

## Work Struggles at Amazon in Germany and Beyond

By Luce Dubois

Workers in the logistics sector have tremendous leverage because they work at the global intersection between production and circulation of goods. However, they and their unions are seldom prepared for the transnational tactics used by corporations to undermine worker struggles, such as building distribution centres abroad or sourcing deliveries from non-striking centres.

In Germany, however, workers from Amazon, the leading US e-commerce multinational, have been organising for more than two years with some success. With the support of solidarity groups, they have developed international relationships with workers from other Amazon sites, such as Polish workers who are usually considered a threat owing to their lower salaries. Such self-organisation shows that a section of the organised workers at Amazon have the willingness to organise beyond national borders and are ready to take an emancipatory path.

### 'Work hard, have fun, make history'<sup>1</sup>

Amazon was founded in 1994 in the US, and opened its first centre in Germany in 1999. It now has nine distribution centres with about 10 000 workers. Worldwide, it has about 230 000 full-time and 100 000 short-time employees.

Work in a distribution centre is industrial and comparable to a factory: individualised mass distribution, reliance on machinery such as goods-picking robots, assembly lines, and advanced division of labour and standardisation of tasks. It is therefore more appropriate to call these centres 'distribution factories', and Amazon's success lies more in increasing the rate of exploitation than in innovative business strategies.

Workers in these factories do not, however, enjoy the benefits achieved by decades of struggles in the manufacturing sector. Since Amazon is not a member of the employer association in Germany, they are not bound by the sectoral national collective agreements that regulate wages, benefits, and seniority.

The working conditions in Amazon's German distribution factories are similar to those in other countries: relatively low pay and very high work intensity. For instance, 'pickers' can walk 20 km per day and have to pick 120 to 130 goods an hour, while packers have to pack 200 parcels with a single good per hour (Leisegang 2014: 19).

In some plants, the use of temporary employment and very tight control practices of workers constitute two particularly harsh dimensions of Amazon working conditions. Amazon uses the German "short time and work agencies laws"<sup>2</sup> and gives most new workers short time contracts of various lengths. At the end of each contract, management decides whether to extend the

contract or not, with the biggest prize a worker could get being indefinite employment.

At the same time, work monitoring technologies discipline workers: scanners mounted on workers' arms monitor their movements, and their performance is assessed via an opaque evaluation system which also grades their 'social behaviour'. The latter is clearly a subliminal signal to those who are insubordinate or organising (Workers' presentations, 2015).

### 'Work hard, have fun, make collective agreement'<sup>3</sup>

Despite these constraints, Amazon workers in Germany have organised. Nowadays all plants have a pro-union works council. (These are co-management committees elected by the workers, usually, but not necessarily, composed of union members with a union agenda.)

A long strike wave started in 2013 at the oldest site and spread to seven other plants. The movement is supported by the main union in the service sector, ver.di, but it is effectively self-organised. Organising started with workers' improvisation in one site and with a ver.di organising project in the oldest site, which, in the words of the workers, consisted of giving them a room where they could meet and identify their problems (Amazon workers meet in Poznań, 2015). Since then, the work councils fight for better working conditions inside each plant, and more than fifteen strikes have occurred in two and a half years, each time involving more sites.

These strikes aimed to win a collective agreement, which Amazon refuses to negotiate. However, confronted with mounting pressure from strikes and media reports, Amazon has given in to some of the workers' demands in German plants, including air conditioning in the distribution factories, wage increases, and a 'special Christmas bonus'. Indeed since the first implementation of Amazon operations in Germany in 1999, it was the first time that wages were increased!

### The solidarity groups

One actor in the struggle for better working conditions at Amazon are the 'solidarity groups' operating outside the distribution factories. They are composed of workers and students interested in class conflict. Interested Amazon workers participate in the group meetings and the group members support them in an un-bureaucratic and timely manner.

These solidarity groups are a phenomenon triggered by the revival of work struggles in Germany. They recall the factory interventions of the 1970s in Western Europe but try not to repeat the mistake of aspiring to be a workers' vanguard. These groups have been crucial in breaking workers' isolation, linking strikes in different sectors, and supporting the internationalisation of the struggle. At the local level, the activists support workers who sue Amazon management for discriminating against works council members and unionised workers by not extending their work contracts. The groups have also publicised the extent of precarious employment at Amazon, picketed and leafleted on behalf of the workers, and support and translate for the emerging international network.

### International relationships and actions

Since their tasks involve receiving, packing and sending goods, workers at Amazon are fully aware of the place of their work in global value chains. They have therefore organised international workers' meetings for action, with the participation of solidarity activists. Independently of this, union officials have also met internationally to exchange information.

The most concrete consequence of the international workers' meetings was the action of Polish workers, disadvantaged compared to German workers. In 2014, Amazon opened three new distribution factories in Poland to meet deliveries despite the German strikes. In Poznań, close to the German border, workers asked the union Inicjatiwa Pracownicza to help them to organise the plant, and the union section at Amazon had a fast membership growth.

In June 2015, Polish workers were required to work an extra hour each day while several German plants were on strike. Workers in Poznań organised a go-slow during the extra 11th hour, while others asked for leave in order not to be unwilling strike breakers. A banner outside the plant and an open letter expressed solidarity with the workers in Germany. For the workers in Germany, this signalled that coordinated international action was possible. International meetings helped the Polish and German workers to change their perception of each other, recognising that they are not competitors but workers with same problems. It also helped to know what kind of work conditions could be achieved in the various sites and to assess how Amazon management tends to react.

### The direction of the struggle

To succeed, the struggles at Amazon have to be international, because orders can always be sent to plants abroad to undermine local strikes. The international coordination of workers and their supporters is a step in the right direction.

Until May 2016, the organised workers and the solidarity groups have gone further than union officials who, according to workers, tend to focus more on membership growth and to be slow owing to bureaucratic procedures (Amazon worker 1, 2015; Amazon worker 2, 2015). Nevertheless the workers involved believe they need the support of the unions – whether because of the unions' institutional power (the right to strike

and reach collective agreements) or financial associational power (strike funds, legal assistance).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, they think that they need the solidarity groups, not only for their fast and creative actions, but also to open the closed world of the factory system. However, the strategy of ver.di officials moved on. During strikes on the second and third May of this year in four German plants, it supported 60 workers to go to Wrocław in Poland where they held strike action with workers organised by the Polish union Solidarność, who, like ver.di, is affiliated to UNI Global Union.

For the struggle to win, labour will have to support the internationalisation led by the workers. Workers should not only be passive union members, but the labour movement and the organisation itself.

Among several factors, the outcome of the struggles at Amazon will depend on the success of local workers' mobilisation but also on practical international industrial action and acceptance by the established unions of the mode of action of solidarity groups and workers and of non-aligned unions.

- <sup>1</sup> Slogan written in all Amazon factory halls.
- <sup>2</sup> Employers can employ workers for two years on several short term contracts without giving any reasons for temporary employment. After two years they have to employ them indefinitely.
- <sup>3</sup> Workers' slogan.
- <sup>4</sup> Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013) define unions' institutional power in relation to legislative support, statutory work councils, the administration of social welfare or a role in tripartite consultations. Associational power is the power which comes from the (financial) resources of having members.

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