

Amazon opens discrimination investigation after internal petition wins backing of hundreds of employees

 [washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/07/23/amazon-gender-discrimination-investigation](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/07/23/amazon-gender-discrimination-investigation)

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SEATTLE — Amazon has opened an investigation into allegations regarding the culture of its cloud-computing unit, the company confirmed Thursday, after an internal petition criticized it as having “an underlying culture of systemic discrimination, harassment, bullying and bias against women and under-represented groups.”

The petition, signed by more than 550 employees and viewed by The Washington Post, alleges that Amazon’s processes to investigate discrimination claims are “not fair, objective or transparent.” It alleges the system is “set up to protect the company and the status quo, rather than the employees filing the complaints” and that employees who lodge complaints are often made vulnerable.

The petition cites a lawsuit filed in May by Cindy Warner, a gay executive in Amazon Web Services professional services business, who accused a manager of making homophobic comments and alleged she was fired in retaliation. It also refers to a LinkedIn post last summer by Laudon Williams, a former employee of the group, who wrote that he left the company over concerns about gender and sexual-orientation discrimination.

AWS chief executive Adam Selipsky emailed the petition’s authors last week that the company had hired an outside firm to investigate the allegations and that he will review the findings, though he did not commit to a time frame for the investigation.

“I share your passion for ensuring that our workplace is inclusive and free of bias and unfair treatment,” Selipsky wrote.

Amazon spokeswoman Jaci Anderson declined to comment further.

The effort is the latest uprising from emboldened Amazon workers unafraid to challenge company leadership. Workers have previously pressed the company to address climate change as well as improve unsafe warehouse working conditions.

The new allegations focus on the culture at AWS’s professional services group, known as ProServe, which helps business customers adopt the company’s cloud-computing technology.

Andy Jassy, who replaced Amazon founder Jeff Bezos as the company’s chief executive earlier this month, previously led AWS. (Bezos owns The Post.) The petition was sent to both him and his successor, Selipsky, on July 15.

The petition, available on Amazon's internal website, lets workers give the item a "+1" if they are supportive. As of Thursday afternoon, 556 employees had done so. More than 130 workers also attached their email aliases to the post.

The petition calls for an independent probe of "employee concerns that there is a non-inclusive culture" as well as the creation of an employee council to work with an external investigator. And the petition seeks to have Amazon leadership commit to the requests by July 30, and complete its investigation by Oct. 30.

The charges echo claims made by Warner in her lawsuit, filed the same day as four other current and former Amazon employees sued the company over allegations of race and gender discrimination. Warner's male managers and colleagues referred to her with a profane epithet, as well as an "idiot," and a "nobody," she alleges in her suit. She also alleges she was hired and kept at job titles below her level of experience because of discrimination, and that resulted in lost income of "millions of dollars." Amazon fired Warner last month, a move she called retaliatory.

Warner said in an interview the "toxicity" is high within the ProServe unit, which is dominated by an "old boys club." She hoped to help Amazon improve, but was instead cast aside, she said.

"Shame on them for going down this path," said Warner, who sent a letter to Jassy and Selipsky. "Someone wants to help you and you turn them into an enemy."

Amazon's Anderson rebutted Warner's claims, saying the company investigated them and found the charges to be "unsubstantiated."

Williams made similar allegations in his LinkedIn post, where he pointed to an indifference to diversity efforts, as well as examples of homophobia. Williams wrote that when members of a women's forum at Amazon raised concerns about those issues, they were "shut down" by the company's human resources group.

Anderson declined to comment on Williams's claims.

Dozens of Amazon workers reached out to Williams after his post, saying they experienced the issues he raised, Williams said in an interview.

"People were relating," Williams said. "These are real systemic issues."

Amazon is not alone among tech giants facing claims of discrimination. Current and former Black employees at Facebook have described [a problematic hiring system](#). The company has responded that it is focused on advancing racial justice in the workplace and in recruiting. A former Google recruiter accused the company of [bias in the interview and hiring process](#) against students from historically Black colleges and universities. Google has said it's working hard to increase the hiring of Black and other underrepresented workers.

Workers at tech companies are increasingly speaking out about shortcomings they find in their employers. Google workers have pushed to form a union — though they are not seeking collective bargaining rights — to have a say in the web search giant’s policies.

A year-and-a-half ago, more than 350 Amazon employees violated the e-commerce giant’s communications policy, publicly criticizing the company in a post on Medium as a show of support for colleagues who were warned they could be fired for openly denouncing the company’s climate practices. Three months later, Amazon fired two of those workers after they publicly blasted the conditions at its warehouses as unsafe during the coronavirus pandemic.

And during the pandemic, Amazon’s warehouse workers protested outside company facilities in New York, Michigan and Illinois to draw attention to conditions they felt were unsafe as the virus spread. At the time, Amazon temporarily increased pay, and the company increased efforts to offer workers face masks and other protective gear, as well as create new workplace rules to socially distance workers.

Complaints over warehouse safety led workers at its Bessemer, Ala., warehouse to push for unionization, only to be soundly defeated in a vote this spring.

Even so, Bezos acknowledged in April that Amazon needs to “do a better job for our employees.” In his annual shareholder letter, Bezos wrote that he intends to include making the company “Earth’s Best Employer and Earth’s Safest Place to Work” part of his initiatives in his new role.