

# What's wrong with **amazon?**

A Report Detailing Amazon's Deadly and Dehumanizing Employment Practices, Anti-Union Activities, Destruction of Brick and Mortar Retailers at Taxpayer Expense, and Past Practice of Allowing Its Platform to Sell Racist Products.



by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union



This document provides background on Amazon's anti-union, anti-worker, and anti-brick and mortar activities, as well as a documented past practice of serving as a platform for selling racist products. This is not a tech company simply trying to expand. This is a company that opposes the rights of workers to receive a fair wage and to freely select a union without being subjected to propaganda against it as it fiercely pursues its goal of world market domination.

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# DEADLY AND DEHUMANIZING WORKING CONDITIONS

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A public record has emerged around working conditions at Amazon's warehouses here in the U.S., which demonstrates the need for a heightened level of oversight of Amazon's current and future New York operations, and for greater advocacy on behalf of Amazon workers.

## A DISTURBING PATTERN OF PREVENTABLE DEATHS AT AMAZON

This year a report from the National Council on Occupational Safety and Health named Amazon one of its "dirty dozen" companies and describes "a disturbing pattern of preventable deaths" at Amazon facilities. The report explains, "Amazon workers suffer injuries - and sometimes lose their lives - in a work environment with a relentless demand to fill orders and close monitoring of employee actions."<sup>i</sup>

The report notes that between 2013 and the time of publication earlier this year, seven workers had died at Amazon facilities. According to the report, two were crushed by forklifts in the warehouses, one was run over by a truck, one was killed by a driver in its parking lot, one suffered a fatal heart-related event during an overnight shift, one was dragged and crushed by a conveyor belt, and one was killed and crushed by a pallet loader. Two more Amazon workers were killed just weeks ago when a warehouse in Maryland partially collapsed during a storm.<sup>ii</sup>

## AMBULANCES PARKED OUTSIDE WAREHOUSES

A New York Times article, following up on an expose in the Morning Call, stated that at a Pennsylvania warehouse, "so many ambulances responded to medical assistance calls at the warehouse during a heat wave in May[...]that the retailer paid Cetronia Ambulance Corps to have paramedics and ambulances stationed outside the warehouse during several days of excess heat over the summer. About 15 people were taken to hospitals, while 20 or 30 more were treated right there."<sup>iii</sup>

## WAREHOUSE WORKERS PEE IN BOTTLES FOR FEAR OF RETALIATION FOR TAKING BREAKS

While Amazon publicly disputes it, in the UK, an author working undercover in an Amazon warehouse, reported that his coworkers were peeing in bottles because they were worried that taking a bathroom break could result in being disciplined. A separate survey reportedly found that almost three-quarters of UK fulfillment-center staff members were afraid of using the toilet because of time concerns.<sup>iv</sup>

## UNSTABLE SCHEDULING AND HIGH TURNOVER

While the expectation is that Amazon warehouses will create thousands of full-time jobs, the reality is different. According to an article in Gizmodo.com which appeared earlier this year, “the labor hours Amazon needs to power its brutally efficient supply chain appear to be far fewer [than expected]. To reduce overhead but continue to sop up performance-based incentives from the local governments it operates in, Amazon has become increasingly reliant on a work scheduling scheme that often coerces workers into leaving their shifts early or turns them away at the door without notice.”<sup>v</sup>

Amazon employs an innocuous sounding Voluntary Time Off (VTO) policy, which if misapplied can create “strong-arm tactics of one kind or another being used to pressure [warehouse workers] into leaving early without pay, supposedly of their own volition.” In fact, according to Gizmodo, some workers have said they believe they are targeted for discipline if they don’t accede to this brand of cost-cutting, which comes at workers’ expense. According to the article, “Of course, one of the qualities Amazon is known for is the pressure it puts on workers to ‘make rate,’ or perform their task at a sustained and often punishing speed. Several associates reported being reprimanded or seeing colleagues let go for hitting 99-percent of their goal.”<sup>vi</sup>

It has been reported that Amazon has the 2nd highest turnover rate of all Fortune 500 companies.<sup>vii</sup>

# ANTI-UNION ACTIVITIES

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## AMAZON'S ANTI-UNION VIDEO SPARKS RESPONSE FROM U.S. SENATORS

In 2018, after a Wall Street Journal article about a group of Amazon-owned Whole Foods employees launching a union campaign, Amazon released a company-wide training video called “Labor Training” for Whole Foods and Amazon managers.<sup>viii</sup> According to Gizmodo.com, the video says:

- “We are not anti-union, but we are not neutral either”
- “We do not believe that unions are in the best interests of our customers, our shareholder, or, most importantly, our associates.”

The video gives tips for managers on how to spot signs of union activity, encourages managers to give their negative opinions on managers, and trains them on how to restrict union activity without running afoul of the National Labor Relations Act.

In one section entitled “Warning Signs,” the video teaches managers to look out for activities “that can indicate associate disengagement, vulnerability to organizing, or early organizing activity,” such as:

- Use of words like “living wage” and “steward”
- Associates raising concerns on behalf of their coworkers
- Workers “who normally aren’t connected to each other suddenly hanging out together”
- Increased negativity in the workplace
- “[A]ny other associate behavior that is out of character”

The video coaches that “almost anything you say is lawful.” For example, “You would never threaten to close your building just because associates joined a union. But you might need to talk about how having a union could hurt innovation which could hurt customer obsession which could ultimately threaten the building’s continued existence.”

After the video was reported on in the media, Senators Sanders and Warren sent a letter to Amazon raising concerns about the video and requesting a copy.<sup>ix</sup> The letter reads, in part, “We write to express our alarm at recent reports that your company is distributing anti-union materials to Whole Foods managers that directs and encourages potentially illegal interference with the rights of thousands of workers.”

## **AMAZON RAMPING UP HIRING OF UNION BUSTING MANAGERS**

Amazon is posting job listings that cite “union avoidance” as preferred experience for the applicant. According to an article in Truthout.com, Amazon is advertising for staff with “union avoidance” experience. It asks for staff with a “knowledge of anti-union tactics. One recent job ad stated that an employee relations manager must have “at least seven years direct experience in...union avoidance work, or labor law with an emphasis on union avoidance.” Another senior employee relations ad stated that “significant experience in handling union organizing is required.” A third position required experience “responding to potential union activity.””<sup>x</sup>

## **THE BEZOS-OWNED WASHINGTON POST RUNS INTO LABOR TROUBLES**

After Jeff Bezos purchased the Washington Post, negotiations with the newspaper’s staff union became increasingly difficult as management demanded significant cuts in pay and benefits. One writer published an op-ed in the Huffington Post criticizing Bezos and was disciplined for it. The General Counsel of the National Labor Relations Board later found the discipline to be illegal. <sup>x</sup>

## **THE NEW YORK TIMES CALLS OUT AMAZON’S ANTI-UNION ACTIVITY**

In 2016, a New York Times story documented Amazon’s use of anti-union techniques, such as lying to workers about how unions have failed to support workers, telling a gathering of workers that they will no longer be able to communicate directly with Amazon if a union represents them, and have managers make the rounds asking workers their thoughts on unions. The article also states that some workers have been fired, supposedly for performance issues, just after those workers began to discuss the value of unionizing to coworkers, although Amazon’s spokesperson denies the allegation. <sup>xi</sup>

## **AMAZON HIRES UNION BUSTING FIRM TO BREAK WORKER ORGANIZING**

In January 2014, a group of maintenance workers at an Amazon warehouse filed for an election with the Machinists Union. Amazon brought in a law firm that specializes in fighting off organized labor and held employee meetings during which management tried to discourage votes in favor of the union. The union lost the election. A company spokesperson said, “With today’s vote against third-party representation, our employees have made it clear that they prefer a direct connection with Amazon.” <sup>xii</sup>

## **AMAZON SHUTTERS UNIONIZING FACILITY**

In 2000, the Communication Workers of America started a campaign to unionize 400 Amazon customer service employees. “But Amazon soon closed the call center where they worked as part of broader cuts following the Internet boom years.”<sup>xiii</sup>



## UNIONS AROUND THE WORLD STRIKE AT AMAZON WAREHOUSES

- European General Strike Against Amazon
  - ▷ Amazon warehouse workers in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Poland and England took part in a strike against Prime Day to bring attention to having “health and decent jobs.”<sup>xiv</sup>

## AMAZON AROUND THE WORLD AVOIDS UNIONS

- Poland and the Czech Republic
  - ▷ The Financial Times, in an article titled “Amazon hopes for a union-free Poland and Czech expansion, reported that the director of Amazon’s EU logistics operations said, “In terms of unions themselves, we don’t see a need for that...Any friction that gets between us and our associates slows down innovation, slows down change, slows down improvements on the shop floor, and we don’t see that as being good at all.”<sup>xv</sup>
- Amazon Hell-Scape in Australia
  - ▷ In Australia, Amazon hired its entire workforce at its new distribution center through an agreement with a third-party contracting firm. One worker described the warehouse job “as a hell-scape, and a union for warehouse workers reported that Amazon was paying significantly below what was negotiated at unionized warehouses.”<sup>xvi</sup>

In 2013 Dave Clark, the company’s vice president of worldwide operations and customer service reportedly told the New York Times that: “Amazon views unions as intermediaries that will want to have a say on everything from employee scheduling to changes in processes for handling and packaging orders. Amazon prizes its ability to quickly introduce changes like these into its warehouses....”<sup>xvii</sup>

# DESTRUCTION OF BRICK AND MORTAR AND JOB LOSS AT TAXPAYER EXPENSE

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Between 2014 and 2016, traditional brick-and-mortar retailers reduced their workforce by 200,000 jobs nationwide. Amazon's job growth must be weighed against this job loss. When job creation at Amazon is weighed against job losses at traditional retailers, the Institute on Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) estimates a net loss of 149,000 jobs in the U.S.<sup>xviii</sup>

Yet public officials want to treat Amazon jobs as "new" jobs creator and shower the company with subsidies. Since 2005, Amazon has received \$617 million in public subsidies,<sup>xix</sup> and it is reportedly set to receive \$3 billion more for locating HQ2 in NYC. These public dollars are used one way or another by Amazon to expand its business which results in the destruction of brick and mortar stores and the loss of the vibrancy of our downtown business districts. This is not a trade-off in which we should be investing public dollars.

Fundamentally, we should not be providing subsidies to attract Amazon to NYC when Amazon wants to locate in NYC. Incredibly, NYC and NYS have committed between them to providing Amazon a sum approaching \$3 billion to locate in NYC.<sup>xx</sup> If given, we will have \$3 billion less tax revenue with which to fund the increased burden on our roads, public transit systems, affordable housing stock and more.<sup>xxi</sup> All the while, one of the richest companies in the world is \$3 billion richer, and the competition, the brick and mortar stores that create the heart and soul of NYC, are stuck with the bill and a bleaker future.

# AMAZON'S PAST PRACTICE OF ALLOWING ITS PLATFORM TO BE USED TO PROMOTE RACIST AND WHITE NATIONALIST IDEOLOGIES

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Amazon is known as the “everything store,” providing consumers with increasingly easy access to a vast range of goods often at just the click of a button. However, while Amazon allows for cheaper and faster connections between buyers and sellers on books, electronics, household items, music and movies, it has provided the same conveniences for producers and consumers with more nefarious interests in mind.

Several groups committed to racial justice recently released a report this July entitled *Delivering Hate: How Amazon's Platforms Are Used to Spread White Supremacy, Anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia*.<sup>xxii</sup> The report states that a “close examination of Amazon’s various platforms and services reveals that for growing racist, Islamophobic, and anti-Semitic movements, the breadth of Amazon’s business combined with its weak and inadequately enforced policies provides a number of channels through which hate groups can generate revenue, propagate their ideas, and grow their movements.”

The study found that “Amazon enable[d] the celebration of ideologies that promote hate and violence by allowing the sale of hate symbols and imagery on its site, including Confederate and anti-Black imagery, Nazi and fascist imagery...”

Via its publishing, streaming, e-book, and print media platforms, the report lays out the ways that Amazon facilitated the proliferation of openly racist material that may encourage and incite violence. In response to the anticipated publication of the Report, Amazon said in USA Today, “Third party sellers who use our Marketplace service must follow our guidelines and those who don’t are subject to swift action including potential removal of their account.”<sup>xxiii</sup> But after publication Amazon told Newsweek magazine: “We have removed those listings, and permanently blocked the seller accounts found to be in violation of our policies. We have restricted the inventory to prevent it from being sold and are in the process of removing it from our fulfillment centers.” In so doing, no apology was extended by the company.<sup>xxiv</sup>

# ENDNOTES

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a report by the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union