We've had a few successes.

15 years in tech

Lead Data Scientist, Anti-fascist, anti-racist activist and organizer

Survivor of multiple assaults, attempted murder, and a terrorist attack


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We're tired and need your help.

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2. Your skills matter
Clearly Delegate Roles

Maintain clarity of command structure

Designate an Incident Commander

Designate clear roles for each participant

Avoid freelancing outside responsibilities & chain of command.
Learn from events

Blameless retrospectives.

Collective behavior and systems, not individuals.

Contributing factors

"What did you think was happening?", not "Why did you do that?". [h/t @auxesis on Twitter]

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The St. Paul Principles

1. Respect for a diversity of tactics and plans of other groups.

2. Maintain a separation of time or space in actions/tactics.

3. Any debates or criticisms will stay internal to the movement, avoiding public denunciations of fellow activists and events.

4. Oppose state surveillance, infiltration, disruption, and violence. Don't assist law enforcement against activists.
Principles of Organizing

St Paul Principle #4 more important than ever: do not naively assist law enforcement
3. Risks & Protections
Company Cultures

"Do good" principles.

Companies claim to want vigorous sharing, debate & employees coming forward about issues.

Make use of your company's cultural statements.
Industry Ethics Codes

ACM:

*Promote fundamental human rights* and each individual's right to autonomy. *Minimize negative consequences*, including threats to health, safety, personal security, and privacy. When the interests of multiple groups conflict, *the needs of those less advantaged should be given priority*.

IEEE:

*Hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public*, strive to comply with ethical design and sustainable development practices, and *disclose promptly factors that might endanger the public or the environment*.
Engineers are valuable

Replacing an engineer costs €x00,000

GDPR.

Service Reliability.

Collective action & solidarity

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Local Labor Laws

Labor laws may protect organizing around working conditions & pay.

Work with your local labor council/union.

EU Works Councils for transnational employers
Generally, whistleblower protections are weak :( 
Ethics != law; whistleblowing only covers breaches of law. 
EU whistleblowing protection law pending 
Risk of collateral damage. 
Be prepared to resign or lose your job.
Be prepared for the worst.

Remedies are retrospective.

Retaliation often happens.

What is your backup plan?

What is our collective plan?

To the executives+managers: Is your company prepared to handle ethical escalations?
Change is worth the cost.
4. Successful Organizing
1. Early awareness

Changing decisions is easier before shipping

Fast iteration/feedback

Listen to colleagues & customers

Diverse networks matter
2. Building Employee Networks

Communicate outside your working group

Mailing lists, social media, and in-person gatherings

Include people different from you

Actively listen and empathize

Build trust
3. Venting vs. Problem-Solving

Listen vs. fix

Emotional vs. rational content

Safe places to vent "in person"

Advocacy != venting

*The New York Times* rule
4. Identifying Decision-Makers

Don't attack the messenger/team

Ask exploratory questions ("If not you, who would know?").

Develop sources in management

Cultivate allies among leadership
5. Effective Persuasion

Assume good faith

Assumptions, priorities, values, & engagement may differ

How can the result be achieved differently?

No pitchfork mobs or attacks against strawpeople

Be trustworthy.
6. If all else fails...

Break glass:

- **Employee petitions**
  - Succinct, clear ask
  - 5% = credible threat

- **Media engagement**
  - Public pressure entrenches execs/PR
  - Situationally powerful.

- **Complaints to regulators, directors, & shareholders**
  - Less well-trodden territory

- **Strike or Quit**
7. Avoiding Burnout

You are not your employer.

It's okay to take a step back.

Progress can take years.

Form long-term working groups.
8. Virtuous Cycles

Ethics is an integral part of our job.

Ethics crises are a process failure.

Continuous {integration, deployment, ethics}

We need robust, reusable infrastructure.
"Crises are simply a scarcity of time and attention."
Strategic > Tactical

Each ethics fight is toil.
Toil fills all available capacity.
Invest in scalable solutions.
Parallels to Privacy Engineering

1. Guard
   ○ Early detection
2. Strengthen
   ○ Safe defaults
3. Extinguish
   ○ Crisis management

(credit to @LeaKissner & @Aiianen)

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No Bandaid Solutions

Ethics codes are not enough: too often they are used to excuse bad behavior.

Following the law $\neq$ being moral;
Following a code of ethics $\neq$ being ethical

Look beyond Silicon Valley: questionably-ethical software is being written by companies that aren’t household names
Be proactive.
Prevent crises.
Pick fights carefully.
5. Resources
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Coworker.org

Helped Google employees develop an organizing and media strategy around workplace safety.

Helped US retail sector employees campaign for better working conditions.

Can help tech workers coordinate!

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Labor Unions

Your local labor unions can help you!
Tech Workers' Coalition in the US
UNITE in the UK/IE
IG Metall in DE
UNI Global Union (headquarters in CH)

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Journalists

Know reporters' beats and angles.
Write out talking points.
Reporters aren't scary.
Talk to us for recommendations.

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Thank you, and rise up! #TechWontBuildIt

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