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Amazon: condiciones laborales y luchas



julio 2016

Guardado en: [LABORAL LUCHAS OBRERAS](#)

Se venía gestando desde hace tiempo, pero hasta finales del mes pasado no se confirmó la noticia: en otoño de 2017 Amazon abrirá un nuevo centro logístico en el área metropolitana de Barcelona, más concretamente en El Prat de Llobregat. Miles de metros cuadrados construidos, augurios de inversiones millonarias y promesas de cuantiosos empleos dan forma, por ahora, al nuevo almacén planeado por la multinacional estadounidense del comercio de compra-venta online, con el que sumarán 29 en toda Europa (uno de ellos en la localidad madrileña de San Fernando de Henares).

Cierto es que la idea de este artículo no es nueva. Hace bastante que nos veníamos encontrando con noticias aquí y allá sobre las *duras* condiciones laborales de los centros de trabajo de Amazon o sobre huelgas en las plantas alemanas. Pero sin duda, lo que más nos llamó la atención fue una iniciativa que comenzó la pasada primavera (y que ya se ha repetido en otras dos ocasiones) por la cual trabajadores/as de varios almacenes de Alemania y Polonia se han estado reuniendo

para aunar esfuerzos y estrategias de cara a potenciar sus respectivas luchas por mejores condiciones laborales. Un proyecto muy interesante, pues mientras que el capital no reconoce fronteras y se desplaza libremente (uno de los grandes catecismos del libre mercado), nosotros/as, más ilusos/as, no solemos ser capaces de hacer lo mismo. Y así, llevamos varios meses con este texto en el tintero. Ahora, la noticia de la próxima apertura de un nuevo almacén de Amazon en nuestro entorno cercano nos parece acicate suficiente como para compartir con vosotros/as estas líneas. Por si nos sirven de algo.

Entrando en materia

Lo que naciera en 1994 como una modesta empresa de Seattle de venta de libros online, se ha convertido con el tiempo en una de las más grandes multinacionales de todo tipo de comercio por la red. En 1997 Amazon dio el salto al mercado de valores, para tres años después abrir su primer gran centro de trabajo en Europa y cinco más tarde comenzar su expansión a Asia. Actualmente, la empresa cuenta con más de 180.000 trabajadores/as y alrededor de 200 grandes centros logísticos de distribución.

A pesar de todo esto, Amazon apenas ha declarado beneficios desde sus comienzos como empresa (lo comenzó a hacer a partir de Julio de 2015). Para ser una multinacional de enormes dimensiones, sus beneficios parecen no corresponderse. Esto se debe, en gran medida, a su estrategia a largo plazo de ocupar una posición de monopolio en el sector (y no sólo en Occidente, sino también en inmensos mercados como el indio), para lo que invierte un enorme capital anual en la construcción de centros logísticos, la creación de nuevas líneas de productos y el desarrollo de nuevas aplicaciones tecnológicas. Todo ello destinado a convertirse en un completo servicio de entrega de productos, lo que le requerirá de almacenes cercanos a todas las grandes ciudades.

Pero aquí terminan las rarezas de esta empresa. En materia laboral, Amazon sigue la misma máxima que el resto, cuanto más puedas explotar a tus trabajadores/as (sin que se te revolucionen, claro está), mayores serán tus márgenes de beneficio. En este sentido, la plantilla de Amazon está compuesta tanto por trabajadores/as fijos/as como temporales (subcontratados/as éstos/as últimos/as a través de agencias de colocación), variando su configuración dependiendo de los picos de trabajo (aunque suele estar en torno al 50%). De este modo, se genera una primera división dentro de la empresa, ya sea por el hecho de que muchos de estos/as temporales no estarán más que semanas o pocos meses en el almacén, o debido a que, a pesar de empezar con sueldos similares, no todos/as pueden acceder a los mismos pluses. La siguiente división, ante todo en plantas como las alemanas o las británicas, deriva de la gran cantidad de empleados/as migrantes contratados/as, lo que la empresa aprovecha para sectorizar más si cabe a la plantilla. Por último, como todas las empresas del sector, existe una división muy clara entre los departamentos de entradas (que incluyen descargar los camiones, desempaquetar los productos, escanearlos y almacenarlos) y los de salidas (que se encargan de recoger los productos según las peticiones de los/as clientes, y del empaquetado y envío de los mismos), lo que en muchos casos supone una diferenciación tal que no existe un contacto entre el personal de cada departamento.

Así mismo, Amazon pone el acento sobre la productividad. Aunque en este ámbito su actuación puede llegar a ser considerada enfermiza. Cada departamento de cada planta tiene una serie de cuotas productivas, al mismo tiempo que estas cuotas también existen para cada trabajador/a individual. Dichas cuotas se establecen según el criterio de la empresa, aumentándolas en épocas puntales. El incumplimiento de las mismas conlleva sanciones, del mismo modo que muchos de los pluses se basan en la competencia por la productividad entre los/as trabajadores/as. Para el control productivo, los/as empleados/as llevan una serie de escáneres que les avisan de los pedidos y van marcando cuantas órdenes cumplen. Las paradas para ir al baño también son cuantificadas. Incluso hay veces en que el escáner aparece el mensaje de “trabaja más rápido”.



Luchas concretas

“[...] Es bastante erróneo representar a los trabajadores de Amazon como pobres víctimas y semi-robots (esto es, desafortunadamente, lo que gran parte de los sindicatos y campañas hacen). Amazon no paga menos que otros almacenes, las condiciones laborales no son mucho peores que en otros almacenes... ¡No pretendemos dar lástima! La

diferencia es que dado el tamaño y la concentración de los centros de trabajo de Amazon, los trabajadores allí tienen potencialmente más influencia. Ellos pueden crear el poder inicial del que muchos de nosotros carecemos”

Queda patente que el propio modelo de negocio de Amazon deviene en su mayor problema a nivel interno. Al juntar a miles de trabajadores/as en un mismo almacén, presionarlos en sus ritmos de trabajo y pagarles unos sueldos no muy elevados, las posibilidades de que se den conflictos son muy alta. Para evitar estas situaciones, la empresa tiene sus mecanismos de organización interna (como ya vimos en párrafos anteriores), a lo que se suman otros factores como la gran capacidad que ha tenido Amazon de cerrar las puertas a la entrada de sindicatos en sus centros de trabajo o la posibilidad de una importante movilidad interna del personal.

Pero sin duda, la mayor amenaza que pende sobre la plantilla de una planta es la recolocación completa del trabajo en un nuevo centro, aprovechando las diferencias regionales. En este sentido, cabe destacar que tras varios conflictos laborales en los nueve almacenes que Amazon posee en Alemania, se han abierto cuatro plantas muy cerca de su frontera, tres en el oeste de Polonia y otra en Praga (República Checa). Teniendo en cuenta que el sueldo medio de un/a empleado/a checo/a puede llegar a equipararse a un cuarto del sueldo de un/a trabajador/a alemán, gana enteros la descabellada idea de trasladar un producto desde Alemania a Praga, empaquetarlo y clasificarlo allí, para después volver a enviarlo a un/a cliente alemán/a.

Es aquí donde entra en juego la capacidad que tengamos los/as trabajadores/as para organizarnos más allá de las fronteras que nos separan. En este caso, esta barrera ha sido sobrepasada por un numeroso grupo de empleados/as alemanes y polacos/as de Amazon.

Para entender algo mejor esta situación, habría que situarnos en el contexto de las plantas de ambos países. En el caso de Alemania, las nueve plantas que posee Amazon emplean a unos 9000 trabajadores/as fijos/as y otros 10000 (o más, en épocas como la navidad) temporales. La principal reivindicación del sindicato Verdi (gran sindicato del sector servicios alemán, no muy combativo), que copa la afiliación de la plantilla de Amazon, es el cambio en el convenio colectivo que se les aplica a los/as trabajadores/as de la multinacional, pasando del de logística al de correos, lo que supondría una serie de aumentos salariales. Más allá de esto, durante estos años se han abierto numerosos frentes ante problemas como la enorme presión por las cuotas productivas de la empresa, la falta de descansos en el horario laboral o la situación de los/as trabajadores/as temporales, lo que se ha traducido tanto en conflictos colectivos, paros y huelgas varias, como en consecuencias individuales, como el hecho de tener un muy alto porcentaje de absentismo laboral (en torno al 20%).



Por otro lado, las tres plantas polacas se abrieron en 2014 al hilo de una serie de protestas en los almacenes alemanes, dos de ellas en ciudad de Wroclaw y otra en las cercanías de Poznan. Es esta última planta la que más nos interesa, donde se emplean unos 3000 trabajadores/as, entre personal fijo y temporal, en una serie de turnos que permiten mantener el almacén constantemente abierto. Tras varios conflictos en torno a las pagas y las condiciones de trabajo, un pequeño grupo de la plantilla pasa a crear una sección del sindicato de base Iniciativa Obrera (IP). Con el tiempo, la afiliación ha ido creciendo hasta más de 300 trabajadores/as. Por el contrario,

las dos sedes de Wroclaw están copadas por el sindicato mayoritario de Polonia, Solidarnosc, que no ha planteado batalla en la empresa.

En este contexto, la iniciativa de las reuniones internacionales partió de los/as trabajadores/as de IP, que se pusieron en contacto con las diferentes plantas alemanas hasta dar con una serie de empleados/as activos/as con un mayor grado de autonomía respecto de la central Verdi (que como ya hemos dicho, es un sindicato altamente institucionalizado, al mismo tiempo que aliado de Solidarnosc). Tras varios contactos, en marzo del año pasado tuvo lugar el primer encuentro de trabajadores/as de Amazon (siendo organizado al margen de los respectivos sindicatos), que volvió a repetirse en septiembre de ese mismo año y en este último febrero. A dichas conversaciones acudieron trabajadores/as tanto de Poznan como de varias plantas alemanas, aunque también están en contacto con empleados/as de Amazon Italia. En cuanto al resultado de dichos encuentros, destacamos las palabras de la resolución final del encuentro:

“Este intercambio de impresiones nos reveló que los trabajadores de Amazon en los distintos países se enfrentan a los mismos problemas (bajos salarios, reglamento, una presión en el trabajo que lleva a problemas de salud, prácticas típicas de Amazon como la de contratar y despedir, etc.). Cuando tiene que hacer frente a las reivindicaciones obreras, Amazon emplea estrategias similares en todos los países, como amenazar a los obreros con el despido, presionar a los activistas sindicales, negociar sin voluntad de ceder, etc.”.

Así, una de las primeras consecuencias de estas reuniones entre trabajadores/as de distintas plantas pudo verse en junio del año pasado. En respuesta de una huelga organizada por Verdi en las plantas alemanas, la dirección de los almacenes polacos intentó que sus trabajadores/as realizaran durante un tiempo indeterminado varias horas extra al día. En Poznan, la sección de IP denunció la estratagema de la empresa, lo que unido a las tensiones que se habían acumulado en el centro en los últimos meses, degeneró en una serie de acciones destinadas a entorpecer el normal funcionamiento de la planta. Algunas tan básicas como tirar toda la basura a la misma papelera hasta saturarla y tener que parar la cadena de producción (una idea entre muchas), produjeron una disminución muy sustancial del ritmo de trabajo. Y ello se consiguió pues numerosos empujados/as participaron de las acciones, muchos de más de los/as organizados/as en torno a IP. Al día siguiente, y la noticia había corrido como la pólvora a ambos lados de la frontera. Los/as trabajadores/as de IP trataron de extender la lucha con una serie de reclamaciones de aumentos salariales, lo que de primeras fue contestado con negativas por parte de la empresa (que por principios se niega a todo diálogo con los sindicatos, tratando de convertir todo conflicto colectivo en varios conflictos individuales), aunque a unas semanas más tarde se acabaron produciendo pequeños aumentos en el precio de las horas trabajadas así como en los bonus cobrados por los/as empujados/as. Del mismo modo, dos trabajadores/as fueron despedidos/as a consecuencia de este conflicto.

Para ir acabando...

Esto no son más que unos pocos ejemplos de nuestra fuerza cuando nos organizamos en los centros de trabajo. Las posibilidades de futuro de la lucha en Amazon son inmensas, si bien son muchos los problemas que tienen que ir resolviendo, ya sea la lejanía en muchos de los conflictos entre trabajadores/as fijos/as y temporales, las dificultades para encontrarse que ofrece un centro de trabajo con turnos ininterrumpidos y departamentos muy parcelados, el cómo hacer frente a la represión de la empresa... Habrá que ver cómo se desenvuelven los acontecimientos en Amazon de aquí en adelante.

Para más información sobre las luchas que se están llevando a cabo en los diferentes centros de trabajo de Amazon en Europa os recomendamos un par de webs: la que han abierto algunos/as de los/as propios/as trabajadores/as de la empresa que están participando de las reuniones internacionales, www.amworkers.wordpress.com (está en varios idiomas, aunque no en castellano), y www.libcom.org, donde podréis encontrar varios artículos de interés de la gente de Angry Workers of the World sobre las condiciones laborales en Amazon tanto en Europa como en la India, así como actualizaciones sobre los conflictos laborales abiertos. También queremos destacar un artículo sobre los conflictos en la planta de Poznan de la revista norteamericana Jacobin, www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/amazon-poland-poznan-strikes-workers/.

“Según las características de este tipo de trabajo, las evidencias muestran un aumento del riesgo de enfermedad mental y de enfermedades físicas”

Esta frase forma parte de las conclusiones de una investigación realizada en 2013 por la cadena británica BBC sobre el trabajo en un almacén de Amazon. Para dicha investigación, contaron con un reportero encubierto que fue contratado a través de una empresa externa para reforzar el centro que la multinacional posee en la localidad galesa de Swansea. Pasó varios meses empleado como mozo de almacén, encargado del tratamiento de órdenes de recogida de productos, mientras llevaba encima una cámara oculta con la que immortalizaba su día a día. Por un auricular le iban comunicando que producto debía de recoger y transportar en su carretilla, a la vez que un escáner registraba el tiempo que empleaba en llevar a cabo cada orden de pedido y pitaba si se equivocaba en algo. El rendimiento de resolución de órdenes del reportero se enviaba directamente a sus superiores/as, y si éstos/as consideraban que la producción era baja, podía conllevar acciones disciplinarias en su contra. Las palabras del reportero son bastante clarificadoras en este sentido: *“Somos máquinas, somos robots, encendemos nuestro escáner, lo llevamos encima, pero bien podrían conectárnoslo a nosotros mismos”.*

Parte de este tiempo, el reportero lo pasó en el turno de noche, donde realizaba jornadas de diez horas y media con un descanso de 1 hora durante 4 días a la semana. Llegó a contabilizar que en una de dichas jornadas nocturnas recorrió andando 11 millas.

Con todos estos datos obtenidos a lo largo de varios meses, la BBC consultó con diversos/as especialistas en el estudio del estrés (y sus consecuencias) en el trabajo, y las conclusiones fueron las esperadas, que si bien este tipo de trabajos son ya *per se* duros, las altas exigencias a nivel de productividad de Amazon atacan más si cabe la salud personal y el bienestar de sus empleados/as. Del mismo modo, los turnos nocturnos tan largos para un trabajo con una carga física pesada y una importante tensión mental, podrían llegar a ser ilegales según las normativas británicas en materia laboral.

La respuesta de Amazon a la publicación del artículo fue asegurar que las condiciones laborales de sus centros de trabajo están acordes a las leyes del Reino Unido, que los objetivos de productividad se realizan en función de anteriores rendimientos alcanzados por sus trabajadores/as y que siempre informan a los/as nuevos/as empleados/as de que ciertos puestos suponen unos esfuerzos físicos elevados. Nada nuevo bajo el sol, sus beneficios aumentan pasando por encima de nuestra salud.

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Valores no se vende ... 2

El sistema de trabajo que enfrenta hacia la muerte ... 3

Organización como clase ... 4

La recuperación de la vivienda en la ciudad de Madrid ... 5

El sistema de trabajo que enfrenta hacia la muerte ... 6

El sistema de trabajo que enfrenta hacia la muerte ... 7

El sistema de trabajo que enfrenta hacia la muerte ... 8

El sistema de trabajo que enfrenta hacia la muerte ... 9

El sistema de trabajo que enfrenta hacia la muerte ... 10

El sistema de trabajo que enfrenta hacia la muerte ... 11

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Si queréis leer el artículo completo, os dejamos el enlace de la web de la BBC: www.bbc.com/news/business-25034598:

Amazon workers face 'increased risk of mental illness'

25 November 2013



Online retailer Amazon employs more than 20,000 people across its eight warehouses during its peak Christmas season

A BBC investigation into a UK-based Amazon warehouse has found conditions that a stress expert said could cause "mental and physical illness".

Prof Michael Marmot was shown secret filming of night shifts involving up to 11 miles of walking - where an undercover worker was expected to collect orders every 33 seconds. It comes as the company employs 15,000 extra staff to cater for Christmas. Amazon said [in a statement](#) worker safety was its "number one priority".

Undercover reporter Adam Littler, 23, got an agency job at Amazon's Swansea warehouse. He took a hidden camera inside for BBC Panorama to record what happened on his shifts. He was employed as a "picker", collecting orders from 800,000 sq ft of storage. A handset told him what to collect and put on his trolley. It allotted him a set number of seconds to find each product and counted down. If he made a mistake the scanner beeped. "We are machines, we are robots, we plug our scanner in, we're holding it, but we might as well be plugging it into ourselves", he said. "We don't think for ourselves, maybe they don't trust us to think for ourselves as human beings, I don't know." Prof Marmot, one of Britain's leading experts on stress at work, said the working conditions at the warehouse are "all the bad stuff at once". He said: "The characteristics of this type of job, the evidence shows increased risk of mental illness and physical illness."



Adam Littler went undercover as a "picker" at Amazon's
Swansea warehouse

"There are always going to be menial jobs, but we can make them better or worse. And it seems to me the demands of efficiency at the cost of individual's health and wellbeing - it's got to be balanced."

Amazon said official safety inspections had not raised any concerns and that an independent expert appointed by the company advised that the picking job is "similar to jobs in many other industries and does not increase the risk of mental and physical illness".

The scanner tracked Mr Littler's picking rate and sent his performance to managers. If it was too low, he was told he could face disciplinary action.

When Mr Littler worked night shifts his pay rose from the daily rate of £6.50 per hour to £8.25 per hour.

After experiencing a ten-and-a-half-hour night shift, he said: "I managed to walk or hobble nearly 11 miles, just short of 11 miles last night. I'm absolutely shattered. My feet are the thing that are bothering me the most to be honest."

Amazon said new recruits are warned some positions are physically demanding and that some workers seek these positions as they enjoy the active nature of the work. The company said productivity targets are set objectively, based on previous performance levels achieved by the workforce.



Amazon said the safety of its employees was its "number one priority"

Those on the night shift work a four-day week with an hour's break per shift.

Experts have told Panorama these ten-and-a-half-hour night shifts could breach the working time regulations because of the long hours and the strenuous nature of the work.

Barrister Giles Bedloe said: "If the work involves heavy physical and, or, mental strain then that night worker should not work more than eight hours in any 24-hour period.

But Amazon said its night shift is lawful. They said they sought expert advice to ensure the shifts "comply with all relevant legal requirements".

Amazon said it had invested £1bn in the UK and created 5,000 permanent jobs.

It added that it relied on the good judgement of thousands of employees. The company said: "Together we're working hard to make sure we're better tomorrow than we are today."

Panorama: The Truth Behind The Click, BBC One, Monday 25 November at 20:30 GMT and then available in the UK on the [BBC iPlayer](#).

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03.31.2016 POLAND

Confronting Amazon

By [RALF RUCKUS](#)

Through creative actions and cross-border solidarity, Polish workers are undermining Amazon's anti-union playbook.

Since its humble beginnings as an online bookseller, Amazon has become a household name — synonymous with endless product choices and same-day shipping, all sustained by a vast logistics network that spans continents.

[Amazon](#) — which now has more than ninety fulfillment, redistribution, and sorting centers in the US — began opening warehouses in Europe in 1999. Five years later, it moved into Asia, establishing centers in Japan and China, and now India — bringing its total number of warehouses to more than two hundred.

What's peculiar about Amazon is that the company's enormous size isn't matched by huge profits. So far it has dumped most of its surplus into building facilities, creating product lines, and developing new technologies.

But that's where the oddity ends. While Amazon's sales revenue and employment figures still lag far behind [Walmart's](#) — about \$90 billion and 150,000 workers, compared to Walmart's \$490 billion and well over two million employees — the two giants share a core philosophy about work relations. The more you exploit workers, the retailers agree, the bigger your profit margins.

Amazon warehouse workers, however, are beginning to fight back. One of the key sites of struggle is Poland, where employee strikes and work slowdowns are upsetting ossified unions and Amazon management alike. But can workers in the Eastern European country go toe-to-toe with an international behemoth?

Amazon in Poland

Germany and the United Kingdom continue to anchor [Amazon's European expansion](#). But Poland is playing an increasingly critical role in the company's push to serve the German market, its second largest.

In fall 2014, Amazon built three new fulfillment centers — large warehouses where products are picked, packed, and shipped to consumers — in western Poland. One center is located in Sady, near the city limits of Poznań, and the other two are close to the city of Wrocław. In the lead-up to the warehouse openings, Amazon announced it would bring on six thousand permanent workers and up to nine thousand temporary employees during peak times.

When the Poznań fulfillment center opened in September 2014, shop-floor workers were hired

directly by Amazon on three-month contracts and then became permanent workers a few months later. New hires had just a few days of training before they were turned loose on the warehouse floor, and starting in October, Amazon began hiring workers through a handful of temp agencies.

Employing a mix of permanent and temporary workers is central to Amazon's [workplace model](#), which divides workers between those employed by Amazon itself on a permanent contract (marked by a blue badge) and workers that temporary work agencies bring on for a few weeks or months (marked by a green badge). Off-peak, temporary workers constitute at least half the workforce, and during the busiest stretch (November through January), they at least double the number of permanent workers.

The male-to-female ratio in Poland is fairly equal (although this varies by department), and most workers are either in their twenties or over forty-five, reflecting the characteristics of the broader labor market. For twenty-somethings, working in the Amazon warehouse is typically a first-time or seasonal job; for older workers it's often a last-ditch attempt at employment. Most workers are Polish, but a few come from other countries, such as Ukraine. Foreign employees generally work as janitors, or fill subcontracted positions in the warehouse or in cafeteria.

In the Poznań warehouse, the workweek is divided into four ten-hour day and evening shifts, plus overtime. Shifts are Sunday to Wednesday, Monday to Thursday, and Wednesday to Saturday; workers switch from the day shift to the night shift every four weeks.

Like other logistics companies, Amazon organizes its departments according to "inbound" and "outbound" work. Inbound tasks include unloading trucks with forklifts, unpacking and scanning goods, and stowing products in the warehouse; outbound work involves picking goods from the shelves to match customer orders, and packing, loading, and shipping the products. Both departments rely on conveyor belts, scanners, and computers, but most of the work (grabbing and scanning items, running from one spot to another in the warehouse, checking information on handheld scanners) is "unskilled" and done by hand.

Amazon's model of work organization isn't entirely new. Even before the introduction of computer-controlled systems, catalog companies like Sears used an analogous system in its warehouses. But the Seattle company has capitalized on the standardization of transport systems (containerization), the mainstreaming of online services (ordering via central online platforms), and the Taylorization and restructuring of [warehouse work](#) (digital surveillance, scanning codes, computer-controlled conveyor belts, stowing and picking robots) to capture an increasing share of the retail market.

And like most other big companies, Amazon's organizational innovations depend on squeezing as much work out of employees as possible. At Amazon, every department in the fulfillment center sets an hourly quota. The company doesn't reveal how quotas are determined.

While managers say they calculate the minimum pace for individuals based on the average output of 90 percent of the most productive workers, they don't divulge how the collective target — the rate demanded for all workers — is set.

All of the workers in the warehouse must reach the target to get a wage bonus. The minimum performance level, meanwhile, is used to pressure individual workers. Those who fail to meet it have a "feedback talk" with managers and then face termination if they don't improve.

Amazon also frequently raises the quota, ratcheting up the pressure to complete tasks at a faster and faster pace. As one explained, “When I work too slow I get a kind of [text message] to my scanner: ‘Work faster!’”

When the fulfillment center in Poznań first opened, the pay for warehouse workers was 13 Polish Złoty (PLN) per hour, or about 2,000 PLN (\$480) a month after bonuses and taxes. This is higher than Poland’s minimum wage (which in 2015 was 1,750 PLN, or \$420 per month before taxes), and Amazon team leaders make about 20 to 25 percent more than their co-workers. But while all temporary workers receive the same pay they don’t all receive bonuses. And though enough for a single person, 2,000 PLN is hardly sufficient to support a family in Poland.

Organizing in Poznań

In Poznań, workers were initially trained by Amazon team leaders from abroad, and the Polish workers who were employed as team leaders were sent to learn at fulfillment centers in the UK and Germany. This interaction gave Polish workers firsthand information about wage levels and working conditions abroad. As one explained, “Amazon tells us: ‘You are the best workers in Europe!’ We ask: ‘Why, then, do we get the lowest wages in Europe?’”

After a few weeks on the job, some workers and team leaders in Poznań began discussing their dissatisfaction with the working conditions, as well as possible ways to organize and fight for improvements.

One suggestion was to organize inside the warehouse with the help of *Solidarność* (Solidarity), Poland’s largest union. But most workers — viewing the storied organization as largely passive and more interested in nationalist and conservative religious issues than workers’ struggles — opposed seeking its assistance. Younger members of Amazon’s workforce, some with higher education and work experience in Western Europe, considered *Solidarność* out of touch, a bunch of “old union men with mustaches.”

An Internet search turned up an alternative: the [Inicjatywa Pracownicza](#) (Workers’ Initiative). Impressed by reports about the militant workers’ struggles the union was involved in — as well as the [IP’s logo](#), which features a fierce-looking black cat — the Amazon workers arranged a mid-December meeting.

One worker later recalled that workers had decided beforehand that if the IP office was in a nice, big building they would know the unionists were “thieves” and would search for another option. But the IP office was in a tiny room in an old building.

In fact, a few IP activists were already working at Amazon and had been involved in organizing drives and support campaigns elsewhere. They’d also distributed leaflets about Amazon’s employment practices to workers in the fall (without using the union’s name or logo).

Soon after their initial meeting, the discontented workers and the handful of IP activists employed at Amazon met in the Poznań fulfillment center’s parking lot to form an IP union section. While they had never engaged in this kind of labor action, warehouse workers outside the IP took the lead; the IP activists registered the union section, wrote and printed leaflets, and dealt with management. The shared experience of working at Amazon provided the basis for collaboration.

Within a year, the IP section at Amazon's Poznań warehouse grew from 20 members to more than 350. Most are permanent shop-floor workers (a minority are temp workers, and a few are team leaders). Amazon only knows the 15 names of the elected IP shop stewards, who are statutorily protected from dismissal; the rest are kept secret to prevent management retaliation.

In early 2015, the IP section wrote and distributed leaflets discussing problems at work and information about workers' legal rights, while other employees (some of whom were not even union members) initiated petitions that at times received hundreds of signatures. The petitions dealt with workers' main grievances — low wages, rising quotas, changes in shift schedules, and working on public holidays.

Amazon has responded to the organizing drive in a variety of ways. As elsewhere (US, UK, Germany) it has made no official concessions to the union, while doing everything from ignoring organizing attempts and avoiding open confrontation to trying to isolate union activity and engaging in anti-union maneuvering. It has also begun promoting its own company-wide system of employee representation at its Polish warehouses called "Forum Pracownicze" (Workers' Forum).

Networking in Poland and Beyond

While the IP has won hundreds of members in Poznań, it has little presence in the two warehouses near Wrocław. There, Solidarność is the legal representative of the the workforce and has about one hundred members.

IP is open to collaborate with Solidarnosc members to push for better worker benefits and stronger health and safety regulations. But despite the IP's attempts to stay in contact with Solidarność's Amazon workers, this has proven challenging.

Solidarność has issued public statements attacking IP for being too "confrontational" and "irresponsible" and presents itself as a conciliatory alternative, willing to negotiate and work with management.

Since the fulfillment centers in Poland mainly serve the German market, the IP has also tried to link up with workers in Amazon warehouses there. Verdi — a large German service union with two million members — has been organizing [short-term strikes](#) since 2013 in an attempt to pressure Amazon to adhere to Verdi's collective bargaining agreement with Germany's mail-order and retail industry to raise employee pay. Though Amazon has increased wages since the strikes began, it refuses to sign a retail sector agreement, insisting that its warehouse workers are "logistics workers."

Verdi is known for its willingness to work with management to reach mutually beneficial arrangements (known as "social partnership" agreements), as well as for tightly controlling worker mobilizations and halting worker actions that threaten to get out of hand.

But Verdi has seen its position in retail weakened due to the decline of unionized companies and the rise of new corporations like Amazon, which have resisted organizing efforts. At the same time, members are increasingly dissatisfied with the way Verdi conducts workplace struggles, and have started looking to alternative sectoral unions.

When IP activists in Poland initially reached out to workers at Amazon's German warehouses, they weren't sure what to expect. Verdi partners with Solidarność through the inter-union organization Uniglobal, but Verdi workers at fulfillment centers in Bad Hersfeld, Brieselang, and Leipzig had expressed interest in establishing worker-to-worker links with members of the IP section before they made contact.

Bad Hersfeld workers in particular have established some autonomy from Verdi's bureaucracy and have built ties with outside activist groups. For instance, members of the [Blockupy campaign](#) in nearby Frankfurt sent a small delegation to support striking Amazon workers.

After an initial meeting in March 2015, several cross-border meetings between activists and Amazon workers from Poznań, Bad Hersfeld, Brieselang, and Leipzig have taken place. The gatherings, attended by ten to thirty workers (and a number of their supporters), have made it possible for workers to correct misconceptions and find common ground: Polish now workers see that German warehouse workers share the same grievances, and German workers are no longer afraid the company will relocate all of its German warehouses to "cheap labor" Poland.

Work Action

The cross-border meetings have also facilitated labor actions.

In late June 2015, in response to a Verdi strike in Germany, Amazon management in Poznań tried to make Polish employees work overtime to pick up the slack. The tactic was nothing new. In the past, Amazon had shifted the handling of orders between fulfillment centers during strike days (as well as in the face of supply or delivery problems, or delays due to bad weather).

But this time, workers in Poznań knew the impetus for the forced overtime and publicized it widely on blackboards, banners, and flyers. In Poznań, tensions had been rising for months, and many employees had strengthened their relationships with each other through collecting petition signatures and working on the IP organizing drive.

Days before the increased overtime kicked in, workers and managers alike knew something was up: employees were discussing ideas on the shop floor, on the company bus, and even on Facebook about how to slow down the work process.

On the night forced overtime was set to begin, IP shop stewards showed up to work wearing Verdi strike t-shirts. Management promptly sent them to a training session, eager to get them off the shop floor.

But other workers, determined to go ahead with the action, exploited a weakness in the workflow process. In the pick department, workers normally place multiple items into bins, which are then put on the conveyor belt. That night, however, they dropped them in one at a time, quickly clogging the conveyor belt and causing one-item bins to begin tumbling from the belt.

After a big pile of bins and items formed, the belt had to be switched off — right in front of the general manager, who, expecting trouble that night, had made a special trip to the warehouse to supervise the workers. Also undeterred, workers elsewhere in the warehouse were carrying out similar actions.

The dozens of workers who carried out the wildcat action — some of whom didn't belong to the IP and hadn't engaged in this kind of struggle before — declined to make specific demands. But they described the slowdown as the result of frustration, as well as an act of solidarity with the striking workers in Germany. News of the action spread quickly in the warehouse, and many workers were enthusiastic, knowing that they'd shown they would no longer quietly accept every company order.

The German Amazon workers who had been participating in the cross-border meetings were also impressed with the action. Since the slowdown, there has been talk of similar actions in German fulfillment centers in solidarity with labor actions at warehouses in Poznań.

The action also got the media's attention. Both Polish and international media noted that the slowdown was the first expression of worker militancy in Amazon's Polish fulfillment centers. *Solidarność*, meanwhile, played the part of the staid union. Its section from the Wrocław warehouses issued a press release a few days later condemning the action.

Management responded by interrogating workers who had taken part in the action, suspending five workers and later firing two. On the whole, though, they've tried to isolate activists by intimidating unorganized workers instead of attacking them directly.

But this tactic could backfire. As one woman who participated in the slowdown said during her interrogation: "I will do it again if we are forced to do overtime again!" Two workers have also taken Amazon to labor court demanding reinstatement, backed by the IP.

The IP officially opened the collective bargaining process with Amazon the day after the slowdown and presented the workers' demands, which included a wage increase to 16 PLN per hour and longer breaks. But the strike had soured Amazon on the IP. During an official employee assembly in Poznań, Amazon's general manager said the company would "prefer to talk to the workers directly and not via the union."

Despite several bargaining meetings in late summer and early fall 2015, the IP was unable to make much headway. Amazon management refused to consider any of the workers' demands, let alone sign an official agreement with the union. Amazon then promptly declared the mediation that followed a failure, preventing the IP from organizing a legal two-hour warning strike during the mediation period. The warning strike would have given the union the opportunity to mobilize workers against Amazon's intransigence.

With the mediation process officially closed, the IP would have to go through the laborious process of organizing a formal strike: it would need to hold an authorization vote in each Polish fulfillment center (including the warehouses near Wrocław), and the majority of workers would have to affirm their support.

At the moment, it is not clear whether IP's Amazon section will follow that path or whether it can garner enough support on the shop floor. In the meantime, workers are focusing on everyday shop floor activism and engaging other employees through petitioning and flyering.

The IP's steady presence, and its continued pressure on Amazon, have secured some modest gains for workers. A few weeks after the slowdown, Amazon boosted the hourly wage from 13 to 14 PLN an hour (both in Poznań and Wrocław), and in late fall the company increased worker bonuses. In other cases, the company has reversed or postponed decisions that workers found objectionable,

such as its plan to change shift hours.

Challenges in Poznań

After a year of organizing efforts at the Poznań fulfillment center, workers are facing five major challenges.

First, problems of communication and assemblies. IP's Amazon workers have found it difficult to have a general assembly — a necessity since all workers are never off at the same time, and most IP members work the same shift. Furthermore, after working a ten-hour shift, enduring a commute of up to four hours, and juggling family responsibilities, workers are often too exhausted to attend meetings.

Second, the relationship between permanent workers and temporary workers. While the majority of the workers in the IP section are permanent Amazon employees, a significant number of workers are temps employed for brief periods (with some exceptions). Temporary workers have said they don't want to engage in organizing because the job is only short term, and while they're angry about their working conditions and their insecure job status, they're also hoping for permanent employment from Amazon.

This attitude sometimes leads to conflicts with permanent workers, who have more job security and more "control" over quotas. During the pre-Christmas peak last year, permanent workers were promoted to easier positions without quotas while temporary workers filled the positions with daily quotas. The tables turned earlier this year, when pressure increased on permanent workers. They began to receive work tasks with quotas and, in some cases, temps were tasked with overseeing permanent workers.

IP's Amazon section, seizing on the issue of precariousness, has organized rallies outside the offices of the temporary work agency Adecco in Poznań and Warszawa. It has also demanded that Amazon limit the proportion of temporary workers.

A divided labor force gives Amazon the best of both worlds: it can hire and fire its [temporary workers](#) according to the ups and downs of online sales, while counting on its permanent section to maintain the knowledge and skills needed to run the warehouses.

A third challenge is exhaustion among permanent workers. Over the past year, some of the permanent workers most active in IP's Amazon section have quit their jobs out of frustration or because they found better work elsewhere.

Many of those who are still especially involved are completely drained. During the 2015 pre-Christmas peak, many workers from IP's Amazon section were out sick, making organizing difficult. A December rally in Poznań, for instance, was sparsely attended.

Fourth, there's the balance between effective strategies and legal boundaries. The IP can't claim official responsibility for wildcat actions, and the legal work it carries out — such as the stalled negotiations with Amazon — have had little effect. Wildcat actions, however, exert direct and immediate pressure on Amazon even if they include more risks for the workers involved.

The larger question, then, is this: how do workers negotiate the tension between the limitations and

predictability of official union actions and the efficiency of disruptive wildcat actions in the context of a long-term struggle against a company like Amazon?

Finally, workers have had to fend off Amazon's attacks. Generally, the company's strategy toward unions has oscillated between largely ignoring workers' efforts and actively bashing unions. While IP's organizing did not disrupt the labor process at Amazon's Polish warehouses, the slowdown in June 2015 had a marked impact, and a range of other factors — including the contentious collective bargaining process, open conflicts at Amazon employee assemblies, and a range of media reports critical of the IP — have sparked increasing tensions between Amazon's management and IP's shop stewards.

Amazon's actions indicate that tension likely won't dissipate any time soon. For instance, Amazon has offered the union an office off-site rather than, as mandated by Polish labor law, one on the company premises. While union shop stewards were initially able to use their "union hours" to meet at the workplace, Amazon has now prohibited this practice. And in recent weeks, several IP shop stewards have been transferred or given harder work tasks.

If IP's Amazon section continues its organizing efforts, such reprisals will likely get even worse.

Spreading the Struggle

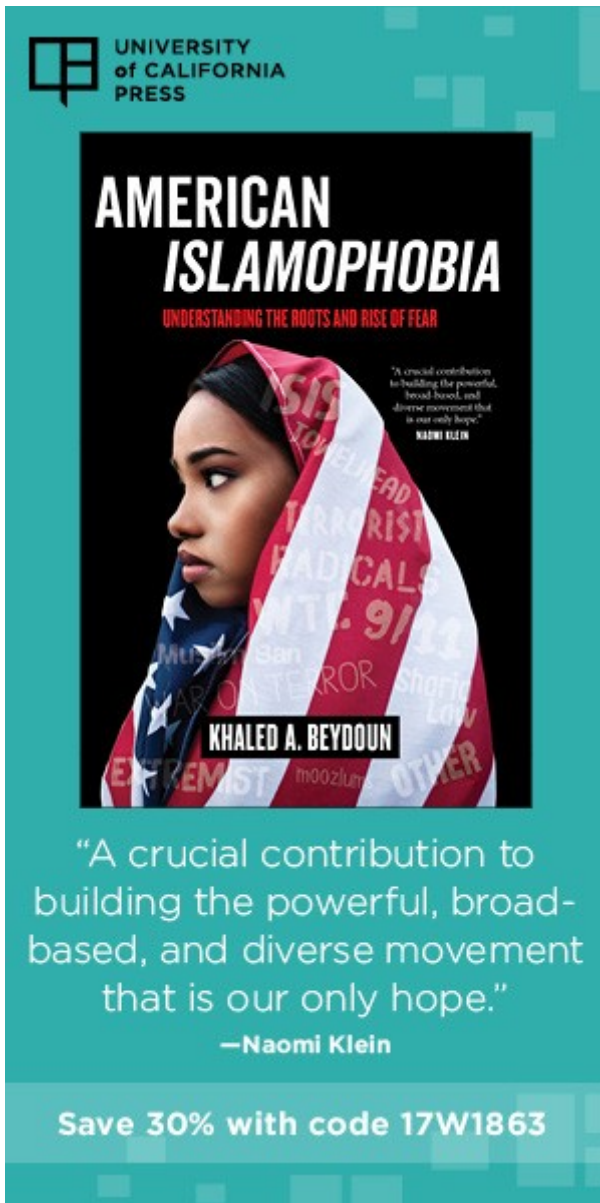
Amazon is in the midst of expanding its warehouse and logistics network further into Eastern Europe. The company opened a new warehouse in Dobrovíz near Prague in the fall of 2015, and recently announced plans to open another warehouse in Poland. As such, cross-border organizing and solidarity is more important than ever.

Unfortunately, some union leaders don't agree. The Verdi leadership has frequently tried to undermine the collaboration between Amazon workers in Poznań and Germany, arguing that Verdi members should work with Solidarność rather than the IP because the latter isn't a Uniglobal member.

Meanwhile, Solidarność sees the IP as competition and publicly attacks it for its "radical" politics. If workers in Amazon warehouses in Poland and Germany are going to organize together, they'll have to clear the obstacles union leaders throw in their way.

To that end, Amazon workers from Poland and Germany converged in Berlin last month for their most recent cross-border meeting. And they've begun reaching out to Amazon warehouse workers in countries like France, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Spain.

Amazon is a formidable foe, so they'll need all the help they can get. But over the past year, Poznań workers have shown how solidarity and organizing have the potential to bring even a multinational giant to heel.



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