

Amazon employees cite 'moral responsibility' to speak out on climate, despite risk of losing their jobs

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More than 350 Amazon employees defied a company ban on unapproved external communications to call out what they see as the retail and technology giant's still-inadequate approach to the climate crisis.

In a Medium post and news release Sunday and video released online Monday, the employees praised the steps that Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos committed the company to last September, but railed against what one called Amazon's "unconscionable" business with the oil and gas industry. They also objected to an updated external communications [policy](#), provided to employees in September, a day after the Amazon Employees for Climate Justice group announced plans for a walkout as part of the Global Climate Strike. They called the policy a "reprehensible overreach" and asserted a "moral responsibility" to speak out on climate.

Earlier this month, members of Amazon Employees for Climate Justice said Amazon had threatened to fire at least two outspoken employees for violating the external communications policy, in what many of them view as a crackdown on dissent within the corporate ranks.

Undeterred by the apparent risk to their jobs with one of the world's most valuable companies, hundreds of employees signed their names and titles to pointed critiques and calls for change.

In the Medium post, they praised the steps Amazon has taken so far—particularly an order for 100,000 electric delivery vans—but said the company's commitment to being [carbon neutral](#) by 2040 is not enough and doesn't befit Amazon's size, consumer influence and leadership in its various industries.

So far, no Amazon workers appear to have been fired as a result of violating the external communications policy. Amazon, in response to inquiries, reiterated its policy, which requires prior approval for communications about the company.

Amazon began updating the policy last spring, as a barrage of proposals—including one championed by employees related to Amazon's then-lack of emissions disclosures—came before shareholders at the company's annual meeting. The updated policy, the company said, requires approval from fewer people with less seniority to ease participation in speeches and media interviews.

"While all employees are welcome to engage constructively with any of the many teams inside Amazon that work on sustainability and other topics, we do enforce our external communications policy and will not allow employees to publicly disparage or misrepresent the company or the hard work of their colleagues who are developing solutions to these hard problems," an Amazon spokesperson said Monday.

She noted that the company has thousands of employees working on sustainability, and has set interim goals, including reaching 100% renewable energy by 2030.

Amazon had more than 750,000 full- and part-time employees at the end of the third quarter of last year.

Many employees alluded in the post to an Amazon leadership principle that instructs employees to challenge decisions they disagree with. The company, in its response, pointed to that principle too, which concludes, "Once a decision is determined, they commit wholly."

Amazon Employees for Climate Justice sent an internal email a week ago, also posted to Medium, organizing a mass violation of the

communications policy. They described the policy as appropriate for things like confidential projects.

"But allowing a corporation to silence us on its contribution to the climate crisis is a clear overreach of comms policy, and effectively demands we give up our basic humanity and integrity in order to be employees," the employee group wrote on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, quoting the civil rights leader: "One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."

The group planned to have employees sign one of "several prewritten, intentionally-policy-violating quotes (or write your own)," which would then be posted to Medium. "Quotes can be critical or complimentary, because either way violates the policy," they noted in the email.

Many of the employee statements were nuanced takes on how Amazon should conduct its business with the world's most polluting industry. Eric Lobdell, who works in Amazon Web Services customer service, said the company should not try to "police every line of code that's run on their hardware, but at the very least, they can stop pursuing and providing advantages to companies that profit from worsening climate change or violating human rights."

Amazon, along with Microsoft and other cloud-computing competitors, offers specialized services to oil- and gas-exploration and -production companies. Microsoft, even with its more ambitious climate goals revealed earlier this month to become net carbon negative—meaning it eventually intends to remove more greenhouse gas from the atmosphere than it emits—did not commit to severing its ties to the oil and gas industry.

Still, Amazon employees cited Microsoft's ambition to suggest that Amazon's plans—which Bezos said were designed to move Amazon out

of "the middle of the herd on this issue"—pale in comparison.

"Now, the real pioneer moment went to Microsoft when they announced their plan to go carbon negative by 2030, capturing ALL carbon from the air they released EVER and putting it back into the ground where it belongs," wrote Annett Stapf, escalation program manager. "I'm applauding this announcement even more and I hope Bill Gates scratched Jeff's competition nerve. I'd love to see Amazon to respond with something even bigger and more effective."

Other employees said Amazon is missing out on business from consumers seeking more sustainable options.

"There is a large, money-spending demographic of customers worldwide in search of responsible companies who don't sacrifice people (and planets) for profits," wrote program specialist JR Maxwell. "In not being that company, despite huge profit margins, Amazon is not only not raising the bar, we are catering to the lowest common denominator."

As has been a theme for the climate justice employees since they emerged as a force in late 2018, many comments focused on preventing the climate harms expected to fall disproportionately on indigenous people, communities of color and people in the Southern Hemisphere.

"Amazon's climate initiatives should prioritize the well being of vulnerable communities who are disproportionately killed and harmed by the [climate crisis](#)," wrote Rachel Babin, an Alexa senior product marketing manager.

Mixed in with the [employee climate](#) critiques were calls to the [company](#) to stop providing technology to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, improve conditions for workers in its warehouses and shut down Amazon's Ring surveillance subsidiary.

"The deployment of connected home security cameras that allow footage to be queried centrally are simply not compatible with a free society," wrote Max Eliaser, a software engineer.

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