

Strike the Giant!

Transnational Organization
against Amazon



Fall 2019 journal

Transnational Social Strike Platform

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This year Amazon will receive an unexpected gift for Black Friday. On this day of transnational mobilization against Amazon, the TSS platform publishes the collected voices of Amazon workers and activists in struggle across the world. After many strikes and actions in Madrid, Bad Hersfeld, Portland, Piacenza, Lille, Poznan, Shakopee, and many other plants, an assembly of Amazon workers from European and North American warehouses gathered took place in Leipzig, Germany, in September 2019. *«We want to strike together for common demands»*, they say in their final declaration, *«despite all of our differences, we are united by the fact that we are facing a common employer. [...] Only when united do we have a chance to effectively assert our interests against Amazon»*. Amazon workers' transnational meetings started in 2015, when Polish and German workers began to talk to each other as a direct response to the opening of the first Amazon Fulfillment Center (FC) in Poland, aimed at supplying the German market in case of disruption and for absorbing the effects of strikes in Germany. As Christian from Bad Hersfeld says in this journal, in these first meetings *«we realized that we have the same problems, that Amazon treats us the same way but also uses the different labor laws of our countries against us all»*.

Since then the bonds have tightened and more people from Poland, Germany, Spain, France, Slovakia and the US have joined the meetings. Started as a way to know each other and have a sense of the different and yet interrelated working conditions and legal frameworks, these discussions went further than simple exchange of experiences. Notwithstanding the company's efforts to portray its management as visionary and keep its working places out of labor disputes, in fact, Amazon's warehouses have been struck by strikes and protests almost everywhere. From these struggles, workers concluded that fighting for local gains is not enough: the growing sense of the need to face the global dimension of Amazon and its complex logistical network led workers to agree on developing a transnational strategy against the company. The final declaration adopted after the meeting in Leipzig is the first visible result pointing at the challenge of elaborating a common strategy and demands across borders. Something new is being attempted: there is not an already established model to be followed, no ready-made solutions. Transnational organization needs to be invented.

This TSS journal collects some of the voices that, from different locations, are discussing how to build this common strategy, what are the tools at hand and what are the goals to be met. The articles in the journal show the novelty of this attempt and the magnitude of challenges we confront when facing a global company such as Amazon. The idea to compose this journal derives from our belief that this discussion involves not only those who are working and struggling within Amazon, but all those who want to act and organize on a transnational level. The stakes go well beyond the company itself. In discussing a common strategy for the first time Amazon workers pose the problem of how to organize against global chains of production, that is, against global command over labor. Together with Amazon workers, the TSS journal reflects on how to build a stable and effective communication across the borders and how to overcome the fragmentation that today seems to make it impossible to build a collective force against employers. Moreover, this experiment poses serious questions to everyone, on the forms of organization that we can use to make our local struggles transnational. Amazon workers are indeed very clear about the need to push trade unions beyond their limits as national structures, in so far as they can be obstacles rather than tools to produce and maintain a political communication across borders. Therefore, the articles raise the problem of organization in a new way that is relevant for everyone: they do not highlight the need of founding a new formal structure, a “union of unions”, but rather to expand and deepen communication by putting pressure on the existing organizations from below in order to overcome workers’ division into sectors, union membership, collective contracts, race and sex. As the French comrades say *«from a trade union point of view, this requires us to rethink our role within companies, to assume the limits of trade union action and structure. We should support workers to organize themselves transnationally»*.

One of the main tools highlighted by the contributions to build a shared strategy is to endorse common demands concerning wages, working conditions and contracts. These demands should serve to enhance transnational communication in FCs globally and to overcome the different labor legislations, the diverse regulations concerning collective agreements, minimum wages, social benefits, or the fiscal, economic and legal privileges granted to Amazon

by each state. This is no easy task since Amazon relies heavily on these differences to prevent workers from building a common force. Amazon's strategy is to negotiate only with specific unions, limit concessions to some warehouses, grant permanent contracts or benefits only to specific groups of workers, raise wages in one place and simultaneously cut them elsewhere, hinge on institutional racism to blackmail migrant workers. All Amazon workers face the same lack of safety, high risk of injuries, physical and mental exhaustion. In delivery centers fumes from cars and trucks accumulate in buildings, putting the health of the pickers at danger. All Amazon workers are allowed too short breaks too rarely, can barely talk to each other, are constantly pressured to meet unreachable standards. Yet, while imposing similar working conditions, Amazon exploits local differences to break workers' capacity to organize. The first task of a transnational organization against Amazon is to overthrow its capacity to take advantage of different political, social and legal conditions to produce fragmentation among workers.

Amazon does indeed research on local conditions – distance to customers, average wage, availability of a poor workforce and migrant labor – in order to decide where to open a warehouse. Besides bargaining with those public administrations eager on creating a “business friendly environment”, Amazon builds *«facilities where there are guaranteed exploitable workers»*, as Brian from the Portland Delivery Center writes. Amazon established centers in the poorest areas of Portland where mostly migrants live, and unemployment rates are higher. Amazon's recruiting strategy aims at assuring a disposable and flexible mass of poor laborers that can quickly deliver goods to the customers. At the same time, it reinforces racial and social hierarchies: as William from Shakopee FC (Minnesota) states, Amazon recruits *«immigrants for its workforce, while at the same time hiring former or current military officers for their management. This creates a distinct hierarchy within the warehouse»*. In the Shakopee warehouse the preference goes to newly arrived East-African migrants, who are supposedly more apt to endure bad conditions without complaining. Somali migrants resoundingly gave the lie to this assumption as they came to the forefront of the first Amazon strike in Minnesota last summer. In Poland, Ukrainian seasonal workers, non-unionized and very mobile, are by now a stable component of the workforce. Moreover, racial hierarchy adds to a very clear sexual hierarchy:

while many pickers and stowers are women, managers and supervisors are mostly men. This implies that, in designing its distribution network, Amazon relies on a whole set of political and social conditions to define the best location for its warehouses and to produce hierarchies among workers inside each of them.

Besides this, there is a detailed production of internal differences through contracts. In all Amazon warehouses a high percentage of workers have short-term contracts, even weekly contracts as in Spain. In France more than half of the workers have fixed-term contracts. Existing collective agreements, when in force, are constantly circumvented by hiring through external providers or temp agencies. Amazon employs precarious workers not only to face fluctuations of sales, but also because it is clearly more difficult for these workers to join the strikes under the threat of losing their job. Moreover, the possibility of layoffs is used to put pressure on temp workers and compel them to meet higher and higher standards, which are then applied to all workers. The articles show that, while the fight for permanent contracts and for collective agreements would enhance the capacity to struggle and to have a say on work standards, it is difficult to conclude that the sole goal of the struggle can be that each warehouse signs its own collective contract. In the US, for example, collective contracts almost always imply a “no strike” clause. As Brian from Portland states, the permanent contract is thus not the ultimate goal of the whole struggle, because for building an effective organization the «contract would become a burden rather than an aid».

Amazon also uses wage levels to divide workers and break the strike fronts. In Madrid the management offered advantages and pay-rises to some workers during the strikes with the clear goal «*to divide those who strike from those who don't and to create oppositions*». While Amazon wages are usually slightly above the regional average to attract the workforce, the company constantly plays with the different wage parts – direct wage, bonuses, benefits, overtime pay – so that wage raises often correspond to cuts in bonuses or increases in work time or performance rates. When talking about Amazon's decision to raise the minimum wage in the US to 15\$, William states that «*the consequences were mixed, because when they raised the minimum wage they also took away the monthly bonuses that we used to get, based on productivity in our building and on*

individual worker attendance». Amazon administers wages both to divide workers and to increase intensity of labor. The problem is therefore how to address the issue of wage transnationally by contesting the possibility that through wage policies workers can be pitted against each other, or that pay raises can be “paid” with higher work intensity and less money after all.

These are the most relevant elements of a complex situation that requires a decisive innovation in terms of transnational strategy and organizing. Against extreme fragmentation, gaining concessions just for some categories of workers means reinforcing hierarchies based on sex, race, contract type, wage level, benefit allowances and location. Common demands need to cope with the fragmentation of social and political conditions of exploitation and the necessity of overthrowing those hierarchies within as well as outside of the warehouse. While starting from the conditions of Amazon workers, we think the articles included in this journal are extremely useful to address the challenge of organizing transnationally against what we have called the “logistics of exploitation”. Here as elsewhere, the priority is to build bridges between different conditions. Amazon – this sort of seemingly invincible global giant – utilizes differences and divisions to avoid that its employees – more than half a million workers worldwide – can unite against one very rich guy in Seattle. But what is our way to Seattle? How can we accumulate power along the way? What are our tools?

«The biggest challenge is to gain more power and to organize a majority of the Amazon workers worldwide. We have to overcome the idea, that this struggle can be won on a local base» as Christian from Bad Hersfeld states. Expanding workers’ connections and communication, as the journal’s contributors maintain, is the first step. For the specific form of production of a global supply chain, no fulfillment center is closer to Seattle than the other: in order to hit the core of this system, organization needs to spread and expand in time and space to confront the dispersed elements that sustain it. Consequently, the transnational strike against Amazon emerges from the articles as a movement and a project, rather than an isolated event or simply a coordinated single day of strike, after which everyone goes back to business as usual. Transnational organization changes local practices by making them part of a common long-term project. Thinking the strike as a movement means

that it includes several different practices. In order to counteract Amazon's attempt to divert flows of goods during a strike, workers in Germany are using the "tactic of needle sticks", «which includes non-announced strikes, variation of duration and number of FCs involved in Germany, "fake strikes", in-out-in-strike, a strike out of the running business and spontaneous strikes in case of high volume of orders». The employment of this tactic has disturbed the smooth flow of packages and has forced Amazon to use extra resources to cope with unpredicted strikes. In Poland, where legislation makes legal strike very hard, Amazon workers organize slowdowns and strike ballots: «*we collect votes, drive around magazines, talk to employees – we use the referendum to agitate in the canteens, inside the magazines, where we distribute leaflets, speak through the trade union's speakers, thanks to which more and more people from different magazines join us*». Assemblies, marches, sit-ins, slowdowns, "needle-sticks", blocks, picket lines, any possible method to relieve oneself at work: the transnational strike is all these practices, in so far as they are not isolated, but go in the direction of accumulating power and enlarging the capacity to organize.

The transnational strike is a political project: recognizing the current difficulty and huge obstacles to organize worldwide does not equate to weakness or compliance, but to the beginning of transnational organizing itself. In this framework any clear-cut opposition between symbolic and real strikes loses its meaning and no formal structure can claim a monopoly on the "true and real strike". If one was to support this opposition, it would have to mean that one was prepared to downgrade the ambitious attempt of addressing the challenges of transnational organizing as simply symbolic. The global women's strike has shown us very clearly in these last years that this distinction does not hold true. Each coordinated action, each strike makes the process grow and intensifies the mutual communication. Each action when placed in a common project contributes to the common transnational strategy, which in turn reinforces local organization.

The transnational strike as a movement and a project needs common demands to be endorsed across borders. Against the "dream" of optimized exploitation organized by Amazon, common demands are the tools to enlarge our potential, to trigger a more intense communication and to fight together despite the differences. Common

demands are not simply concrete points to be presented on the table of a supposedly transnational negotiation, but, rather, tools to be used for advancing faster on our way to Seattle. They are the tools to start speaking a common language, to recognize each other in a common fight. In this direction, the demand of an equal wage for all Amazon on a global scale (which is currently being discussed) is an enormous wager. As TSS we think that this wager is to be made. As the French comrades say, this *«is a demand that forces workers to conceive themselves transnationally»* and allows to counteract the administration of wage differentials and contract hierarchies used by Amazon. We believe that an equal wage for all Amazon workers cannot be reduced to a “realistic” calculation or a specific amount of money, measured according to purchasing power or national minimum wages, that are themselves a way to increase fragmentation. Its concreteness lies in the radical quest for equality that it contains, and not in how accurately it is measured, how rationally it fits with the different legislations or how scientifically it is tailored on the different types of contracts. It is concrete because it brings further the construction of a common front.

As the Polish comrades say *«while a few years ago it was unimaginable to mention that we want to earn the same as colleagues from Germany (then most would laugh that it was pious wishes or shrug their shoulders), today there is more and more room for criticism of wage inequality in Europe. After all, our work is the same as in Germany»*. Claiming an equal wage gives us the measure of the power that we can exercise against Amazon on a global scale, something that was unconceivable until little time ago. For this reason, the equal wage is crucial not simply for those who are struggling within Amazon. The equal wage could express a shared and strong commitment to equality against divisions and subordination, to that equality that Amazon as well as all other employers negate every day. Demanding an equal wage means to collectively reject the political command over work that (not only) Amazon exercises by imposing hierarchies and differences aimed at increasing exploitation. In relation to this, the crucial question, central to everyone who is striving to organize on a transnational level, is whether existing organizations and unions will be ready to make space for the transnational strike as a project and a movement, to *«think bigger»* and overcome national limits. As the final declaration from Leipzig states *«we only have one life and we cannot wait»*: the urgency of this task cannot be overlooked.

Common Strategy to Gain Power and Think Bigger

Interview with Christian Krähling
Ver.di union, Bad Hersfeld,
Germany

Transnational Social Strike Platform In the last years German workers have been at the front of the struggles against Amazon. Can you tell us something about the current situation of the struggle within Amazon warehouses in Bad Hersfeld and generally in Germany? What have been the things you achieved? What are the main problems you are facing?

Christian The current situation remains difficult for us in Bad Hersfeld and in Germany. We still work to organize a majority of workers to join the strike movement. At the moment about one third of the workers in Bad Hersfeld are joining the strikes. Although we make good efforts in gaining new union members, it's still not enough to completely stop the deliveries from our warehouse. The fluctuation of workers is quite high. The situation in whole Germany is even worse, because Amazon is opening up a lot of new warehouses and sortation centers. All the people working there have temporary contracts and won't join the union or go into struggle before they have permanent contracts, which generally takes 2 years. But we knew right from the beginning, that this struggle would last for even 10 years or more and all the shop stewards and strikers don't get tired to move on.

When we started our struggle, Amazon started to react. After years without any wage raises, we get raises on a regular base every year, which orient on the raises of the collective agreements in Germany. The management also implemented a Christmas bonus and pays different bonuses during the peak time. Also, they started to work on emending the working conditions. They built air conditioning systems and started a health program in order to make the workplaces healthier. With the work council, we managed to get rid of the feedbacks, so the pressure to perform is not as high as in other Amazon warehouses. But for me, the best achievement of our struggle is that a lot of workers got self-confident and dare to ask critical questions or scrutinize the decisions made by the management.

Although we made all these achievements, we still have the problem, that the management doesn't accept the fact that the workers are organized. They don't want to negotiate with us.

TSS After the strikes started to hit in Germany, Amazon de-

cided to expand in Poland to counteract the damages produced by the strikes. When the Polish workers started to organize and denounce the fact that they are turned into a mass of involuntary 'strike-breakers' and paid well less than the German workers, you decided to join forces. How did this connection begin? What have been the most relevant moments of this alliance?

C The effect of Amazon's expansion to Poland on our capacity to organize was that a lot of the workers were anxious about Amazon leaving Germany and losing their jobs. When the first warehouse opened up in Poland it was all over the news in Germany. I saw people crying at the parking lot of the warehouse after they heard about it on the radio. We had a hard time that year organizing new members, but we didn't lose any.

We started trying to connect Amazon worker's internationally right from the beginning of our struggle, but we didn't have any contacts to polish workers. The next year after Amazon opened up in Poland, we received an Email from Polish Amazon workers who started to organize and heard about our struggle. They wanted to exchange experiences. Things went quite fast then. We invited them to come to Bad Hersfeld, where we had our first meeting. During this meeting, we realized that we have the same problems, that Amazon treats us the same way but also how they use the different labor laws of our countries against us all. I think this was the most relevant moment of the alliance. We started to exchange information on a regular base. During this process the connection also evolved on an emotional level. For us, the workers from Poland are close friends now and I'm very happy that this is spreading to the other countries.

TSS Since then, more workers from around Europe, Spain, France, Slovakia and now from the US are joining the effort of building a common strategy against Amazon. In July, on Prime Day, Amazon workers went simultaneously on strike in different parts of Europe and in the U.S. How has this connection worked so far? What is your evaluation of the potentiality of this kind of transnational coming together?

C We had similar actions before the last Prime Day. There were big strikes in Europe during Black Friday 2018, when workers

from Italy, Spain and Germany went on strike on the same day. Also, we joined forces to demonstrate together with German, Polish and Spanish workers in Berlin, when Jeff Bezos visited the “Springer-Haus” to receive an award for innovation. It’s very easy to organize common actions during these important days for Amazon, since it’s logical for every warehouse to do some action on these days. We have direct contacts via social media and can easily exchange information. When we hear that the Spanish workers will go on strike, we probably decide the same. I think for the future of our struggle it will be crucial to coordinate these kinds of actions, since it’s more likely that the Amazon management in Seattle will have to react to it. They can’t ignore that Amazon worker’s worldwide have the same kind of demands and are joining forces. This also gives a new motivation for local organizing.

TSS In the struggles in Amazon warehouses some key issues have come to the fore as the crucial ones: wage levels and wage differentials, increases in workloads and work intensity, temp and precarious contracts. While so far these issues have been tackled on a local or national level, now the problem in front of the transnational Amazon meetings is how to tackle them in a common way. How do you think this can be done? What are the main obstacles to be overcome and the main tools that can be used for doing this?

C I’m not sure if these issues are the crucial ones. But these are the issues which are capable to build the framework for an international strategy. The problem is, that the struggle can only be won on an international level while the local unions don’t have an international strategy. We now took the first step to define common goals. The next step would be to find common tools and work out the details. The main obstacle is to put our plans in a concert with the local organizations and to find an organizational framework. At this moment, we’re not at the point where we are directly facing this obstacle. I think the main tool to overcome it is to build a realistic plan, which can be accepted by the local unions. We have to openly communicate with them. The next months will show how it works...

TSS As the case of the use of Polish warehouses for the German market shows, Amazon is relying on wage differentials between

countries to increase profits. Besides, as last year's rise to 15\$ of the minimum wage in the US warehouses shows, pay rises are used either to attract people to work for Amazon when there is the need of or to justify the intensification in work rhythms or to stop struggles. How do you think that a transnational struggle over wage can look like?

C A transnational struggle over wage would just be a part of our struggle in general, so this is a tactical issue. We could decide to start a worldwide campaign over wage raises at Amazon, defining either one big goal or different goals for every country. We could use the same logos and slogans etc. Different kinds of actions with the same motto could be done (e.g. strikes, walk outs, demonstrations, leaflet-actions). But I don't want to go in detail now, before we have concrete plans.

TSS Do you think the demand for an equal wage for all Amazon workers could be one relevant way to overcome the differences between workers throughout Europe and throughout the world?

C I don't think the wages are the most important fact when we speak about differences between the workers throughout the world. We have different labor laws in every country, thus there are a lot of obstacles for organizing on a transnational level. E. g. it's much easier to decide to go on strike in Germany than it is in Poland and with the US-workers getting involved more and more, it's getting even more complicated, although we're very happy about that. Also it will be very difficult to develop the demand of an equal wage throughout the world, since the workers in the local organizations have to acknowledge this as a realistic goal. But if we manage to overcome the obstacles and find a way for demanding an equal wage, I think it would be a great tool to prevent that Amazon can pit the workers of the different countries against each other.

TSS What are the main challenges facing a transnational struggle against Amazon today? In your opinion, what are the necessary steps that need to be taken in order to adopt a common long-term strategy?

C First of all, I have to tell that we in Bad Hersfeld didn't even

dream about coming to the point where we are now as we started organizing with a group of 15-20 people back in 2011. Today we have a huge working network with organized Amazonians, unions, supporters, journalists and also artists from all over the world who are working on this with much dedication.

The biggest challenge is to gain more power and to organize a majority of the Amazon workers worldwide. We have to overcome the idea, that this struggle can be won on a local base. Every single Amazon worker knows that big achievements can only be made with pressure on a transnational level. So we have to create a common vision first, which I think is happening at the moment. From this vision we have to form an organizational framework and build our strategy along common demands, which should be acceptable for the local organizations. From the other side, the local organizations have to be more flexible and think bigger. Also the exchange between workers from the different countries has to be brought to a wider level. We need to get more workers to travel to the different countries to visit their colleagues and to exchange experiences of all kinds. This will promote a broader feeling of what solidarity really is. You could say, if the organizational frame is our body, then solidarity is our soul. I think after our last transnational meeting we are on the right way to achieve this, although we're still at the beginning...



Warning Signals for Amazon

Struggles in Poland & Beyond

OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza in Amazon,
Poland

Since May we have been in a collective dispute with Amazon. This is the second time we have had a dispute with Amazon. We demand salary increases of up to 25 ZŁ (5,8 €) net, stable contracts and removal from the work regulations of the annex assuming constant evaluation of the productivity of employees by computer system, dismissing those who couldn't meet deadly targets for several times. We are currently at the stage of a strike referendum. So far, 5.5 thousand workers have taken part in it, i.e. about 30% of the crew. In Poland, Amazon directly employs around 16,000 people in 7 warehouses in different parts of the country. One third of such a huge and divided crew is in favor of a strike! That is a lot of people, which shows how big is support for the strike and it's a serious warning signal for Amazon. In Poland, however, this is not enough for a referendum to be valid, the turnout must reach 50%. Amazon in Poland is growing all the time: In 2018, the company opened two new warehouses, so the employees have been employed there for a short time, have fix term contracts and are only just beginning to organize themselves. This affects the overall attendance.

According to Polish law, agency workers cannot vote in a referendum on the strike in Amazon. However, our union does not want to exclude this important group, so we have created a petition with the same demands. More than 800 Adecco and Randstad employees have already signed the petition. We are trying to publicize the fact that agency work is being abused, that it is modern human trafficking, but also that agency workers are not slaves and also have a voice – we spoke about this, for example, during a picnic outside the Adecco headquarters in Poznan in May and Leipzig in September this year, as part of international meetings.

The referendum is still in progress, the law does not specify the date of its end. In other plants in Poland the referendums lasted even two years. So we still collect votes, drive around magazines, talk to employees – we use the referendum to agitate in the canteens, inside the magazines, where we distribute leaflets, speak through the trade union's speakers, thanks to which more and more people from different magazines join us. We have the following demands: stable agreements, ZŁ 25 net wage, the removal of negative feedbacks.

More than half of the employees are employed directly by Amazon, but on fixed-term or trial contracts. Not only do they have to fight for further contracts, they can be dismissed from day to day without any reason. In addition, during the whole year Amazon employs thousands of people through temporary employment agencies on contracts lasting one month. The company claims to do this seasonally, and the season can last all year – because of black Friday, Christmas, Valentine's Day, because there is Easter, in the summer because permanent workers go on vacation, and so on all the time. As a result, some people work even two years on the highest turnover, not admitting to accidents at work, coming with spinal pain and fever, because any sick leave can close the way to a permanent contract. We all suffer because of this, not least because it is more difficult for us to organize ourselves when most of our colleagues are constantly changing, and when they are already working, they are under incredible pressure. Almost 2,000 people have passed through our union, many of them have quit on their own. Amazon is more and more willing to employ people from Ukraine through agency or external companies responsible for cleaning or cooking, and it is more and more difficult to organize, because most often they can only work for half a year.



Currently we earn about 3.5 € on head. In addition, there is an 8% attendance bonus for 97% of presence and 7% for the efficiency of the entire warehouse, but neither in Poznań nor in Wrocław this year have we got them. We do not know how this bonus is set. We would have to earn Zł 25 (5,8 €) net in order to match the consumption possibilities with the German employees. Prices of basic consumer goods are slowly becoming comparable, but wages are much lower. In order to survive, we work overtime. If there is an opportunity, some people work even 60 hours a week, losing up to 6 hours a day for commuting to the company. It is easy to imagine how much it affects your health. The positive thing is that our situation is improving, i.e. thanks to the pressure of the employees. In 2014, when Amazon opened its first warehouse, wages were 13zł/h gross (3 €), today it is 20 zł (4.7 €), it has increased of more than 50 percent. While a few years ago it was unimaginable to mention that we want to earn the same as colleagues from Germany (then most would laugh that it was pious wishes or shrug their shoulders), today there is more and more room for criticism of wage inequality in Europe. After all, our work is the same as in Germany. We send parcels to the German market, no liberal economist can make us believe that we are less productive, so people are asking more and more bravely: where these differences come from? There are people who leave Poland, but more and more people want to live here without feeling that they are being robbed by their bosses every day.

Our next postulate, crucial for the employees, is connected with physical and mental health. Currently, we are evaluated by a computer system on the basis of our performance and quality of work. However, the system is not perfect, it does not take into account objective factors, e.g. decrease in the number of orders, broken equipment or worse products, errors beyond our control. It also does not consider the psychophysical condition in which we are, the fact that after a month of night shifts or weeks filled with mandatory overtime, we are barely alive. The system also generates targets (e.g. how many packages need to be packed per hour). We do not know the details, we demanded explanations, but the representatives of the company say that we do not need them, it is a secret of the company, we just have to work in such a way that the system was certainly satisfied. We only know that the results of the 10% of the slowest employees are cut off and on the basis

of the rest the system calculate targets for the next month. The system constructed in this way ensures that targets are constantly growing. Moreover, in order to have a chance for bonuses, we have to make more than 100% as a plant. Managers also put pressure on individual workers to reach more than 100% productivity. Even in the employee brochure, the company says that employees are expected to be over 100%. As a result, the screw is constantly being turned on. This is not allowed in Poland. Targets cannot be raised due to the increase in the pace of employees' work unless technological changes are made. Amazon explains that these are not "targets" but "performance indicators" and these regulations do not apply to them.

Last year, under pressure from the union, the Labour Inspectorate examined the efforts of randomly selected employees. Half of them exceeded the maximum permitted calorific value per hour. One of the women even twice! In fact, this work kills her. She was automatically moved to another department. The rest of workers from this department work as they did. The law is too weak. Amazon appealed the results of the inspection to the court; the case has been pending for a year now. Our lawyer has won some court cases against Amazon. We have judgments and expert opinions that say that Amazon is not organize its work properly and "that this rat race should be changed". These opinions help us a lot, provide arguments and make us credible when we describe pathologies. However, they did not have a real impact on working conditions. Amazon does not break the law directly but tries to manipulate it to the detriment of employees, state institutions see it, but they spread their hands. A few weeks ago, we submitted an application to the Office for Personal Data Protection to examine whether the provisions in the regulations that we want to delete, and Amazon's performance-related practices are in accordance with the law on personal data processing. Experts say "NO", but we cannot be sure what the Office will show. The point is that the assessment of work is done only on the basis of personal data processed by a computer system, and this should not be the case. We have to wait about a year for a decision against which it is possible to appeal to a higher instance.

If the state institutions are too weak, only employees in the company can really improve working conditions. Without the daily

pressure of the crew to make Amazon take our demands, court rulings and inspection results seriously and reorganize the work in the warehouses, nothing will change in the coming years. We have already brought about many positive changes through direct pressure. Mainly in the area of H&S, but not only. At the turn of September and November 2019, Amazon gave us the Christmas bonus regulations to sign. The conditions were worse than last year: 320 € for 6 weeks of perfect attendance at work. Please note that it is winter and very hard time before Christmas, 50 hour working weeks, etc. We refused to sign the regulations, as unions we have the right to do so and we can block Amazon's proposals, saying that it is not enough. Amazon threatened that there would be no bonus at all. We did not give in, among other things, thanks to the employees who supported us and said that we should stick hard to our own and that they do not give a shit about low bonuses. Unofficial and official talks lasted three tense weeks. Eventually Seattle agreed to change the regulations. We are to get 1500 ZŁ for a 4-week period of work with less restrictions related to the presence. Additionally, we managed to win a free Christmas Eve for all "Amazonians" in Poland.

There is also a conflict between the employees and Amazon about shortening our breaks and stealing our time before and after the shift. Employees come up with smarter and smarter methods to relieve themselves at work, argue about breaks, sneak out earlier to change clothes and gain time for themselves. These are seemingly small things, but they are important for the employees. They also show that the fight continues, there is no consent for full subordination of our lives to capital. A few months ago, when it was hot and the temperatures in the buses paid for by Amazon were unbearable, the employees also resisted: they complained, refused in groups to board the buses etc. We discussed a lot not only about working conditions, but the whole time about subordination to the company, taking into account the travel time, which after all is not the time at our disposal.

In terms of international activities, we need to take into consideration that the board of directors and Amazon's representatives in Poland have to agree everything with the office in America. The decision-making power of the Polish management is quite limited. That is why it is so important for us to organize Amazon

employees across borders. Twice a year, we organize meetings for employees from different countries: Poland, Germany, France, Spain, Slovakia, USA, etc. We would like to stress that this is a meeting of employees and not a union bureaucracy. More and more warehouses are represented at these conventions, our network is still developing. The last meeting in Germany was attended by employees from North American warehouses. For the first time there was a delegation from Slovakia, we also established new contact with employees from the Czech Republic. The next meeting is planned in Spain. We also have contacts with tech workers from Amazon in Seattle. We are more and more convinced that only the fight on the transnational level can force a giant like Amazon to make major changes. Until now, we have shared our experiences, information about what our work looks like but also what happens locally, where and when protests are planned, etc. We have also shared our experiences and information about our work. We also managed to coordinate a few actions related mainly to the pace of work and H&S (Health & Safety). Now we are working on a more systematic strategy and common demands. It is not easy, we have to communicate in many different languages, we live hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away from each other, we collide with differences, e.g. different legal regulations, etc. Therefore, we are aware that we will not work miracles in a few months, that building strong transnational relations and mutual trust takes time. However, this gives us a great deal of hope. We are not discouraged by the fact that we did not strike this year, we are not worried about past and future lost battles, we hope that by joint global forces we will win the whole fight.



Unpacking the Supply Chain

The Struggle Against Amazon
in Portland

Brian Johnson (pseudonym)

For years, European workers in Amazon have been organizing and uniting together to fight for their rights and dignity against the oppressive consumerist empire built by Jeff Bezos. Yet workers in the very place where Amazon originated, the United States and specifically the Pacific Northwest, are only now beginning to wake up to the cruelty of Amazon's working conditions and to the power that they have as workers. There are many reasons why workers in the US have not organized at a high level for the last few decades. Amazon's supply chain in the United States is complex, using division between workers to make worker solidarity difficult. Adding to the difficulty is the state of labor law in the United States and the overall weakness of the US labor movement, something that is only recently beginning to change.

Amazon warehouses are well known internationally as abusive workplaces, where much of management is run by algorithms, where bosses impose their will on the very workers who generate Bezos's wealth, where injury and death are simply contingencies in a highly programmed environment. Speed, productivity, and machine-like behavior are Bezos's demands. There is no conceivable way for Bezos to have as much wealth as he does without the exploitation of his workers, who hustle, sweat, bleed, and sometimes die while on the job.

Although workers are beginning to organize in the US, the supply chain in the US is a complex web of new strategies and experiments by Amazon. This creates difficulties as Amazon is always shifting its processes. The center of the supply chain is the Fulfillment Center (FC), as it is elsewhere in the globe. But most FCs in the US are not immediately connected to delivery stations. In Portland, Oregon, a few hundred kilometers south of Amazon headquarters in Seattle, the FC is just the first stop for a package on its way to the consumer. The package actually weaves its way through multiple facilities, being sorted and resorted until it lands in one of many delivery options.

From its starting place in the FC in Troutdale, the package is sent 52 kilometers west to Hillsboro, to what is called a Sortation Center. Here the package is resorted, and many packages end their journey, being picked up by the United States Postal Service or private delivery companies like UPS or FedEx. But some of the

packages are shipped again to another warehouse, this time a journey 26 kilometers back east, to the center of Portland. This is the final destination, a Delivery Center. Here the packages are once again resorted, and prepared for delivery in three ways: 1) delivered by Amazon's own fleet of private delivery vans, 2) delivered by private contractors, non-Amazon entities, using their own fleet of delivery vans, or 3) delivered by private individuals using their own cars in a kind of "Uber for Amazon" style.

The work inside each of these three different warehouses is not hugely distinct: FCs package products and prepare them for shipment, Sortation Centers receive these shipments, undo them, resort them, and prepare them again for shipment, and Delivery Centers receive those shipments, undo and resort, and then again prepare them, this time for delivery.

Why the broad spread of facilities and the long journey for each package? There are a few reasons that we know. The Delivery Center is an attempt by Amazon, now seemingly growing at a rapid pace in the US, to take over large areas of US industry. Amazon will save money by delivering packages on their own, or through private contractors or private individuals. Amazon has calculated the cost of shipping these packages across the Portland area and knows that if they continue to keep labor costs low, they can still make money. The fact that the Delivery Center has three different methods for delivery shows that Amazon wants to find the method that is most cost effective, or perhaps to mix methods for different areas of our region. Since some workers are not technically employed by Amazon, this also limits Amazon's liability and the ability for these workers to organize together as a single legal entity. All of these reasons boil down to the fact that Amazon is creating ways to avoid paying FedEx, UPS, or the United States Postal Service for their work, and to begin to do this work themselves. In the process, Amazon will be destroying and remaking the US delivery and logistics industry just as it remade the bookselling industry. This means fewer union protections, worse conditions, and greater consumer reliance on one big company.

One other primary reason for Amazon to have facilities in three corners of a large region like the Portland metro area is because Amazon prefers to build facilities where they are guaranteed

exploitable workers. Hillsboro and Troutdale, and their surrounding areas, are not as wealthy as inner Portland. You are more likely to meet immigrants, to see lower cost housing, and to find greater poverty and unemployment in these areas. Amazon has shown its willingness to deliberately recruit immigrants for its workforce, while at the same time hiring former or current military officers for their management. This creates a distinct hierarchy within the warehouse, where the workers are less likely to oppose management, and management is made up of authoritarians with little regard for their workforce. The workers who live on the margins of US society, who are most likely to fall into poverty or homelessness, are the ones more likely to accept the conditions inside an Amazon warehouse. This also means the workers in an Amazon facility are far more diverse than their management, which is more exclusively white and male the further you look.

Workers in FCs are exclusively full-time workers, while workers in Delivery Centers and Sortation Centers are exclusively part-time. Part-time workers in the US are not provided with health insurance from Amazon because it is not legally required. There are options for taking on extra shifts, but if a worker takes on too many extra shifts to the point where they would be legally required to have health insurance, Amazon management will stop them from taking extra shifts and reduce their workload. Thus, the Delivery and Sortation warehouses keep costs low for Amazon by reducing their benefit expenses.

The road to organizing an Amazon warehouse in the US is a treacherous one. In the US, there are some limited legal protections for a minority union, but the real legal power of a union occurs when workers win a union recognition vote. This requires a majority of workers to vote to join a union, and then worker contract negotiation can begin. Amazon has never negotiated a worker contract outside of those mandated by law, in the US or in Europe. Amazon may come to the table on occasion, but they never give in to demands and will call off negotiation if they are legally allowed. Beyond this, worker contracts in the US would almost always include a “no-strike” clause. For the workers organizing through solidarity unionism, the strike is the most powerful tool they have. The worker contract would become a burden rather than an aid.

In many different cities in the US, workers are organizing their warehouses through “solidarity unionism,” a tactic distinct from the fight for a worker’s contract that we often see from trade unions. These workers are not seeking a contract. They want to challenge the norms inside Amazon warehouses and push back against the ever-increasing productivity rates and inhumane expectations. This strategy is intended to create a powerful movement in the US that is not co-opted by trade unions and their failed strategies. These warehouses are organizing as workers, not with the help of paid staff, and without direction from an institutional body.

In Portland, my coworkers and I were able to gain three small concessions from Amazon during our time organizing. Firstly, we were able to stop the practice of skipping our lunch. Oregon law demands 15-minute break every four hours of work, and a half hour meal every 6 hours of work. Our shift lasted only 6 hours. During the Holiday Season (or Peak), our managers would get in the habit of working us through our regularly scheduled lunch, and with an hour left of work would say “Everyone needs to clock off 5 minutes early. No lunch today.” This means that after working 5 hours and 55 minutes, we had a single 15-minute break. After this went on for about a week, my coworkers and I planned to speak up during a morning meeting and express our discontent with this policy. We took turns speaking out, voicing different concerns about our well-being: feeling overworked, underprepared, hungry, no bathroom breaks, etc. Although it took some time before management took our complaints seriously, the policy of skipping our lunches was dropped.

Similarly, we spoke up when we realized that we had been working for Amazon for nearly 6 months without being offered permanent employment. Amazon policy allows for “conversion” from temporary to permanent status every quarter. Two quarters had gone by and management continued to delay. This time, when we spoke up, we found we were not the only ones who had these concerns. Others joined with us, and it was impossible for management to ignore us. We received the offer for permanent employment within a week.

Lastly, we were able to make changes to the noise level inside the Delivery Center. In our warehouse, cars and vans drive directly inside the facility at regular intervals throughout the day. When the cars are moving, an alarm is played so that workers can know not to cross the drive lane. These alarms were very loud and piercing. During Prime Week, coworkers spoke to the media about the situation inside the warehouse. As soon as Amazon received a little bad press, they immediately made changes. It is worth noting that we had complained about the noise situation for months using Amazon's official "Voice of the Associates" board. This, unsurprisingly, yielded no results. Finding Amazon's weak point - worker rebellion, bad press, etc. - was the solution. (It's also worth noting that fumes from the cars accumulate and occasionally an alarm goes off indicating the CO2 levels are too high. When this happens, windows are opened automatically in the facility, but work does not stop, nor does any worker know what the alarm means. It is one of many situations inside an Amazon warehouse that makes you feel powerless - and all the more reason why workers should organize themselves and make changes.)

These are but small examples of successes of solidarity unionism. It requires a patient, diligent group of people, seeking out leaders and those who are already resisting, connecting them with each other, and empowering them to take action. If we had not had our demands met at my facility, we would have needed to escalate or "turn up the heat" on our managers, until we were successful. Other cities have been participating in the same fight, using similar tactics, and having even greater success. However, one of the requirements for this type of organizing is to keep our work secret, so we are not targets for termination. But as stories become more public, the US workforce is beginning to see that workers in Amazon are fighting and winning. Amazon workers from many cities are also joining the work of the Transnational Meeting of Amazon Workers, a largely European network of workers from many countries who meet regularly to plan strategy together. Workers in the US and those in Europe are joining together, hoping to unite in action and show solidarity with one another. Together we say to each other: "Same Struggle, Same Fight! Workers of the World Unite!" And we will continue to fight so long as this oppressive system run by greed and enforced through cruelty is in operation.

Fighting Precarity, Overcoming Divisions

Perspectives from Madrid

Sección sindical CGT Amazon MAD4,
Madrid, Spain

The absolute priority of the workers of our center is to pass to fixed contract by Amazon, some, due to their long time of temporary contract, demand some day of vacations to be able to rest and almost none, except in rare exceptions carries out the strikes due to the managerial pressure and the threat of non-renewal. As a matter of fact, a high proportion of workers are hired through temporary employment agencies and this means that these workers do not carry out strikes for fear of dismissal or retaliation, these workers do not have holidays and are used largely to cover periods of high workload or holidays of permanent staff, they are given weekly contracts, with the pressure that if they do not reach the production rates that the company believes convenient or protest they are automatically dismissed.

The most damaging tasks are equally distributed between permanent and temporary workers, except in some cases, there is a high turnover of temporary workers in periods such as summer and Christmas, due to vacations and peaks respectively. Our union is open to any workers, since we don't make distinctions between permanent or temp workers and try to involve the latter even though with little success. The way to involve precarious workers is by dialogue and making them aware of their rights, since many times they do not know them or believe that they do not have rights given that they have a temporary contract. There is a precise strategy on the side of Amazon to divide workers: the management encourages with advantages especially during the days when strikes have taken place, to divide those who strike from those who don't and to create oppositions. Those who do not carry out strikes are encouraged with promotions, even if this is not recognized by the company. The two groups of workers are clearly differentiated.

We believe that the claim of an equal wage at European level is almost a utopia, since each country has different legislations. Amazon takes what benefits most from the legislation of each country, regardless of the conditions of workers, both in salary and other things very important to us. Also, inside the warehouse there are many different wage levels, because they are defined by one's category picker (mozo), skilled picker (mozo especialista), foreperson (capataz), shift manager (jefe de equipo) etc. Previously it was more a matter of the length of service. Now this doesn't

matter so much: what matters is whether you have a temporary or fix contract. Another relevant element is that in the higher wage levels most men are hired.

We believe that the wage is one of the most important issues in any workers' struggle, but it should not be the only one and the center of the common transnational struggle, given that there are many other problems such as occupational health, equality, conciliation that should be at the center of our strategy as well as the wage, of course. In our FC right now, we have a big conflict for the fact that the company does not want to agree on real improvements for all workers. It has even taken away rights that we already conquered without any reason. The task of involving workers in the struggles is tremendously complicated in our country, due to the precariousness in the type of hiring and the fear of many workers to lose their jobs, this should be a cause for debate and reflection in future transnational meetings to seek solutions to this problem.

Moreover, this struggle is not only at the level of the workers of Amazon, it should focus on transnational solidarity and not only labor, but also society in general. For this reason, we must focus our demands on common problems of all Amazon warehouses that reach also the heart of all society, so that also others empathize with our struggle such as conditions of health and safety, family conciliation, work rhythms, etc.



The background features a large, stylized orange letter 'V' on a white background. The 'V' is composed of two thick, slightly irregular orange strokes that meet at a point at the bottom. The overall design is minimalist and modern.

Interlude

Possible Employee Conversation.

Somewhere in the World

Steven Cuzner
TSS Coordination

You are in the cafeteria at work and some six or seven co-workers of different sizes have started a conversation about why to organize a strike. Talk is circulating about the wave of shorter strikes, walkouts and slow-downs at other warehouses and this is not the first huddle you have seen at your own warehouse. Some discussions have dealt with the issue of “emotional spies”: a new breed of managers employed by the company. About two years ago they started appearing everywhere throughout the warehouse. Their singular task appears to be to approach every individual package picker, engage them in emotional conversations and tease out personal biography, family stories, traumatic experiences in the private realm and so on. Trained in rookie psychology they were let loose across the fulfillment center like human-size pesticide on a mission to get you bogged down in your particular situation, believed to deter any sense of commonality between workers. Probably the result of an expensive weeklong retreat devoted to innovative methods for breaking worker unity. If the company investment in this peculiar deterrent has harvested the desired outcome or not, however, is difficult to say. A guy you know who goes by the name Limes once said that he saw one of these emo-spies out in the parking lot, kneeled down on the ground next to her car, weeping inconsolably. Then she never came back. Soon a whole epidemic broke out. Crying or flustered emo-spies were seen everywhere, behind rows of shelves or outside the bathroom stalls, stuck in motion like poorly coded computer game villains, aimless and tragic totems stripped of their magic. Within a month they were all fired. They had obviously not been trained well enough to fulfill their duties nor drilled hard enough to accept their purpose. If anything, they caused something of an opposite effect. All the commotion got the small talk among the package pickers really peaking. The company had to send in a cadre of higher managers to undo the damage, drop all the soft infiltration business and get the drill sergeant boots back on.

Nonetheless, in that period of thriving chatter among the package pickers many necessary topics were covered. You took part of a number of impromptu meetings that touched on well documented problems like quota pressures and intolerable workplace stress, omnipresent worker surveillance, temp-agency replacements, wages... Productive discussions. The co-workers that have gathered in the cafeteria now, however, holding lunch containers

and plastic bags – some have started eating still on their feet – seem to be willing to sacrifice the brief half hour lunch to get to the bottom with another issue altogether. You join right at the moment when someone is asking how we really hurt the profits of such a giant outfit as Amazon™. The logic of strike is of course already from the onset an attack on profits, she says. When workers unite and collectively refuse to perform, this disturbs the flow of production (whatever its type) and costs the company money. If everything goes our way, the employer agrees to hear our demands and negotiate a deal and whatever, to get everyone to return to their duties so they avoid losing more money on even more hours of stopped production... But I guess the question here is whether we want to threaten the profits temporarily in order to get a bit better conditions, or if we have an agenda to bring down profits as such? [Heads nodding around the circle, sandwiches being unwrapped, bags of chips being ripped open]. She carries on frankly, even as bits of food openly move around in her mouth. Technically speaking, if the company totally appeases our demands – regardless of it means paying higher wages or improving working conditions in some other way – adapting costs them even more money. So, a successful strike is always us taking a big bite out of their profits, right? Then the remaining question is why we want to bring down their profits in the first place. Isn't it that we simply want more of their profits to be distributed to us? She stops talking and prepares to take a bite from her sandwich like she was hoping it might make eye contact with her.

Well, if we want more of the company profits to go to those of us doing most of the work, we need to fight, right? And as soon as we do, like you say, we also bring down profits in some way. It's Limes speaking, from a chair outside the circle. All heads turn and then the circle grows a couple of inches wider. You hadn't realized at first that he was even here. Limes seems to mean that it is unavoidable but also that it's a good thing. All companies should have to deal with an onslaught of labor conflicts. Like a virus spread to every workplace far and wide. That eventually forces all employers to accept lower profit margins relative to labor costs.

No doubt that far and wide needs to be in the literal sense for that to become true, though. One of the attendees is wearing a baseball cap stained with many layers of dried out salt from many sweaty

days on his head. The white squiggly traces on the black canvas have made the cap look like an inverted Chinese landscape painting. He argues that with too much pressure in just one nation, elected politicians worry that investors will pull out of the country, in the end causing the entire economy to plunge, in turn leading to unemployment and angry voters. Elected politicians don't want that. National politics enters the scene when workers get too strong in just one nation, we can't forget that. No doubt that the movement has to be transnational if we don't want it all to backfire.

A tall woman holding an apple core with just two fingers says that when it comes to companies like the one, we are working for, the results of our interferences never really impact on profits anyways. Yes, if it happens everywhere, maybe. But major transnational corporations can adapt in other ways long before their profits are affected. Look at Amazon for instance. One of the reasons they have grown so massive is because they already from the beginning have planned their business to protect them from losses caused by worker interference. It's written into their algorithm. The vast majority of workers are highly replaceable. And as soon as we go together in one warehouse to threaten delivery speed, they can repurpose any which one of their adjacent warehouses to take the brunt of our refused labor. This has already happened in Germany/Poland, right? That's another argument for making sure that our organizing reaches across borders, for sure. But the question is if we really can target profits, even when we are acting globally. Like all corporations Amazon is required to keep their capital circulating. And so, they make waste of far more of their profits than we can ever dream of damaging. They need to get rid of those profits fast. It's called reinvestments, yeah, and we might imagine that all those reinvestments are successful but many of them are entirely experimental and result only in capital losses. Even some of the costly maneuvers for building up their immune system against worker unity are shoddy investments. Like all these emotional spies running around crying in our warehouse for example. Or if they embark on different clueless attempts to diversify the business. Like suddenly opening an unsuccessful chain of Amazon cafés or something. They could totally try to do that. They have to. The point is that Jeff Bezos makes more than enough from profits but even he can't just crawl into some giant vault with all his loot. That capital has got to

keep moving or be invested in something that is certainly rising in value, like skyscrapers in hot real estate locations. The signal he needs to keep transmitting to the rest of the market is that his Amazon – contrary to the Amazon rainforest – is constantly growing in size. When his Amazon spends millions on reorganization in order to defuse labor conflicts, even that sends a positive signal to the market. It shows competitors and shareholders alike that his Amazon is invested in that special brand of future growth that is won by disabling the labor movement.



This last outrageous statement sends a jolt through the entire body of a lanky guy with bangs in his eyes, forcing his head back and his hair out of his face. What does her statement mean, if it is true? That our struggles essentially make the company more powerful? The apple woman discards her core in the trash can, wipes her hand on her pants and says No, man, absolutely not. For

one, like I was saying, they don't necessarily know what they are doing all the time. They just have nearly endless resources to keep trying. And secondly: while the company is shuffling to resist our growing organizational strength, they do come out looking more resilient, but workers also send signals to other workers, and that is full of potential as well. That is certainly a problem to the corporation. She continues to say that we could – and by all means maybe should? – carry on with local negotiations and demand little improvements, but we need to know that those struggles reach a limit. As soon as we decide to go beyond that limit, we have to understand what we are targeting. If we think that we are targeting profits, we have to keep in mind that they have such substantial capital that they can destroy endlessly more of their profits themselves in order to secure a prognosis. They are not disturbed by a temporary labor conflict hold-up, as much as by a tendency and ability to keep doing it. Corporations are in constant competition with each other and the winner is measured not by some static profit, but by their growth, relative to the competition. They can afford losing countless millions as long as they are assumed to grow all the more. If they give a convincing image of growth it generally increases their value and that in turn helps them satisfy the expected growth.

You want to ask her how that makes any difference, isn't profit and profit increase essentially the same thing? But a number of co-workers are looking over their shoulders for something and complain that they need to hurry up and get in line for the microwaves. Let's try to talk this through over a beer later. At the bar beers are being ordered by more than seven co-workers. Word must have spread. The shitty acoustics demand louder voices and an older picker accustomed to dealing with that fact takes command. We simply can't organize to suffocate the company, that is her point [looking at the tall apple woman while raising his glass]. If we think that we are threatening something we aren't threatening, we lose touch with the basic logic of the strike. We have to know what problem we are creating in order to have any leverage. With a small employer, say one hundred workers can bring production to a halt. Those workers are more likely to have success squeezing the owner for higher paychecks. And it's much easier to gather the entire staff for maximum effect. Amazon controls so many workers that completely synchronized work stoppage is

difficult to imagine, and there is only so much the management team at an individual warehouse can agree to without involving headquarters in Seattle. From there they can switch around costs as they please. When we act in isolated locations, we basically end up competing with other Amazon colleagues somewhere else. And then there is the issue of their staggering abundance of capital. Just repeating what she was saying earlier today here, but when you think about it, that puts them in a position to throw away ludicrous sums that either are or just look like investments in growth. Because that is ultimately the value of their dominance: the prognosis, right? An upward movement. That makes the company less concerned with temporary dips in profit that we can cause, and all the more concerned with spending double that to prove that they in the long run can defend themselves against workflow interference.

The group is about to dissolve in doubt. He raises his voice a notch to interrupt the loss of concentration. Our most explosive option, on the other hand, is precisely to use their growth fetish to our advantage! A number of people take deep sips from their pints while exchanging glances, eyebrows raised in sarcastic exaggeration. What does that mean? One from a trio of girls sitting on a wooden bench breaks the silence. You mean that the more they grow the bigger our collective can become, or something like that? The tall woman says that she would think so. Just look at how many people Amazon employs to do exactly what we are doing. And the fact that they are stretched over so many nations. There are fulfillment centers in almost 300 cities worldwide. Hundreds of thousands of individuals running around like pack-rats – for what obsession exactly? What are we fulfilling at the fulfillment centers? Basically, someone's misguided interest in seeing their company grow. The Amazon empire is such an evident example of how ridiculously useless it is, that we as workers are pressured to keep doing stuff like this the rest of our lives, just to help a company fare well against their competitors in some pointless growth game. A game that literally is about nothing else. Anyway, [taking a big chug from her glass of beer], we just happen to be working for one of the most immense employers in history. We have like half a million colleagues just doing what we do all day. We can use our employment to unite for unparalleled worker influence on a political level.

Veiled behind his heavy bangs, the lanky guy can't help but ask what this political level is? It sounds so vague. Does that mean that instead of mobilizing to stop productivity, so we get what we are asking for... we gather around the entire globe to besmirch the image of the company? Make them a political embarrassment? All eyes turn to the apple lady for an answer. Why would we be interested in ruining this company in particular, man? Them collapsing or being bought up by someone else... that's not going to... Do you know what happened to Toys R Us for instance? Did they go down because their owners weren't making any money at all? I don't think so. The company just wasn't properly competitive anymore. Not winning the race. They file for bankruptcy and then because of private equity the owners walk away with millions while tens of thousands of workers are suddenly unemployed and forced to look for the next shitty employment. Of course, it makes a difference if it happens because of worker interference, but... I mean, if we want to really change things as workers... I think sometimes about how someone told me that the true victory for the women's suffrage movement was not necessarily obtaining the right to vote, it was making clear the antagonism that existed between men and women. Imagine Amazon package pickers around the world joining in on the same coordinated strategy. All making the same simple demand. The value of it, the real effect of that is, similarly, making the antagonism between capitalists and workers cut like laser through the world. We should want to fight for a position that allows us to turn this shit upside down. There is that potential in this workplace.

On that triumphant cue you and your co-workers rush to order more beers. Hairdos are fixed and lipstick rolled on thick. The Chinese landscape painting baseball cap guy removes his hat to reveal a perfectly bald young scalp. The older picker is solidly seated to receive the flurrying energy as you all return. He suggests that our most productive global demand after all must be a companywide equalization of wages. To pressure the company to match all salaries to the one that is currently highest. Where are pickers paid the highest? Nobody knows. Never mind. It would mean that some pickers would join the demand without it even directly impacting their paycheck. That's tough. But the wages aren't really the point. The highest wage isn't good enough anyways. No compensation makes it acceptable that we are

exhausting our lives basically to make the single richest individual on the planet richer each month. The point is that the workforce is huge, across a greater part of the world, in 300 different cities, all doing the same tasks and under the same employer. By really using wage differentials between us to the max, Amazon makes us imagine that we are not unifiable. We just bypass that shit by making every struggle about that one issue: wage equalization. But not because we are in love with that wage but because even such a petty demand would appear impossible. And that exposes exactly how useless this system is. We should ask ourselves what the economic growth demand does for anyone. There is no way that Jeff Bezos can materially get more pleasures daily as his enterprise keeps growing. What is he going to do, ride ten horses at once? He's shitting his pants to come up with more spending schemes. There are limits to how much even a perversely rich person can indulge in the perverse spoils of our labor. The enjoyment lies elsewhere. The enjoyment lies in the growing numbers themselves. The competition itself. They are like gambling addicts who win a little lose a lot and vice versa infinitely. We should be furious that we are all working our asses off until the end of our days just to fulfill that! And look, Bezos is no different from his competitors. The market dictates this behavior. If we truly want to change our working and living conditions, we need a labor movement that confronts the capitalist market as such. By taking advantage of the simple fact that we have more than half a million co-workers here at Amazon, potentially demanding the same thing, we pose a threat not to a single company, but to all companies. It's the type of threat that puts us in a completely different position than any of them ever planned for, or against.

And, you want to add, the only realistic way to get the dignity we fight for in the first place.



Common Demands and Coordinated Strategy

How to Struggle Together

French Amazon Workers
(Saran and Lille, France)

As Amazon workers from the French warehouses of Saran (45) and Lille (59), part of the Sud-Commerce Union, we are discussing together with other Amazon workers in UE and the US common demands at the transnational level. We are facing a very complicated task, even more so when the same union is operating within global companies like Amazon, than since its birth has used wage differentiation among the states as a source of profit. On the side of workers' organization, this capacity to exploit differences is far from finding strong opposition by trade union structures which are still anchored to national or even local action and structure. Moreover, the division into sectors and the autonomous nature that some trade union sectors claim within the same union, as is the case for many French trade unions, only make it even more complicated to organize a horizon of shared struggles. It is in this perspective and because of the limits of a purely national action that our union has decided to place its struggles against a global company like Amazon within a transnational organization framework, such as the TSS, of which it has been a part since the beginning. In a context such as that of France, these limits are even more obvious because of a constant attack that Macron's neoliberal government and its predecessors made on workers' representative structures, an attack that was concretized by labor laws before and by unemployment reforms after. These laws depict intermediate organizations as useless and costing a lot of public money, and favor policies that are alleged to be directly accountable "to the citizens".

In the case of Amazon's warehouses and the transnational organization of struggles, these difficulties are no less obvious, but it is also true that adopting a common strategy and shared claims such as an equal wage is now one of the issues under discussion, and is configured in our political and trade union perspective as a horizon that would be capable of uniting workers both at national and transnational level. For instance, the claim of an equal wage raises problems that have to do with the methods of exploitation and production of wage differentials among states, but also within warehouses in the same states. These differences depend on the French normative framework that aims to protect Amazon's profit margins. In particular, the fragmentation of the work-force within Amazon's French warehouses is produced by a set of factors: the types of contracts, which widely vary within the

same warehouse and establish very uneven salary levels; a massive recourse to temporary workers; the management of bonuses and access to these bonuses by workers; the collective contracts establishing working conditions.

There are several wage levels within Amazon France: a first level T1; a second level T2; and a level T3 which is that of a Supervisor. The wage at level T1 is 1677 euros gross, while the wage at level T3 is 2396 euros gross. Wage gaps mean remarkable inequalities also in terms of bonuses, like the 13th month and shareholding. To benefit from them the worker needs a permanent contract, so employees on fixed-term contracts and temporary workers are often excluded. Amazon's use of temporary work is large. The number of temporary workers is often half of the workforce. Given their status, temporary workers are under pressure to meet high work rhythm in order to eventually get more stable working conditions and are thus indirectly used to accommodate changes in the standards relating to the amount of work per hour and per person. Moreover, since Amazon is not their direct employer, temp workers' participation in collective movements is complicated. Consequently, the fragmentation of contracts hampers the ability of French workers and trade unions to formulate common wage demands, given that most of the time the necessities of permanent workers are different from those of temporary workers. In addition, Amazon wants to apply in France the collective agreement for transport rather than the current one for distance selling in order to worsen the working conditions in the warehouses.

Amid the divisions affecting Amazon workers, the project of sharing common claims on wage, working conditions and contract is now at the heart of the debate of the transnational network of Amazon workers. This network, which has been meeting for four years and in which we are taking part, is giving a more and more fundamental role to the elaboration of common demands. This is because common demands are able to produce a struggle that goes beyond contractual differentiation within the company. At the same time, common demands create more transnational organization. For instance, the demand of equal wage allows workers from neighboring countries who are paid both half of their colleagues to join forces. In other words, it is a demand that forces workers to conceive themselves transnationally, to produce a for-

ce whereas sectors, contracts, borders and wage levels divide and fragment their possible power. Moreover, claiming an equal European wage makes it possible to move away from a perspective that still believes that the solution to these transnational forms of exploitation can be articulated at a national level, with national minimum wages, which in most cases are not even adequate to the panoply of precarious contracts applied to the same jobs. This holds true even more for companies like Amazon which operate on the transnational level.

As we have pointed out, the main challenge of a transnational fight against Amazon today is to act in a unified way, to coordinate strategies, to set up joint actions and advocacy actions. In this context, advancing common claims like an equal salary is a fundamental point to make sure that a victory in a warehouse in Germany is not a defeat in another country. From a trade union point of view, this requires us to rethink our role within companies, to assume the limits of trade union action and structure. We should support workers to organize themselves transnationally, to guarantee support for the transnationalization of workers' struggles. In four years, many achievements have been made. Thanks also to TSS, we must now take advantage of them and in many cases translate words and commitments into a transnational organization. Moreover, we believe that by informing other workers of our existence at the transnational level will allow us to mobilize more Amazon workers, knowing that each one of us must forget their trade union label and focus on the common ground of the struggle rather than on the differences that separate us.

Migrants and Locals Together in the Strike

Interview with

William Stolz
Shakopee FC, Minnesota, US

Transnational Social Strike Platform Can you tell us something about you, about your job at the Amazon Shakopee warehouse and about your participation in the protests and strikes?

William My name is William Stolz, I'm 24 and I work as a picker in the Amazon's fulfillment center in Shakopee, Minnesota. I've been working there for about two years and in that time we, as workers, have organized around different issues we've had in the warehouse. I got involved in protests around the working conditions, the pace and intensity of the work. We've been organizing with the help of the Awood Center, which is a workers' center and not just a union. None of the Amazon warehouses in the United States have unions.

TSS Can you tell us about the strike you staged on July 15th at the Amazon Center in Shakopee. What was the turnout? What claims and demands did you address to Amazon? Why striking on Prime Day?

W We had about 35 workers participating. The main demands were around the speed of the work and the risk of injuries. We also wanted them to convert temporary employees into permanent, to cut out temporary agencies and give people job security. We were concerned with wages as well: we are making a lot of money for the company and we demand to have a piece of that. Prime Day is a very busy moment for Amazon and the time when they need us the most: it was the logical moment to make them understand that if they want us to deliver all these packages and make all that money for them, they've got to treat workers with respect.

TSS What was the organizational process that led to the strike? What was the role of the Awood Center?

W The Awood Center started reaching out to Amazon workers in 2017, not just in our warehouse, but in others as well. We already had done a protest in December 2018 about many of the same issues, and since those have gone unresolved, since Amazon hadn't done anything about the pace of the work and the injuries, talking amongst us with other workers we decided to stage another protest. We all know what are the busiest moments for Amazon, like December or Prime Day, because that is when we

are called for overtime and so people were thinking that if we wanted to do something powerful, Prime Day was the best time to do it. The Awood Center was there to help us understand what our rights were, to help us spread the word and get support, to help us organize and come together, but fundamentally following what workers wanted to do in the first place. The Awood center is not a union, it a no-profit community organizing group and “Awood” is the Somali word for “power”. They help workers from different warehouses to come together and talk about how we can unite and fight. It is not a service organization and it doesn’t want to just represent workers but it is about helping the workers understand the power that we all have if we stand together, not just in the short term but also thinking about the bigger changes we need to see in order to win safe and reliable jobs.

TSS Can you tell us something about the workforce composition at the Shakopee center and the relevance of your warehouse for Amazon?



W I can’t say how relevant is our warehouse for the Amazon network, but it surely is the only fulfillment center in Minnesota and it is pretty large, employing about 1500 people. One thing that’s been knowable about our warehouse is that there are wor-

kers coming from many different backgrounds but there a lot of East African workers and many of them have been leaders in our fight for better working condition. So, we have a demographic make-up surely different from other States or other warehouses.

TSS How does their being migrants and refugees affect their working conditions and their wages?

W There are lots of workers from different parts of the world, mainly East African, but also West Africans and from the Philippines. Of course, people come here with very different backgrounds and knowledges, Somali workers are refugees and, in some cases, coming to a new country they don't know their rights or how to get a protection from the legal system or how to stand up if there is an issues. But alternatively, many of the migrants and refugees workers had incredible life experiences standing up against injustice in their countries, many had a fight for justice in their background and that surely helps their fight here at Amazon. As far as working conditions in the building, the main problems, the speed of the work, the injuries or not being paid enough, they affect us pretty much equally, no matter where we come from, also because so much of the system is through the computer that tracks the workers all in the same way. One thing that Amazon significantly changed since the beginning of our protest and since Somali workers started organizing and pushing for change is that they hired a lot of more Somali managers and supervisors, but mainly hiring from outside and without promoting people from the inside. In general, you get paid based on how long you've worked there.

TSS How would you describe the working conditions at the Amazon's Shakopee warehouse?

W I work ten hours a day, four days a week. I've been at the pick department for the whole time I've been there. I had done warehouse work before in other places, but I've never seen as many injuries and so much turnover as since when I came to Amazon. Seeing people whom I became friend with being injured or having to quit because they reached a point of exhaustion, that had an impact on me, and I was experiencing a lot of the same things myself. I haven't been injured but it's very physically intense

work: the stress and the strain of it is hard, especially with repetitive motion, performing at these fast speeds to keep up with the demands of the computer at your station, all of that takes a big toll on our bodies and our minds. And that is not just at the pick department, there is no place in the warehouse where working is easy.

TSS How many items per hour are you required to move and what happens if you don't?

W Right now, it's still 332 items per hour, and if you can't make it, the managers have a bit of discretion and usually give you a "verbal coaching", which can become a "written warning". If you're below rate, you're going to accumulate written warnings. At my warehouse they are currently experimenting a new system that looks at us on a curve, depending on our productivity rate, without telling us what our actual rate is. The bottom 5% performers will have to speed up their work if they are below rate, so it is important to make sure not to be in that 5%. Going forward in the curve, we're just looking at ourselves and at our speed compared to other workers and adjust it not to finish in the "danger zone". In the new system, managers will have no discretion, if you're below rate and if you've been working below rate for at least 160 hours, there is an automatic written warning. There is currently a trial period, but it is likely that's the system they're going to adopt.

TSS How many other Amazon Centers joined the strike in July in the US? Are you connected with them?

W For Prime Day in the United States, as far as I know, our warehouse was the only one that did a strike. About three weeks later at a delivery center next to our warehouse, eighty workers did two-and-a-half-hours strike around safety issues and they won their major demands. We have been in contact with them, but we had not many contacts around the country. Even at our warehouse of course we don't have the majority of the workers with us, but the important thing we did was to show other workers who are afraid and who have a problem that we have the power to go out there and fight and demand better working conditions. So, hopefully, we will be able to win the support of other workers who didn't go on strike, but seeing our protest succeed they will

join us, and in the same way we hope that other workers at other Amazon warehouses will start fighting after they see what we have done in Minnesota.

TSS Last year Amazon decided to raise the minimum wage to 15\$ per hour, and a few weeks ago the Houses of Representatives approved a bill raising the minimum wage to 15\$ per hour in the whole country by 2025. How would you describe the consequences of that decision on the salary levels in your warehouse?

W It had mixed consequences, particularly for us. In Minnesota, we had already been making 15\$ per hour since September 2017. Minnesota has a very low unemployment rate, so they had to pay us more than workers in other states. For some states, the raise to 15\$ was fundamental, but the consequences were mixed, because when they raised the minimum wage, they also took away the monthly bonuses that we used to get, based on productivity in our building and on individual worker attendance. They also took away this stock-grant program that they had, according to which if you worked there years you would get two shares of Amazon's stock and then every additional year you would get an additional share, which was pretty good because at the moment each share was worth almost 2000\$. They still have some stock-purchase plan, but it is not even comparable. For us in Minnesota, when they raised to 15\$ in the whole country, they raised our minimum wage to 16,25\$. So, overall at the beginning it wasn't really clear if we were making more or less money after the wage change. Of course, I think that if we were making more money, they would have taken more trouble to go through the math and prove it to us, but they didn't.

TSS Why do you think Amazon decided to raise the minimum wage?

W Because they have been getting a lot of criticism about their practices and the working conditions for years, so I think they realized it was easier for them to change the compensation system by simultaneously raising the minimum wage and taking away the bonuses, than actually overhauling and improving the conditions of work. It was an attempt to deflect the criticisms they were getting.

TSS In the past recent years Fight For 15\$ was the primary claim of a larger movement in the US, which started in Walmart's warehouses but soon reached a wider political relevance. How would you describe the impact of the minimum wage raise on this movement, both in Amazon and elsewhere? Do you think it can slow down future mobilizations?

W A lot of the workers who were organizing with the Fight For 15\$ were workers from extremely low-wage industries such as Walmart and fast foods, that in general are paid worse than warehouse's workers. So, I think that as long as the problem of low wage will persist in those industries, those workers will continue to demand more. As far as Amazon is concerned, at my warehouse for example, the most burning issue is the working conditions. Pay of course is important but for us it hasn't always been the number-one issue.

TSS What's next after the July strike? How do you plan to carry on your struggle against Amazon?

W Amazon has the opportunity to meet our demands as workers, to provide safe and reliable jobs. Amazon is a huge successful company and still many of my coworkers have to get extra jobs on the side in addition to working for Amazon just to provide for their family and for their living situation, and temporary workers have to wonder if they're going to have a job in a month. There is a lot that Amazon can do to meet our demands: if they won't, we'll just keep fighting and see where that takes us.





The Theft of Time and Knowledge

Workers' Control and
Transnational Response

Alessandro Delfanti
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There are many things that are not remunerated by an hourly salary. Indeed, in contemporary capitalism labour time is only one of the variables from which capital extracts value. The hours of labour spent staffing an Amazon distribution centre definitely represent the bottleneck without which nothing can happen in the FC, the core commodity workers sell to the company. But that is only the tip of the iceberg. Several things workers provide to Amazon are made invisible and thus not remunerated. This is not new. Historically, workers and sociologists alike have identified several things that are provided to capital and yet go above and beyond labour time and thus cannot be captured by wages. To cite but a few: relational labour (a call centre's operator ability to pretend they care about customers' experience), tacit knowledge (informal knowledge about how to operate a certain piece of machinery on the shop floor), or even aesthetic labour (the work of making one's body attractive and pleasurable, think of receptionists or sex workers). While it is quite different from some of these examples, Amazon warehouse work spearheads the growth of this tendency within today's digital capitalism. Let me provide two examples, among many possible others, of forms of labour that go beyond the time spent working in an Amazon FC: the work of not working and the gift of worker knowledge to the algorithm.

THE WORK OF NOT WORKING

Amazon fulfillment centres are based on a built-in form of flexibility, managed by algorithms but shouldered by workers in its entirety. In fact, the nature of online commerce makes sales fluctuate over time, and Amazon needs an extremely flexible workforce to respond to the needs of a company that promises not only to sell "everything" but also to deliver quickly, smoothly, and in increasingly unreasonable time frames, for example just a few hours after a customer clicks on a commodity on the website. This requires a form of flexibility that forces workers to be ready to work or not work at any given time. In sum, Amazon work colonizes the whole day or even year, as the time spent being available to work in outbursts of demand is unpaid. There are two different cycles of what anthropologists call temporal orders, that is the time horizons, that structure work in the FC. Clearly, power over shaping such time horizons is firmly in the hands of Amazon,

which controls the unpaid labour of not working performed by FC workers.

First, there is a year-long cycle, influenced by predictable factors such as peaks around Christmas, Black Friday, or the start of the school year in September. Amazon relies on staffing agencies to get its hands on a flexible and disposable workforce, hired through hyper-casualized contracts, that can quickly learn to staff the FC and can as quickly be expelled from it once the peak is over, maybe just a few weeks into their new job. This form of seasonal employment relies on Amazon's ability to scoop up masses of workers from a "reserve army" composed of suburban, often racialized, unemployed or under-employed workers, many of whom are victims of austerity politics. Without such a reserve army, it would be impossible for Amazon to maintain the high turnover rates that sustain the year-long cycle according to which seasonal workers are hired and laid off. This plays out differently in different contexts, as Amazon has raised the minimum wage in US warehouses to \$15 -- perhaps to retain at least part of the full-time workforce in the face of low unemployment rates -- while relying more heavily on staffing agency in Eastern and Southern European countries with high unemployment rates.

The second cycle is faster, and more similar to the flexibility required to work in urban gig economy companies such as Uber or Foodora. Like other companies, Amazon strives to forecast consumption patterns and thus predict short-time peaks which will require more workers in a FC. For example, weather forecast may enter the picture as Amazon tries to predict how much a rainy Sunday will boost online orders as customers spend their leisure time at their computers or phones and thus buy more stuff--which will need to be processed and shipped the next day. To rein over such temporal order, Amazon must have access to a workforce it can command to work or not work at will. For example, workers who cannot say no to a request for overtime ("let's stay another two hours!") or to a new Sunday morning shift scheduled and communicated on Saturday evening. Gig economy apps use forms of "soft" control to grow and shrink their workforce in response to such fast cycles of consumption. For example, Uber drivers may be incentivized to drive on a Saturday night in the city center, when many people will need to be driven home,

by communications that the area will pay higher rates per ride. Amazon workers are rather forced to provide such flexibility by the despotism they encounter in warehouse work, as they may get fired and do not really have the choice of not working overtime, especially if they are contracted through staffing agencies or work in a country with low labor protection regulations. This kind of flexibility is also heavier on certain sectors of the workforce, for example women who are bound to perform care work at home vis-a-vis young male workers who have an abundance of time and may not mind the indeterminacy of this temporal cycle.

THE GIFT OF WORKER KNOWLEDGE

The algorithmic organization of labour in the warehouse also conceals workers' contribution to inventory and the role of their knowledge, or lack thereof, in the functioning of fulfillment processes. Take stowing: workers who place commodity on the shelves in a FC perform a complex form of cooperation which is at least partially left to their autonomy. For example, stowers decide where to store a certain commodity, say a teddy bear, depending on a few rules: distribute copies of the same item in different areas of the pick tower, do not store it in cells containing similar objects (in this case another stuffed animal), and make use of all available space. This generates what Amazon calls "chaotic storage," that is a randomized inventory which is more efficient both in terms of space use and for retrieving commodities once a customer places an order. In fact, workers can stow the teddy bear wherever there is room for it rather than in a specific area, thus reducing the presence of under- or over-utilized areas in the warehouse. Furthermore, this limits the chances of a bottleneck in case of a surge of orders for teddy bears, as many pickers can retrieve copies of the same commodity in different areas of the pick tower.

Now, such chaotic inventory is so complex that no human being can possibly know it in its entirety, or even partially for that matter. Once a commodity is placed on the shelf, the stower records its position with her barcode gun and immediately moves to the next item. In the meantime, this process is fed to the software underpinning inventory, and is thus stored in distant servers nei-

ther workers or managers have access to. This is different from forms of “surveillance capitalism” that commodify all user behaviours, such as those underpinning systems like Android phones or social media platforms. On the contrary, Amazon datafies and captures something very specific: workers’ tacit knowledge about the position of items on the shelves. This knowledge is so important that chaotic storage immediately takes it away from workers. I call this process machinic dispossession to stress how worker knowledge is incorporated in algorithmic machines, but also how this expropriates workers of key political leverage, that is their tacit knowledge about inventory. Deprived of such traditional form of knowledge, Amazon FC workers have lost one core source of power and are immediately made more disposable: there is no need for a new worker to learn the geography of FC inventory, which is incorporated in algorithms and communicated through the barcode gun, for example to a picker who needs to retrieve the teddy bear. From this follow that there is no need to train new workers, who can be immediately productive thanks to what 1960’s Italian workerist theorist of industrial capitalism Romano Alquati called “fake deskilling.” Amazon FC labor requires a sophisticated ability to quickly interact with both specific digital technologies and peculiar corporate cultures. But such skills are readily available in a workforce that is highly socialized to the use of new technology as well as to flexible employment. Therefore, Amazon can exploit its technical ability to destroy worker inventory knowledge to diminish the costs and risks normally associated with high worker turnover.

RESISTING AMAZON

In the face of such forms of theft of non-work and inventory knowledge, as well as many other issues such as the authoritarian organization of FC work, low salaries and benefits, or issues of workplace health and safety, Amazon workers have tried to respond with mobilizations at the local scale, but global coalitions are forming in response to the transnational nature of the corporation. The struggle for a higher wage can be strategically deployed to foster recomposition of a dispersed workforce that experiences high turnover levels, political barriers to organizing, and needs to fight back against Amazon’s ability to work across

national borders. It is also an immediate goal that can radically improve the lives of FC workers. But it can't be disentangled from other goals such as curbing flexibility or increasing worker control over work rhythms and shift allocation. Indeed, in FCs which have mobilized and strike, such as in Italy and Minnesota, scheduling and flexibility have been core worker requests. On the other hand, resistance to knowledge dispossession is trickier and seems to be based mostly on individual acts of sabotage. Misplacing commodities is indeed one of the ways in which Amazon FC workers react to the despotic nature of their work. Although this is not done collectively, workers use such acts as a way to game the algorithmic organization of inventory. Imagine picking a comic book, reading it as you wander with your cart in the pick tower, and then placing it randomly without recording its position. Yet these individualized forms of everyday resistance do not change the power relations that shape Amazon labor. A collective transnational response is needed to play at the scale required by the challenge posed by Amazon and counter its theft of worker time and knowledge.

A large, stylized orange letter 'A' graphic that serves as a background element for the text. It is composed of thick, solid orange lines that form the shape of the letter, with a slight gap at the top and bottom points.

Against the Logistics of Amazon

Challenges to Build
Effective Power

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The transportation of goods and people has always been important for the capitalist system, but also a main sector of working-class action. Since the '70s logistics has become a central element of capitalist strategies to counter working class power by relocating production sites to regions in the world with low wages and/or assumed submissive workforces. It has been playing a key role for the reduction of production costs to outset competitors in times of chronic overaccumulation. It's the prerequisite for just-in-time and lean production along globally dispersed commodity chains. The logistics revolution of the '90s has further changed the meaning of logistics and has integrated production and distribution into one unit.

Paradoxically, however, while logistics has been used to counter working class power, it has simultaneously created new vulnerabilities of capital. The reliance of contemporary capitalist production on the constant and undisturbed flow of goods has increased the possible damage of disruption by workers at choke points along value chains. Therefore, workers in logistics have been regarded as being in a strategic position. It should give them not only the potential power to improve their own situation, but also to provide new leverage for the working-class movement as a whole.

Though, logistics workers often have problems to use their ascribed power to improve their situation and are exposed to precarity, bad working conditions and payment. This may be explained in part by organizational concepts like outsourcing, fictitious self-employment or the use of temp agencies undermining collective action. The insufficient understanding and use of the strategic position of logistics workers by trade unions might also be regarded as a decisive factor. But one should also be reminded not to derive the power of certain logistics workers from the general importance of logistics in contemporary capitalism.

It's important to analyze the potential power of workers in certain positions in specific production processes with regard to the influence of legal frameworks, organizations and institutions. Thereby the ability to make the right strategic choices to reali-

ze potential power might be improved. Also overestimating the power of logistics workers, thereby obscuring our understanding and ability to tackle the real challenges, could be avoided.

AMAZON AS MAJOR PLAYER OF E-COMMERCE & WORKERS' POWER RESOURCES

Amazon is an excellent example for the challenges to build effective counter-power in the logistics sector. Warehouse workers in several countries have been fighting the company for several years. They have been learning about and demonstrating various obstacles, possibilities and necessities. Amazon has become a major player of e-commerce using an aggressive strategy of expansion to control the market - actually propelled not by profits, but by the promise of control in the future. Like for Walmart in brick-and-mortar retail, its success is based on an efficient logistics network. For this purpose, it's also implementing digital technology to steer the whole network and to control the work in its logistics centers.

Workers do have certain power resources that they can mobilize to enforce an improvement - of small issues at the workplace, the enforcement of collective bargaining, the restructuring of the labor process or the general transformation of society. Their potential power resides not only in their position in the production process but also in their position in the labor market. It's influenced by institutional and legal frameworks (like works councils or the right to strike) and organizations like trade unions and workers centers. To realize their potential power, they have to develop a strategy to make use of it.

DIGITAL TAYLORISM AND MASS WORKERS

A decisive factor for the power of a worker at the bargaining table are the available alternatives to a given job, as are the availability of other workers ready to replace him. Amazon is using digital Taylorism to standardize the work and to decompose it into simple tasks. These are further guided by hand scanners or displays telling the workers which item to pick next or which cartonnage to use to pack a certain item. In that way it's making the labor process rather independent from the concrete workers and their

experience and knowledge. The availability of workers being able to do the work allows Amazon to use a “hire and fire” policy on a massive scale. It doesn’t have to care for certain workers, as long as they can easily find new workers and train them fast. Therefore, Amazon hasn’t to provide above-average working conditions or payment, but these have to be enforced by the workers.

DISRUPTIVE POWER

The best way for workers to enforce improvements has been the interruption of the production process, because it stops the valorization of capital and causes financial losses. Since logistics is important for just-in-time production with low stocks, interruptions of the flow of goods at specific choke points might stop whole value chains.

In contrast to industrial logistics, Amazon is delivering to single private customers, not to other companies. A delay of deliveries doesn’t cause an immediate loss for Amazon. A longer stoppage probably would lead to the loss of orders and on probably would hurt Amazon’s main strategy to win more and more customers by promising fast and reliable delivery on the long run. Thus, one of the main targets of any campaign against Amazon has to be to undermine this image and capacity.

But to really stop deliveries, you have to shut down Amazon’s Fulfillment Centers (Fc)¹, in which the items are stored, picked, packed and shipped. The simplest way to do it, would be a strike of the whole workforce. But only in one FC in Madrid an overwhelming majority of workers has joined a strike so far. In most of the FCs in Germany, Italy and France, it has only been a minority of workers who went on strike.

STRATEGIC POSITIONS IN THE WAREHOUSES

In former times militant minorities have been able to shut down whole facilities by stopping the work of a specific department or part of the assembly line. This happened for example, when a minority of workers launched a sit-down strike in the engine department of a General Motors factory in Flint in the 1930s. Their action was able to stop the whole factory and finally the whole

1 Amazon’s logistics network does include Sortation Centers, Delivery Centers and Prime Now Hubs, too. For lack of space, this article focuses on the so called Fulfillment Centers.

2 I owe this comparison to Nantina Vgontzas and her research.

3 This can be explained by its focus on future market control instead of current profit margins right.

4 Pretending to go on strike by driving a trade union car in front of the fc or to set up a food truck – which happens normally if there is going to be a strike.

5 This means to start the strike not with the start of the shift, but to start the work and leave it suddenly for a strike.

6 This means to start to work, go out on a strike and to return to work after one or two hours.

production of General Motors². In the FCs of Amazon, though, there are hardly any choke points you could tackle to shut down the whole warehouse. The different departments can operate independently from each other – at least for a certain period of time – and with bigger or smaller workforces.



Furthermore, because of digital Taylorism, workers may easily be trained for most of the tasks and shifted to a different department if necessary. Since it seems that Amazon has always an overcapacity of workforces to deal with any surge of orders or disturbances, it can quite easily deal with a striking minority³. During peak season workers have to work extra hours and seasonal workers are hired, which can more than double the workforce. So far Amazon has managed to keep most of the workers with specific qualifications from striking. When technicians, who can't be replaced that easily, joined the strikes in Germany at the beginning, Amazon immediately bought most of them out by offering higher wages.

WAYS TO DISRUPT THE SMOOTH PACKING AND SHIPPING

In Germany the trade union ver.di and the workers have adapted to the situation and are restraining from a strike with open end. They are using a 'tactic of needle sticks', which includes non-announced strikes with varying duration and number of fcs involved in Germany, 'fake strikes'⁴, spontaneous strikes in case of high volume of orders, strikes out of running business⁵, and in-out-in-strikes⁶. This tactic has been able to disturb the smooth

flow of packages and is forcing Amazon to use extra resources to cope with spontaneous strikes. Amazon has also been raising the wages every year and has introduced an extra bonus for being on the job during peak season. So, they have been able to put a constant, even though limited, pressure on the company. However, especially organizational problems have hindered a more systematic use of some of the most effective tactics so far.

A minority of workers could shut down a warehouse by blocking the entrances and exits for the trucks. This has been tried in different forms in Germany and France, partly with support from solidarity groups. But especially legal concerns – fear of warnings and dismissals – have prevented its systematic use in Germany.

AMAZON'S EUROPEAN DIGITAL SERVICE FACTORY

Even if it would be possible to shut down one or several warehouses, Amazon would still be able to deliver packages. There are over 40 logistics centers in Europe operating like one huge digital service factory. Though their inventories vary to some extent, every fulfillment center can process most orders. Within a short period of time, Amazon is capable to shift the volume of orders to a different warehouse in Europe – delineating the necessary area of the struggle. Furthermore, there is no fulfillment center with a strategic position in the network, whose fallout would shut down the whole or at least part of the network. Since it's more a network of independent sites than a chain of dependent warehouses it's necessary to organize the majority of warehouses in Europe. Also, Amazon is automatically adapting the promised time of delivery in accordance to capacities. Therefore, customers often won't even realize if a strike takes place and causes delays.

Since Amazon is expanding and opening new warehouses every year, trade unions and workers have to catch up with organizing just to maintain the percentage of workers being ready to strike. The difficulty of this task is increased by the use of precarious employment contracts especially in new facilities in Europe. In Germany most of the workers in new facilities only do get fixed-term contracts for up to two years before they get a permanent employment. This has increased the reluctance of workers to join the struggle for fear of losing their job and has already led to the

loss of activists, whose contracts haven't been renewed. In other countries Amazon is using temporary work and/or fixed-term contracts to split the workforce. This shows how the legal possibility of precarious employment is decreasing the workers power in all warehouses, since it's hindering organizing. Therefore, the network Amazing Workers of Amazon has already done public actions in Poznan and Leipzig to denounce those tactics.

National trade unions, transnational network

A major challenge to the organization of workers' power has been the number and variety of trade unions involved. Not least because trade unions are organized on a national level, there are different levels of organizing at Amazon depending on the commitment of the respective organizations. If there is no organized resistance in a major country, like in Great Britain, this undermines the effort of the other trade unions. Furthermore, trade unions stick to different traditions and approaches, political orientations and are affiliated to different international trade union associations. There are already considerable attempts to build an international coalition against Amazon. But, for organizational interests or narrow mindedness, there hasn't been a meeting with all trade unions involved in organizing at Amazon yet. UNI Global has held regular meetings only including affiliated organizations. The network Amazing Workers of Amazon has met separately orienting towards rank-and-file workers without regard to union membership. There also have been several common actions like solidarity statements, mutual visits, a common call to work to rule ('Safe Package'), a common manifestation and rally against Jeff Bezos in Spring 2018 as well as several coordinated strikes in different countries. Those efforts are already important achievements, though, the development of a common strategy has just started.

The differing legal regulations on the national level are making it difficult to develop a common strategy and struggle in Europe. Since collective bargaining is institutionalized nationally, so are the aims and demands of the trade unions. Thus, trade unions are focusing more on the local and national management. Though it's not them, but the management in the headquarter of Amazon in Seattle who takes the main decisions. It has refused to recogni-

ze trade unions and to negotiate with them - if they are not forced to do so by law, like they are in France or Italy. This has also its benefits, because it has created the opportunity for a long transnational rank-and-file cooperation of workers. As a matter of fact, the Amazing Workers have been working on the formulation of common demands and the development of a transnational strategy targeting the real decision makers.

Differing rights to strike make it difficult to develop a common tactic to strike. When trade unions in France had been in negotiations with Amazon, they didn't join the strikes in Germany and Spain for Prime Day 2018. While in Germany minority strikes have been going on for years, they are disallowed in Poland. Trade unions in Spain have to announce strikes two weeks in advance to local authorities, who provide Amazon with the relevant information – while part of ver.di's tactic in Germany has been to practice unannounced strikes to cause disturbances. Finally, if one trade union could get a contract in a certain country, they wouldn't be allowed to call for a strike anymore and most probably drop out of the struggle (e.g. Germany).

Conclusion and perspective

So, the potential power of Amazon's workers is smaller than one might expect with regard to discussions about logistics. As a matter of fact, Amazon's logistics network lacks choke points, the warehouses are more or less interchangeable. Only a strike of the majority of all workers in Europe might be able to shut the network down. Since the production process of Amazon is transnational, the struggle has to take place on the same level.

Therefore, workers might have to transform the field of struggle itself. They cannot just fight in one FC or in one country but have to fight on the transnational level. They will have to find and create new possibilities to fight together, think about changing (national) legal frameworks or looking for approaches beyond legal regulation. Also, the problem of temporary work and fixed-term contracts has to be regarded as part of the struggle against Amazon. Considering the apparent reluctance of the trade unions to tackle those problems sufficiently, rank-and-file workers might have to put pressure on them and change labor politics in their organizations.

The challenge to interrupt the network of Amazon shows the necessity to analyze power resources of workers in detail and develop appropriate strategies. The workers and trade unions engaged at Amazon have already started to do this and have shown an untiring resistance. For its further development it seems necessary to deepen alliances with social movements and workers from other (logistics) companies and sectors. This should also include a stronger focus on building public pressure on Amazon. The Amazon workers may not be in the strategic position to shift the balance of power for benefit of the whole working class. But they definitely give an inspiring example of how to take up the challenge to fight against capital beyond conventions and borders.

Final Declaration of the Transnational Meeting of Amazon Workers in Leipzig

<https://amworkers.wordpress.com/2019/10/24/final-declaration-of-the-transnational-meeting-in-leipzig/>

September 27–29, 2019

From 27th to 29th September, nearly 40 Amazon workers and supporters from Europe and the USA met in Leipzig, at Conne Island. It was the ninth meeting of the “Amazing Workers“.

As a prelude, on Friday afternoon we visited a rally of striking Amazon colleagues in front of the Fulfillment Center in Leipzig. Some colleagues had waited the whole night in front of this location as the strike night watch. In speeches and discussions, we underlined that we can only win the fight for better working conditions across borders and in solidarity.

On Saturday, a rally was held in front of the local office of the temporary employment agency Adecco in Leipzig’s city center under the motto “Abolish agency work and temporary contracts – overcome divisions!”. Across the globe, companies like Adecco support through their “services” the systematic denial of workers’ stability and well-being.

The labor dispute at Amazon reveals weaknesses in the prevailing policies of the European and North American trade union movements: although the nation-state borders for transnational corporations are becoming less important due to the abolition of nation-state regulations and free trade agreements, the workers are organizing themselves only nationally. Amazon stores and ships most of the goods for the German market from neighboring countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This is made possible by the European customs union. Across the border, wages are lower, working conditions worse and the right to strike more restricted. If German workers go on strike, their colleagues from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia will be turned into strikebreakers. The nationally organized trade union cannot do anything about it.

Our vision is different: we want to strike together for common demands. Despite all of our differences, we are united by the fact that we are facing a common employer. We do not unite out of idealism, but because we think that only when united do, we have a chance to effectively assert our interests against Amazon. We see ourselves not as a new union, but as workers from different unions with different orientations and traditions. Rather, we see ourselves as a complement to national trade union organizations. Since trade union leaders today are not in a position to take this necessary step towards the transnationalization of working struggles, we have to challenge them as members from the grassroots. We only have one life and we cannot wait! We hope for the solidarity and support of our local and national trade unions.

We have appointed a committee of eight with workers and supporters from different countries. Their task is, on the one hand, to temporarily take over organizational tasks such as public relations, and on the other hand, to submit a proposal for the establishment of an organization and strategy before the next meeting. The next meeting is scheduled for early March 2020 in Madrid. Organize yourselves in your Fulfillment Center, come to the meeting in Madrid and let us grow in numbers! Only together can we improve our working conditions! Same Struggle, Same fight – Workers of the World Unite

Workers Across the Globe are Uniting Against Amazon's Working Conditions

Press Release from Amazon
Workers for Black Friday,
November 2019

This Black Friday and Cyber Monday, Amazon workers across the globe will once again process the millions of orders that consumers make in preparation for the holiday season, or as Amazon calls it, Peak Season. Whenever an item is purchased on Amazon, it is touched by dozens of hands, processed through multiple warehouses, and brought to the consumer in mere days, or sometimes even in 24 hours. In order to accomplish this feat, workers in Amazon warehouses must work hard, work fast, and do so knowing that they will reap none of the massive profit from Amazon's busiest season, aside from their normal wages.

It is no secret that Jeff Bezos despises unions, yet within many Amazon warehouses across the world workers are forming unions that are fighting oppressive working conditions and inhumane treatment.

In Lille, France, workers are fighting against mandatory 6 day work weeks, mandatory Holiday work, and abusive discipline from management intended to intimidate the workers into submission. On Black Friday they will strike to demand that Amazon open negotiations. They will be joined by the activist group ATTAC and the Gilets Jaunes.

In Madrid, Spain, workers are asking the public to assist them in boycotting Amazon, to make it clear the public supports the workers and not the inhumane treatment inside the warehouse.

In Germany, all six of the Fulfillment Centers in the country will go on strike for several days starting on Black Friday. This is the first time these facilities have gone on strike at the same time. These warehouses are organized by the union Ver.di as part of a 6 years long campaign to get a worker contract with Amazon. The workers have demanded this for years, and Amazon of course has refused to negotiate.

In Poland, workers have opposed the high expectations for worker efficiency, have grown their union, and have recently negotiated to receive a higher Christmas bonus than Amazon originally offered, with less rigid conditions for workers to receive it. They have shown that victory against Amazon is possible. Still, the labour dispute continues: unions are demanding higher wages,

stable contracts and new forms of job evaluation. Part of this dispute is ongoing strike vote, in which 5,5 thousand Polish workers have already taken part. Amazon has opened this year two new warehouses in Poland and recruited thousand of workers before the peak time, big part of them through temp agencies, for one month contracts.

In the US, workers in Chicago were able to force management to provide water during the sweltering heat of the summer. They are defending their coworkers against authoritarian managers and voicing their discontent with stagnant wages. In Sacramento, workers were able to get two coworkers rehired after they had been terminated by a computer algorithm; one had missed work to grieve a dying parent and the other to take care of her children. In Minneapolis, workers have walked out of their facility and stopped work to demand increased safety and more respect from management.

Workers across the US also collaborated to gather injury report records from US Amazon warehouses, and it should surprise no one when they learned that Amazon's injury rate is at least twice that of similar industries. Amazon pushes its workers to the point of injury, then quickly disposes of them when they can no longer work. In the US, many Amazon workers are without healthcare, because they are temporary or part-time. Amazon offers these workers a measly Vision and Dental plan, hardly a comprehensive health plan, and workers never receive these benefits "on Day one" as they claim, because workers are always hired as temporary hires first. To add insult to injury, raising the wage to \$15 caused many Amazon workers to lose their government provided healthcare, something Amazon will not offer its US employees unless it is required by law.

Starting Black Friday, Jeff Bezos will again take the massive profits generated by the workers of Amazon fulfillment centers during Peak for himself. He will continue to amass an obscene amount of wealth while his workers suffer, are forced to work long weeks, are treated like robots or cattle, are disposed of when injured, and are given no agency over their work and little agency over their lives. But the days of Amazon assuming it can exploit and abuse workers with no consequences are over. We are no longer willing

to sit back and allow the richest man in the world to mistreat us. We are coming together, to act together, to fight back as a global movement, not just in one country, but in every country where Amazon does business. We made Jeff Bezos rich, and we deserve better than scraps from his table. We call on all Amazon workers across the globe to organize with your coworkers, fight for your issues, and make this company realize that without us, the work doesn't happen. Without us, there is no Amazon. Workers of all nations unite, here and now, and we can change this company and the world.

WHAT IS THE TSS PLATFORM?

The Transnational Social Strike (TSS) Platform aims at involving different kinds of workers — women and men, those employed in factories, those who experience the normality of precarity, locals and migrants — in a political process against subordination and exploitation. It is open to workers, groups and unions across Europe and beyond that share a common goal.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL STRIKE & WHY TO START A PROCESS TOWARDS THIS GOAL?

We experience every day that things in the workplaces and in society have changed. Organization of labor struggles is weakened by the divisions between those who work in the same hub, factory, school, call center etc. Solidarity is challenged by the differences of contracts, time of employment, political conditions such as residence permits or welfare rights. Labour disputing is more and more difficult and it is often not enough to stop the increasing precarization. National divisions imposed on labor obstruct the capacity to fight back against the transnational dimension of production and exploitation. As a result, a little conquest by one can sometimes be a loss for many others: be they workers in other countries with lower wages and income or temp workers in the same factory, young interns or migrants and refugees forced to work for free to get their visa.

The TSS process is born from the assumption that there is no technical way out to this situation: only a political movement can overturn the state of affairs according to which we are just numbers and shares in the balance sheets of the European technocrats and capitalists. The strike is for us the name of a power that aims at damaging the pillars on which this unequal and unjust society is grounded. Building the conditions to exercise this power is what we need in order to overthrow the current state of subordination to employers and politicians.

www.transnational-strike.info

THEREFORE TODAY THE STRIKE NEEDS
TO BE TRANSNATIONAL AND SOCIAL.

Transnational because capital works and thinks transnationally, creating divisions among countries, wages and working conditions to weaken us and make profits. Only by facing and overturning these divisions we can aspire at increasing our power and make ourselves heard. In this, we refuse to be labeled either as anti-eu or pro-eu: we deem insufficient to organize at the national level, as the transnational dimension is our battlefield and Europe is for us a common space of organization where to find allies and enemies.

Social because the power of the strike cannot be restricted to some categories of workers, trade unions or groups of supporters. The strike is a weapon that everyone has to be able to hold and use throughout society: even those who are constantly changing jobs, the migrants who risk their residence permit, the students and the unemployed. The strike can become for them a chance to be in the frontline, to organize and to overthrow the political conditions of exploitation. There must be no exclusion from the strike movement: this is the basis of our understanding of solidarity and social strike.

The TSS Platform is a political infrastructure to confront these challenges. It is a reservoir of experiences and tactics to politicize labor struggles, to connect social and labour struggles, and make their claims heard well beyond each group's and union's capacity. It is a space of organization, communication and encounter where different figures of labour can think together about how to develop a common discourse, how to support common European claims capable of being instruments of emancipation and how to build the conditions of possibility of the transnational social strike.



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