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Amazon's mobile workforce and its protest movement in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Amazon's warehouse and delivery workers became an essential and rapidly expanding workforce in the United States during the pandemic. Amongst various categories of workers, protest and legal mobilization arose as part of a movement to protect Amazon employees in the mobile sector, even while so much else of the country was in lockdown.²

Keywords

United States; pandemic; mobile labor; warehouse workers; delivery workers; protest

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² Saultz, John. 2020. Essential Workers. *Family medicine* 52(7): 469–470. <https://journals.stfm.org/familymedicine/2020/july-august/fte-jul-aug20/>.

From the start of the pandemic, Amazon began instituting an array of policies to expand its workforce and increase productivity at incredible rates in order to keep up with rising consumer demands for delivery services as the United States was in lockdown. While white-collar workers were mandated to “work-from-home,” Amazon warehouse workers and delivery workers became the backbone of America’s delivery services. However, since March 2020, these mobile workers in warehouse and delivery have mobilized wide-ranging legal and social protest demanding adequate protections and compensation.

More mobile than ever: Amazon warehouse and delivery workers

At Amazon, a company that delivers over 1.5 million packages per day across the US,³ it became increasingly apparent that there were two distinct categories of mobile *essential workers*⁴ during the COVID-19 pandemic who continued to clock in in-person: warehouse workers and delivery workers. Amongst such groups, both protest and legal mobilization arose as part of a movement to protect those in the mobile sector, when much of the country was in lockdown.⁵

Amazon is the second largest private employer in the US after Walmart, with nearly 600,000 full-time and part-time employees.⁶ The company’s supply chain is massive, stretched across 110 warehouses in the US that receive incoming goods worldwide, and from which all deliveries to customers depart. Packages are then delivered by truck, plane, and Amazon Delivery Service partners. A whopping 75,000 workers hired by Amazon and its partners make up the delivery labor force.^{7 8 9} Of course, Amazon is just one of many employers that is a part of the delivery services economy, alongside companies like FedEx, DHL, DoorDash, and GrubHub. In 2020, nearly 1.05 million workers were a part of the “couriers and local delivery services” sector according to some estimates, which includes those involved in “picking up and delivering goods that can be held by an individual without special equipment.”¹⁰ The sector was identified

³ Haag, Matthew and Winnie Hu. 2019. 1.5 Million Packages a Day: The Internet Brings Chaos to N.Y. Streets. *The New York Times*. 28 October 2019. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/27/nyregion/nyc-amazon-delivery.html#:~:text=New%20York%20Times-1,5%20Million%20Packages%20a%20Day%3A%20The%20Internet%20Brings%20Chaos%20to,urban%20areas%20around%20the%20world.&text=An%20Amazon%20order%20starts%20with%20a%20tap%20of%20a%20finger>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴ For context on “essential labor” in the United States, see entry on “*Essential Workers*” in the *United States During the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

⁵ Saultz. 2020.

⁶ Ghaffary, Shirin and Jason Del Rey. 2020. The Real Cost of Amazon. *Vox Recode*. 29 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/6/29/21303643/amazon-coronavirus-warehouse-workers-protest-jeff-bezos-chris-smalls-boycott-pandemic>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Wisniach, Brian. 2020. The Amazon Supply Chain Explained for Beginners. *Helium 10*. 13 August 2020. Available online at: <https://www.helium10.com/blog/amazon-supply-chain-explained/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁹ Gurley, Lauren Kaori. 2020. Amazon Delivery Drivers Are Overwhelmed and Overworked by Covid-19 Surge. *Vice*. 1 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7j7mb/amazon-delivery-drivers-are-overwhelmed-and-overworked-by-covid-19-surge>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁰ IBIS World. 2020. Couriers and Local Delivery Services in the US – Employment Statistics 2005-2026. *IBIS World*. 23 November 2020. Available online at: <https://www.ibisworld.com/industry-statistics/employment/couriers-local-delivery-services-united-states/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

by the Bureau of Labor Statistics as having the faster rate of growth of any industry, with a 22% increase between January 2018 and January 2020 – before the global pandemic even began.¹¹

On March 5, at its onset in the US, Amazon mandated that 50,000 of its employees start working from home – yet, notably, this *did not* include warehouse and delivery workers.¹²

Rising consumer demands and Amazon's pandemic workforce expansion

The beginning of the pandemic and the stay-at-home orders that ensued in the US brought a surge in Amazon orders, as well as confirmed COVID-19 cases among the workers fulfilling those very orders at warehouses, which are known as “fulfillment centers.” Customers who feared going out to stores were met with delays on many goods ordered online, including toilet paper and hand sanitizer due to nationwide shortages.¹³ ¹⁴ The increased orders meant that Amazon warehouse workers had to meet far higher processing targets, forcing them to “make trade-offs between safety precautions and productivity targets.”¹⁵ On March 16, Amazon announced that it would hire 100,000 more employees to meet the surge,¹⁶ and in late March, the company released a video on YouTube titled “Thank You Amazon Heroes,”¹⁷ although it was met by backlash from workers who felt that they were not being offered adequate protection.¹⁸

Between March and May, Amazon had hired an additional 175,000 workers in both warehouses and delivery to meet demand.¹⁹ Between May and July, Amazon’s consumer spending was up 60% compared to the same period in 2019,²⁰ and between April and June, at the height of an unprecedented moment in contemporary history, the company saw its biggest quarterly profit since its founding in 1994.²¹

¹¹ Kopf, Dan. 2020. Delivery is the fastest-growing job industry in the US. *Quartz*. 7 March 2020. Available online at: <https://qz.com/1814110/delivery-jobs-are-the-fastest-growing-in-the-us/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹² Weise, Karen. 2020 (a). ‘Way Too Late’: Inside Amazon’s Biggest Outbreak. *The New York Times*. 19 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/technology/amazon-coronavirus-workers.html>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹³ Palmer, Annie. 2020 (a). Amazon Prime Now and other services hit with delays as online shopping surges amid coronavirus outbreak. *CNBC*. 4 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/04/amazon-prime-now-suffers-delays-amid-coronavirus-outbreak.html>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁴ Weise, Karen. 2020 (b). When Even Amazon Is Sold Out of Exploding Kittens. *The New York Times*. 17 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/technology/amazon-coronavirus.html>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁵ Amazonians United NYC. 2020. We, Amazon Workers, Demand Coronavirus Protections! *Medium*. 17 March 2020. Available online at: <https://medium.com/@amazoniansunitednyc/we-amazon-workers-demand-coronavirus-protections-16f28ad8b15f>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁶ Amazon. 2020. Amazon’s COVID-19 blog: updates on how we’re responding to the crisis. Available online at: <https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/company-news/amazons-covid-19-blog-updates-on-how-were-responding-to-the-crisis>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁷ Amazon News. 2020. Thank You Amazon Heroes [video]. *YouTube*. 27 March 2020. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FB7Z8kmCVbk&feature=emb_logo. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁸ Capriel, Jonathan. 2020. Some of Amazon’s ‘hero’ workers protest over coronavirus; Company defers loan payments for third-party sellers. *Biz Journals*. 1 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2020/04/01/some-of-amazons-hero-workers-protest-over.html>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁹ Weise. 2020 (a).

²⁰ Semuels, Alana. 2020. Many Companies Won’t Survive the Pandemic. Amazon Will Emerge Stronger Than Ever. *Time*. 28 July 2020. Available online at: <https://time.com/5870826/amazon-coronavirus-jeff-bezos-congress/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

²¹ BBC. 2020. Nearly 20,000 Covid-19 cases among Amazon Workers. 2 October 2020. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-54381928>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

The structure of labor at Amazon

While warehouse workers are hired directly by Amazon, “delivery service partners” – small companies that are contracted by Amazon as a way to curb its reliance on other delivery companies – are in charge of delivery workers, although by proxy, Amazon technically maintains control over their working conditions.²² In March, delivery workers were met with more unsafe and taxing labor conditions in order to meet the demands of the anxious and immobile American public.

For example, Instacart, an Amazon-owned grocery delivery service, vastly increased its gig-economy workforce during the pandemic. Instacart is made up both of employees stationed in specific retailer stores who purchase goods at a specific location based on orders made through its app, and others who are hired as independent contractors who are not linked to a particular store, and do not have access to health insurance or paid sick-leave.²³ Instacart hired 300,000 new delivery workers known as “shoppers” between February and April to keep up with demands for home delivery.²⁴ This meant that Amazon’s delivery workers also faced higher targets similar to those seen in warehouses; in one interview, a worker described how, under normal circumstances, he delivers 180 packages in a 10-hour shift, but with new high demands, this jumped to 300 packages per shift.²⁵

Amazon workers differ from workers in other industries, such as food service and automobile, due to the company’s vehement stance against enabling its workers to unionize, which is often viewed as imperative in protecting labor rights. In 2000, Amazon closed a call center after workers launched a unionization campaign.²⁶ Reports then arose that Amazon gives its managers anti-union materials to share with its employees.²⁷ Amazon also defeated unionization efforts in Delaware in 2014;²⁸ and in 2018, it raised its wages to \$15 an hour, stating that there is no need for unionization because it treats its employees well.²⁹ As a pertinent aside: an analysis of California counties that host “fulfilment centers” showed that the average turnover rate more than doubled when Amazon opened its doors.³⁰

²² Gurley, 2020.

²³ Sonnemaker, Tyler. 2020. Instacart plans to add 300,000 additional workers as demand surges for online delivery. *Business Insider*. 23 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/instacart-to-add-300000-shoppers-as-online-grocery-delivery-surges-2020-3/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

²⁴ Sainato, Michael. 2020. Retail workers at Amazon and Whole Foods coordinate sick-out to protest Covid-19 conditions. *The Guardian*. 1 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/01/retail-workers-at-amazon-and-whole-foods-coordinate-sick-out-to-protest-covid-19-conditions>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

²⁵ Gurley, 2020, ibid.

²⁶ Greenhouse, Steven. 2000. TECHNOLOGY; Unions Pushing to Organize Thousands of Amazon.com workers. *The New York Times*. 23 November 2000. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/23/business/technology-unions-pushing-to-organize-thousands-of-amazoncom-workers.html>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

²⁷ Greenhouse, Steven. 2000. ‘Amazon.com Is Using the Web to Block Unions’ Effort to Organize. *The New York Times*. 29 November 2000. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/29/business/amazoncom-is-using-the-web-to-block-unions-effort-to-organize.html>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

²⁸ Kopytoff, Verne. 2014. How Amazon Crushed the Union Movement. *Time*. 16 January 2014. Available online at: <https://time.com/956/how-amazon-crushed-the-union-movement/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

²⁹ Bishop, Todd. 2018. Amazon raises its minimum wage to \$15/hour, vows to lead push for higher U.S. minimum wage. *Geek Wire*. 2 October 2018. Available online at: <https://www.geekwire.com/2018/amazon-raises-minimum-wage-15-hour-vows-lead-push-higher-u-s-minimum-wage/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

³⁰ Tung, Irene and Deborah Berkowitz. 2020. Amazon’s Disposable Workers: High Injury and Turnover Rates at Fulfillment Centers in California. *National Employment Law Project*. 6 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.nelp.org/publication/amazons-disposable-workers-high-injury-turnover-rates-fulfillment-centers-california/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

In short, the exponential rise in online home delivery during COVID-19 and the subsequent workplace demands enabled the mobility of goods to skyrocket. But warehouse and delivery workers at one of the world's largest companies were placed in precarious workplace conditions as a result.

Chronology of Amazon workers' pandemic protests

The following will elucidate a chronology of worker experiences and protest actions at Amazon in the United States between March and October 2020.

March – April: Lack of protection, rising cases, and an emerging protest movement

By mid-March, workers began falling ill at Amazon warehouses in New York, California, Michigan and Texas (among other states), and complaints that the company was not taking enough precautions - such as providing personal protective equipment, enabling social distancing, and enabling paid sick leave - started to appear.³¹ ³² Over 1,500 Amazon workers signed a letter to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, in which they demanded paid sick leave (regardless of diagnosis), childcare pay and subsidies, 1.5x hazard pay, and facility shutdowns if any cases came back positive.³³

Workers began mobilizing protests and walk-outs to demand protection, beginning at the Staten Island, New York warehouse. Chris Smalls, organizer of the Staten Island protest, was abruptly fired for his organizing.³⁴ Walk-outs ensued at Amazon-owned company, including Whole Foods, Instacart, and Target's Shipt delivery service.³⁵ ³⁶ Tim Bray, an Amazon vice president, resigned after ridiculing the company's decision to fire Smalls for highlighting safety issues.³⁷

May – July: Legal mobilization, tracking the case count, and more illnesses

³¹ Greene, Jay. 2020. Amazon workers test positive for covid-19 at 10 U.S. warehouses. *The Washington Post*. 24 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/03/24/amazon-warehouse-workers-coronavirus-positive/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

³² Greene, Jay and Elizabeth Dwoskin. 2020. Amazon's warehouse workers sound alarms about coronavirus spread. *The Washington Post*. 17 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/03/17/amazons-warehouse-workers-sound-alarms-about-coronavirus-spread/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

³³ Amazonians United NYC. 2020.

³⁴ Eidelson, Josh. 2020. When Working Means Deadly Risk, Backlash Brews. *Bloomberg*. 7 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-07/coronavirus-marks-the-best-and-worst-time-for-workers-to-strike>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

³⁵ Dickey, Megan Rose. 2020. Target's Shipt shoppers are walking off work today. *Tech Crunch*. 7 April 2020. Available online at: <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/07/targets-shipt-shoppers-are-walking-off-today/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

³⁶ Lyons, Kim. 2020. Instacart workers will walk out on Monday for better sick leave and virus protections. *The Verge*. 27 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/27/21197078/instacart-workers-protest-coronavirus-protections-date-sick-leave>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

³⁷ Paul, Kari. 2020 (a). Amazon executive resigns over company's 'chickenshit' firings of employee activists. *The Guardian*. 4 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/may/04/amazon-tim-bray-resigns-working-conditions-coronavirus>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

Outbreaks continued across and within warehouses throughout the summer months, as did frustration and demands for greater labor protections. For example, an outbreak in the Poconos reached over 100 cases.³⁸ In June, an outbreak at a Minnesota warehouse left 1.7% of workers with COVID-19 – as compared to 0.1% positivity rate in the county surrounding the warehouse.³⁹

On May 1 – a date known as “May Day,” or International Workers’ Day – hundreds of workers at Amazon warehouses boycotted the warehouses as part of a “sick-out,” a protest of Amazon’s decision to end the unlimited paid time off policy that it established in March.⁴⁰ Although the spring protests led to the provision of more protective personal equipment (PPE), enforced social distancing, temperature checks, and a \$2-per-house and double overtime pay bump that would be extended until May 16,⁴¹ many felt that compensation and workplace cleaning were not adequate. Three workers sued the company with the support of civil society organizations Towards Justices, Public Justice, and Make the Road New York, “asking for an injunction requiring the company to adhere to public health guidelines.”⁴²

Furthermore, Amazon warehouse workers voiced that they did not believe they were being given accurate reports of the number of cases in each warehouse. Jana Jumpp, a warehouse worker who left her position in July, identified that the company updates on cases would only include cases per day, not totals, therefore presenting a false image. Jumpp began to crowdsource data with other workers and non-profit organizations to consolidate and present an accurate image of the number of cases at warehouses. By September, Jumpp herself recorded 2,038 cases at Amazon facilities. But Amazon did not report any official numbers case or death numbers.⁴³

July – October: Overworked delivery workers, continued legal action and “the new normal”

As of October 2, nearly 20,000 Amazon workers had contracted COVID-19, accounting for 1.44% of its 1.37 million workers.⁴⁴ Six out of every ten workers were aware of confirmed COVID-19 cases at their

³⁸ Weise. 2020 (a).

³⁹ Palmer, Annie. 2020 (b). Amazon memo reveals Covid-19 was more prevalent in Minnesota warehouse than surrounding areas. *CNBC*. 30 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/30/amazon-minnesota-warehouse-workers-infected-with-coronavirus-at-higher-rate.html#:~:text=Amazon%20memo%20reveals%20Covid%2D19,Minnesota%20warehouse%20than%20surrounding%20areas&text=Coronavirus%20infection%20rates%20at%20an,internal%20memo%20obtained%20by%20CNBC>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴⁰ Ghaffary, Shirin. 2020. The May Day strike from Amazon, Instacart, and Target workers didn’t stop business. It was still a success. *Vox Recode*. 1 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/5/1/21244151/may-day-strike-amazon-instacart-target-success-turnout-fedex-protest-essential-workers-chris-smalls>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴¹ Selyukh, Alina. 2020. Amazon to Change Time-Off Policy During Pandemic, Extend Pay Bump. *NPR*. 24 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/24/844823221/amazon-to-change-time-off-policy-during-pandemic-extend-pay-bump>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴² Eidelson, Josh and Spencer Soper. 2020. Amazon Workers Sue Over Virus Brought Home From Warehouse. *Bloomberg*. 3 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-03/amazon-warehouse-employees-sue-over-virus-brought-home-from-work>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴³ Glaser, April; Olivia Solon; Cyrus Farivar; Adiel Kaplan; and Ezra Kaplan. 2020. Lack of oversight and transparency leave Amazon employees in the dark on Covid-19. *NBC News*. 30 September 2020. Available online at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/lack-oversight-transparency-leave-amazon-employees-dark-covid-19-n1241549>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴⁴ BBC. 2020.

workplace.⁴⁵ Earlier in the summer, mobile delivery workers began to appear more in the media spotlight. A short documentary was released showing the mental and physical toll that increased demands in the summer heat played on workers, along with a lack of adequate hazard pay.⁴⁶

Lawsuits filed earlier in the year began to yield fruitful results for workers during this period, and further suits were filed, while in-person protests continued. Following the spring walk-outs and protests at the Staten Island warehouse, Amazon workers filed a June lawsuit arguing that its leave and on-the-job policies endangered workers. In mid-July, Amazon announced that it had instituted a national policy to “not punish its warehouse workers for insufficient productivity or when taking necessary COVID-19 safety precautions.”⁴⁷ In late July, the State of California began an investigation into the company based on its unsafe workplace conditions that put workers at “needless risk.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, a coalition of labor unions, including the country’s largest retail union, filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission “alleging Amazon is exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to further entrench its market dominance and calling on authorities to take action to halt the company’s growing anti-competitive behavior.”⁴⁹

Given how Amazon is structured, all of the organizing against the company in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has occurred *outside* of any collective union or workers’ group - although workers are publicly backed by well-known national unions and advocacy groups.⁵⁰ In short, this has thrust Amazon warehouse and delivery workers, now more mobile than ever as stay-at-home has translated into ‘order in,’ into the public’s attention in a way never before seen. The workers, who previously maintained this global supply chain in the background of most citizens’ minds, have now been deemed essential by societal standards. What happens next could have massive implications for mobile work worldwide.⁵¹

⁴⁵ UFCW. 2020. America’s Largest Retail Union: Amazon Exploitation of COVID-19 Pandemic Endangers Frontline Workers. 23 July 2020. Available online at: <http://www.ufcw.org/press-releases/ftcamazon>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴⁶ Abowd, Paul and Mary Saba Jirmanus. 2020. Amazon, FedEx Workers fought exploitation in a pandemic, then joined an uprising. *The Intercept*. 15 July 2020. Available online at: <https://theintercept.com/2020/07/15/amazon-fedex-essential-workers-coronavirus-blm-protests/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴⁷ Havlik, Brooke. 2020. Amazon Workers’ COVID-19 Lawsuit in New York Helps Protect Workers Across the U.S. *Open Society Justice Initiative*. 16 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/newsroom/amazon-workers-covid-19-lawsuit-in-new-york-helps-protect-workers-across-the-us>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴⁸ Paul, Kari. 2020 (b). California investigates Amazon’s treatment of workers during pandemic. *The Guardian*. 27 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jul/27/california-investigations-amazon-workers-coronavirus>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴⁹ UFCW. 2020.

⁵⁰ UFCW. 2020.

⁵¹ Nickelsburg, Monica. 2020. Amazon has avoided unions for 25 years – here’s why labor leaders think that could soon change. *Geek Wire*. 4 September 2020. Available online at: <https://www.geekwire.com/2020/amazon-avoided-unions-25-years-here-labor-leaders-think-soon-change/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.