

# George Floyd protests lead to reckoning as Black employees speak out on racism and discrimination in the workplace

Jessica Guynn

USA TODAY

Last week, Apple CEO Tim Cook posted a video on Twitter announcing a \$100-million initiative to fight racism and break down barriers to opportunity, including inside his own company.

Tanya Faison, who is Black and for five years worked in technical support at Apple, says she's skeptical of these expressions of solidarity from corporations that for years stayed silent on systemic racism while perpetuating racial inequality by failing to hire, promote or fairly pay Black people and people of color.

"It's very nice that he's decided to take this moment to start focusing on Black folks, when he is in a company with Black employees who are not being taken care of," Faison said of Cook.

From Silicon Valley to Wall Street, corporations from nearly every sector of the American economy have taken to social media proclaiming their support for the Black Lives Matter movement and condemning police killings as protests over the death of George Floyd still flood American streets.

Seizing an opportunity to be heard, Black employees are responding on social media with painful stories of workplace racism that they say they were too fearful to discuss before. The wave of firsthand accounts and activism has led to resignations, drawing parallels to the #MeToo movement.

"We need more than performative, symbolic or superficial statements. We need action," says Aericia Shimizu Banks, one of two former Black employees who went public this week with charges of racial discrimination against social media service Pinterest. Pinterest denies the charges.

"I hope companies are recognizing that your employees will not stay silent to racism, sexism and discrimination anymore."

**Big change:**Aunt Jemima brand is changing its name and removing the namesake Black character

**GM on Juneteenth:**GM to go silent for 8 minutes, 46 seconds on Juneteenth in support of Black community

The voices of Black workers are being amplified by colleagues of all races, turning up the pressure on employers to make real change in hopes this moment could mark a turning point for racial equity in the American workplace.

At Adidas, dozens stopped working to attend protests outside the company's North American headquarters in Portland, Oregon. Hundreds of Facebook employees staged a virtual walkout to protest CEO Mark Zuckerberg's decision not to take down inflammatory posts by President Donald Trump.

## **Black Lives Matter pledges under scrutiny**

Driving this wellspring of employee activism: pledges by businesses large and small that in the past have done little to balance the economic scales for Black workers or to eradicate toxic work environments.



Protesters march on June 15 in New York City after the death of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis. Spencer Platt, Getty Images

In recent weeks, Facebook and Citibank chimed in, as did Nike and the NFL. Bank of America said it would spend \$1 billion over four years to address racial and economic inequality.

Randall Stephenson, chairman and CEO of AT&T, called for racial equality in the U.S. in an open letter to federal, state and local officials, saying he would work on equitable justice as part of a new Business Roundtable, a committee of large-company CEOs.

Google's YouTube video service said it will funnel \$100 million into a fund for Black content creators. Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter and Square, made Juneteenth, which celebrates the end of slavery in America, an official paid holiday at both companies. L'Oreal SA on June 9 rehired Munroe Bergdorf, a Black transgender model it fired in 2017.

Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase, even took a knee for a photograph with staff from one of the bank's branches, a nod to former quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who was blacklisted from the NFL for protesting the police killings of African Americans.

Yet African Americans are woefully underrepresented in the echelons of corporate America, where the Fortune 500 has just four Black CEOs and senior leadership teams are still made up entirely of white men. And the coronavirus pandemic has only deepened inequalities in the business world, disproportionately claiming the lives and livelihoods of African Americans.

The statistics are sobering. Black workers are paid less than white workers, even in high-wage positions. Research shows that the black-white wage gap has been widening for decades, even during periods of economic expansion. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the overall average wage for black workers in 2019 was \$21.05. For white workers, it was \$28.66. As a result, in the U.S., Black households have one-tenth the wealth of a typical white household, according to Federal Reserve data.

Being called out are companies publicly throwing their support behind the Black Lives Matter movement while continuing the status quo.

On Twitter, Amazon called for an end to "the inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people" in the U.S. Its CEO Jeff Bezos posted on Instagram an email from a customer criticizing the Black Lives Matter banner on Amazon's home page, and responded that this was the kind of customer he was "happy to lose."



A protester kneels and holds up a fist as he and others demonstrate the death of George Floyd by closing down and blocking traffic on I-395 in Washington, DC on June 15. *JIM WATSON, AFP Via Getty Images*

At the same time, the company has been criticized for relegating workers, many of them African American, to low pay and harsh working conditions. In March, it fired a Black warehouse employee who was advocating for safer conditions during the pandemic. Amazon said the worker violated its social distancing policy.

## **Push for accountability led by employees, activists**

The Plug, an online news service created by journalist and entrepreneur Sherrell Dorsey to cover Black innovation in the tech world, is pushing for accountability with a spreadsheet that tracks the recent statements by tech companies and pairs it with information on the demographics of these companies, including the death of Black people in leadership and technical roles.

Online racial justice organization Color of Change has launched a campaign to urge corporations including Amazon, Adidas, Nike and Target to move #BeyondTheStatement.

“I have seen an outpouring of companies saying Black lives matter,” Color of Change President Rashad Robinson told USA TODAY. “I want them to actually make Black lives matter through their policies and their practices.”

He says all of these gestures are hollow unless corporations back up statements with concrete plans to close racial pay gaps, hire and promote more Black employees and ensure more wealth flows into Black communities.



Rashad Robinson, president of online racial justice organization Color of Change *Color Of Change*

“What I am seeing across the board is not a full recognition from corporate America about all the ways they have written the rules and all the ways they benefit from the rules that fuel racial discrimination and racial injustice in this country,” Robinson says. “Now is not the time simply for statements of support that don’t actually come with real structural change. Now is the time to actually change rules and change behavior.”

## **Tech industry confronting its race problem**

The race problem in the tech industry was thrust into the national conversation in 2014 when companies from Facebook to Google disclosed for the first time how few women and people of color they employ. The companies pledged to make their workforces less homogeneous.

The paucity of underrepresented minorities in an industry increasingly dominating the U.S. economy drew sharp scrutiny from company shareholders and Washington lawmakers. Yet hundreds of millions, if not billions, in diversity spending later, very little has changed.

After the 2016 presidential election, corporations pulled back on their commitments to diversify their workforces, says Karla Monterroso, CEO of Code2040, an organization that advocates for proportional representation of Black and Latinx leaders in the tech industry as a way of diversifying high-wage work in America.

**Facebook while black:**Users call it getting 'Zucked,' say talking about racism is censored as hate speech

**Corporate America roiled:**Black Facebook employees complain racism, discrimination have gotten worse

“A lot of different corporations were making real deal investments in this stuff. Once the election happened, and the president won, you saw a huge backtrack from those investments,” Monterroso says.

“The social capital around this disappeared and the capital capital around this disappeared. There was a lot of fear. I had people, directly and indirectly, tell me that they were afraid to make these investments and be public about their beliefs because it would put them in the crosshairs of a president with an itchy Twitter finger.”

Undeterred, employees at companies from Facebook to Google have come forward with personal stories of racism and discrimination inside their companies.

## **Black employees speak out on discrimination**

On June 2, Pinterest CEO Ben Silbermann wrote a public post about the changes the company planned to make to elevate racial justice content on the social media service and increase the diversity at the company, where 3.7% of employees are Black, 2.8% of managers are Black and none of the senior leadership is Black, according to the company's 2018 federal filing.

“With everything we do, we will make it clear that our Black employees matter, Black Pinner and creators matter, and Black Lives Matter,” Silbermann wrote on June 2.



Pinterest CEO Ben Silbermann in 2011 speaking at Thinc Iowa in Des Moines. ANNA JONES, GANNETT

Quietly, less than a week earlier, Banks and Ifeoma Ozoma, two Black employees in prominent public policy positions, left the company. On Monday, they went public about the racial discrimination they said they faced at Pinterest.

Ozoma told USA TODAY that she wanted people to know that “in this moment when Pinterest is claiming to care about Black employees and Black lives, that just a few weeks ago, when I was still there, that was not the case for me at all.”

Despite driving high-profile initiatives for Pinterest such as the decision to stop promoting former Southern slave plantations as wedding venues or to steer searches for vaccine-related information to public health groups, Ozoma says she was not paid fairly. When a white male colleague, upset with her work on policy issues, shared sensitive personal information about her in “just about every dark corner of the internet,” she says she was forced to hire a company to monitor online information and threats.

Banks told USA TODAY that she almost immediately regretted the decision to join Pinterest to head up its Washington, D.C., office, in May 2019 and barely lasted a year in the role.

Banks, who is African American and Japanese, says she faced disparaging remarks about her ethnicity from her manager. Even after she left the company, she says her sponsorship of Black organizations and businesses was scrutinized.

In a statement to USA TODAY, Pinterest said it conducted a “thorough investigation” into the allegations.

“We’re confident both employees were treated fairly,” the company said.

Color of Change is launching [a petition](#) to secure back pay for Ozoma and Banks.

"The retaliation these women experienced underscores the risk Black workers in Silicon Valley endure every day for speaking out against racism and discrimination," Color of Change campaign director Jade Magnus Ogunnaike said in a statement. "To show a serious commitment to racial justice, the company should use this opportunity to change their hostile culture for Black workers and set an example for the tech industry."

Robinson says he's thrilled to see employees "speaking out and pushing back."

“We are hearing from employees in very powerful ways," he says, "and that’s important."

## **Former Apple employee, Black Lives Matter activist speaks out**

One of those employees is Faison, the Black Lives Matter activist. The job at Apple in Elk Grove, California, paid well, came with good benefits and gave her time to devote to her Black Lives Matter activism in the Sacramento area.

But there was only one Black supervisor and no managers of color in her office, she says. And even as coworkers were encouraged to openly embrace gay rights, Faison says it was made clear to her that, if she wanted to get promoted, she would have to keep quiet about her fight against police killings.



Tanya Faison, of Black Lives Matter, addresses a demonstration outside the Sacramento Police Department to protest the decision to not prosecute the two officers involved in the 2018 fatal shooting of Stephon Clark. *Rich Pedroncelli, AP*

Faison says she held her tongue, even when customers she was helping with their iPhone or Mac problems made racist comments or used the N-word, presuming she was white. But holding in her feelings for a paycheck left Faison angry and depleted by the end of the day.

“I couldn’t even go into diversity and inclusion meetings and talk about the work or what’s going on and how it is impacting us,” she says.

Then, in February 2018, Apple announced that Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors had been invited to speak at Apple’s Cupertino, California, headquarters. Faison pushed her ergonomically adjusted chair from her desk and, in the middle of her shift, stood next to her car trying to make sense of it.

“It really upset me because, for years, I was holding my breath. For years, I was tiptoeing around Apple about my work,” she says. “I had been hiding everything, and that wasn’t acceptable.”

A month later, when 22-year-old Stephon Clark was killed by two police officers in his grandmother’s backyard, drawing national scrutiny of police shootings and discriminatory policing of Black neighborhoods, Faison took a leave of absence and then another to

organize a wave of protests in Sacramento. Then she quit. She says Apple tried to convince her to stay on, but she couldn't.

"I couldn't hold the weight of the work and also the weight of what was happening in the streets anymore," Faison says. "I had to go."

And, even though she needs a job, Faison says she'd never go back.

Apple's \$100 million pledge, its first directed to the Black community, pales next to its investments in clean energy, manufacturing jobs and housing. It's also a drop in an overflowing financial bucket. Apple, the world's most valuable company, made a profit of \$55 billion on revenue of \$260 billion last year.

And Apple has made slow and halting progress in diversifying the company. According to a 2018 filing with the federal government, Apple has one Black executive out of a total of 123, less than 1%, and 284 Black managers out of a total of 9,878, less than 3%. Nine percent of its U.S. workforce is Black.

"Black employees are not being treated with dignity. They're not being treated fairly. They're not being promoted fairly. There's not a lot of Black leadership within the company," Faison says. "And there were not a lot of places for us to go to express that we were not being treated the way that we should be."

Reached for comment, Apple said it believes in treating everyone with dignity and respect and that it applies those values in all aspects of its business.