

Fulfilling orders: automation, control and resistance at Amazon

Maciej Bancarzewski

A review of *The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon*, Alessandro Delfanti (Pluto, 2021), £19.99

After his brief space journey in July 2021, Amazon owner Jeff Bezos said, with disarming frankness, “I want to thank every Amazon employee and every Amazon customer, because you guys paid for all of this.” Indeed, they did. Amazon’s profits rocketed by over 200 per cent during the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, its British workers were offered an hourly pay rise of just 50p. In recent years, it has become one of the world’s largest multinationals, not just storing and delivering goods, but also investing heavily in cloud computing. The enormously profitable Amazon Web Services hosts other technology giants such as Netflix, Instagram and Airbnb, as well as providing services, including surveillance technology, to government agencies such as Britain’s GCHQ. Its “unique” mode of operation—reliant on robotisation, surveillance of workers and algorithmic management—is currently emulated by others, though it borrowed many innovations from firms, such as Walmart, that pioneered the “logistics revolution” and “lean retailing” much earlier.¹

Although Amazon is commonly regarded as an “online” retailer, the company has recently expanded its physical infrastructure to include hundreds of data centres

¹ Moody, 2020, p40.

and new warehouses or, in Amazon's nomenclature, "fulfilment centres", which are supposed to "fulfil the customer promise". These are located mainly on the outskirts of major metropolitan areas. Its global presence is also shown in Amazon's logistical organisation, which utilises international airport codes to name its fulfilment centres; for example, its Coventry warehouse is called BHX4, in reference to Birmingham Airport. The number of Amazon fulfilment centre employees had been growing exponentially until the post-lockdown recession, when the firm began mass redundancies. Currently, it employs over one million workers—not only in the United States and Europe, but also in emerging economies such as India and Brazil. It is not without reason that Amazon's warehouses are labelled the new factories of the global economy: "In many respects, they resemble the factories of the past: workers are subject to daily indignities, productivity pressures, and health and safety hazards long associated with manufacturing". Understandably, Amazon is attracting a lot of attention in the media, industry and academia; it is a successful business story of the era in which e-commerce has become the dominant form of consumption. Yet, behind this exuberant image lies the living labour that paid for Bezos's space trip. Alessandro Delfanti's *The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon* reveals the reality of work for the many thousands of employees, peering beyond the popular "entrepreneurial" portrayal of the firm. The book deconstructs the true meaning of one of Amazon's popular slogans such: "Work Hard, Have Fun, Make History!" *The Warehouse* is based on interviews, conducted between 2017 and 2021, of Amazon's workers in Italy, as well as the United States and Canada. The author also delved into thousands of online comments left by Amazon workers.

In the first chapter, "Relentless", Delfanti introduces Amazon's organisation, including its business approach and workforce structure. "Relentless" has been a key word in corporate newspeak since the 1990s. It symbolises Bezos's obsession with speed and control. Amazon is about the "frictionless movement of goods", and "workers are the most problematic factor in this equation and must be carefully controlled and governed lest they generate friction, slowing down or even stopping the movement of commodities".³

Delfanti points out that revenue rose during the coronavirus pandemic, increasing from \$280 billion in 2019 to \$380 billion in 2020. The increase in profits during the Covid-19 lockdowns was largely due to the expansion of the e-commerce market, but also the greater availability of more vulnerable workforce. This is what Delfanti has described as a "perfect crisis", with Amazon simultaneously capitalising on higher demand for e-commerce and web services *and* employing thousands of precarious workers affected by the pandemic. To meet the high number of orders,

2 Milkman, 2020, p13.

3 Delfanti, 2021, p21.

warehouses switched to continuous shift working. Amazon, like many other companies, relies on the dual employment model: workers employed directly and a flexible workforce employed by agencies. The majority of the flexible workforce is employed in the autumn and then let go in January. Temporary “Amazonians” are lured into performing an excessive rate of output by the offer of potential permanent contracts. The scale of this precarious system is also shown by the number of workers living in their camper vans outside warehouses during seasonal peaks.

This part of the book also looks at the regional economic impacts of Amazon’s warehouses. Amazon tends to locate in areas with good transportation links that are also economically and socially deprived. Amazon had no problems recruiting workers in such areas, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. A dense network of warehouses allows Amazon to benefit from low-wage economies: “Workers in Polish fulfilment centres may make as little as 3 euros per hour, and yet the packages they ship serve a German market where the same workers would make 11 euros per hour”⁴ The company also relies on migrant workers. In Italy, these are both internal migrants from the South and immigrants from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Amazon often exercises its monopsonist market power in employing workers; “it’s either Amazon or nothing” is a common sentiment among fulfilment centre workers across the world. It can pay less than its competitors because it generally employs young, inexperienced workers.⁵ Moreover, it exploits “hyper-precarious” local employment law in states such as Italy, Spain and Britain.⁶

After outlining the broader context in which Amazon operates, subsequent chapters (“Work Hard!”, “Have Fun!” and “Customer obsession”) focus on the nature of work and surveillance in the company’s warehouses. Hard, physical and repetitive labour means that workers often cannot keep up with the pace of work. Moreover, this work is becoming increasingly dangerous. Between 2016 and 2019, Amazon reported 14,000 serious injuries in the US alone, many of them leading to chronic pain and long-term disability. Workers have even reported that some Amazon fulfilment centres vending machines sell ibuprofen pills. In some respects Amazon’s work organisation resembles the Taylorist system whereby the labour process involves a series of individual, standardised tasks (such as picking or packing goods). Individual workers do not take care of an entire order; nor do they possess a full knowledge of the inventory. The whole process—from packing items to sending them to customers—is “chaotically” managed by algorithms, which also gather all the information flowing from this process. In this way, workers’ knowledge is dispossessed by the machine. This algorithmic organisation of the labour process is

4 Delfanti, 2021, p26.

5 Delfanti, 2021, p34.

6 Delfanti, 2021, p38.

reminiscent of Harry Braverman's "deskilling thesis".⁷ Here, Delfanti also refers to the Italian school of workerists of the 1960s, who, similarly to Braverman, argued that narrow specialisation and breaking down tasks subjugates labour to capital.⁸ The author makes an important argument that workers produce not only commodities but also information. Robots are gradually filling up fulfilment centres' space. This, however, does not mean that the human labour disappears. Working alongside robots carries the risk of workers facing demands for Stakhanovite rates of output; for instance, "pickers have reported increasing their rate from 100 to 400 items after robots were introduced", causing an increase in number of injuries.⁹

Workers describe the alienation they feel as a result of automation: "We are worried about these little robots you are standing in workstation locked in a cage alone...the robot brings you to the shelves, a tablet tells you where to put stuff—so, you click...and pick from this workstation... There may be no physical effort, but after a week in this cage with a computer, I am mentally depleted".¹⁰ As Delfanti points out, this so-called "datafication" allows management to deprive workers of inventory knowledge as well as giving managers a direct tool of monitoring and control. A simple scanner—the main tool of the Amazon worker—has become a symbol of ubiquitous surveillance. It monitors a worker's every activity, including their so-called time off-task (TOT): "Passing a certain threshold of TOT, for instance, generates TOT points. Workers who accumulate too many TOT points are subject to warnings and, especially for temp workers, their contract renewal may be jeopardised".¹¹ Apart from scanners, workers are constantly observed by cameras, which are installed across the warehouses as well as in vans and lorries. Indeed, Amazon's surveillance has become a "service" which can be sold to government agencies too. The company provides databases used by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which controls migration in the US.¹² Of course, Amazon is interested in spying on its own people too. One of the adverts found on the company's jobs website wanted to recruit an "analyst tasked with gathering intelligence on 'labour organising threats against the company'".¹³

In the next chapter, "Reimagine Now", Delfanti continues exploring technological aspects of Amazon's operations, focusing on the coexistence of robots and workers. Much emphasis has been put on the company's futuristic (or, rather, dystopic) devices such as drones, which deliver products directly to

7 Braverman, 1974. For more on Braverman's deskilling thesis, see Carter, 2021.

8 Delfanti, 2021, p65.

9 Delfanti, 2021, p64

10 Delfanti, 2021, p63.

11 Delfanti, 2021, p81.

12 Delfanti, 2021, p83.

13 Delfanti, 2021, p84.

customers, and augmented reality visors, which are worn by workers to speed up labour and send managers real-time information about what they are seeing.

Amazon wants to increase automation, but workers can never be obsolete, since robots need to be trained and maintained. Delfanti correctly observes, “Workers will remain because they are cheaper and easier to control and discard than robots. What Amazon is dreaming of are new ways to squeeze value out of them”¹⁴. The role of automation is to increase the exploitation of workers: “Automation is not meant to liberate humans from work under capitalist relations. Rather, it perpetuates and consolidates the authoritarian organisation of work”¹⁵. Yet, a bleak view that Amazon’s work regime is uncontested would be far from the truth.

“Make history”, the book’s final chapter, deals with workers’ resistance. Importantly, the author recognises that this resistance goes beyond simply battles over working conditions and pay: “The fight against Amazon is a fight for racial and environmental justice, for health and safety, for workplace democracy, and for workers’ control of data generated by labour”¹⁶. Workers’ resistance can cause a lot of friction in a company based on the frictionless flow of commodities. Unsurprisingly, Amazon wants to be union-free, spending millions of dollars on anti-union propaganda. Despite this, there is plenty of evidence that workers can get organised. Unionisation in European fulfilment centres is higher than in the US and Canada, but it has also risen in North America in recent years. Even though Amazon’s operation is geographically vast, workers across the world are exposed to standardised management and production methods introduced from the US. Sharing this relatable experience helps to mobilise workers in different countries:

Regardless of formal representation in fulfilment centres, unions and workers’ collectives worldwide participate in global networks that coordinate actions against, and research into, the corporation. All have formed to take the fight at the transnational level—the only possible level if broad change is to come.¹⁷

Workers also respond through small, individual acts of resistance and sabotage. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, absenteeism reached 30 percent.¹⁸ Workers, fearing their safety, failed to turn up at the warehouses, where social distancing was limited. In the concluding section of the book the author points out that workers have a potential to disturb Amazon’s resilient logistical system. Thus, industrial actions have been often organised on “Prime” and “Cyber Monday”, the

14 Delfanti, 2021, p124.

15 Delfanti, 2021, p146.

16 Delfanti, 2021, p150.

17 Delfanti, 2021, p153.

18 Delfanti, 2021, p156.

company's annual promotional deal periods. To effectively break down Amazon's supply chain, these resistance tactics need to be organised in as many locations as possible: "What is needed is a counter-logistics of struggles—a networked organisation with the ability to rise up tactically to overcome the organisational and technological obstacles put in place by the corporation—to lay siege to Amazon".¹⁹ British workers have been successfully laying siege to Amazon since August 2022, when the first strike was organised in Coventry's fulfilment centre. Workers in other warehouses slowed down or even participated in stoppages in solidarity. In early 2023, Coventry saw more strikes, this time organised by the GMB union, which attracted hundreds of workers. In June, Amazon employees voted for six more months of strikes. This is the way to break Amazon's supply chain.

The Warehouse is a major contribution to understanding the labour process at Amazon, including automation and surveillance, but it also explores the broader socio-economic environment in which Amazon operates. As Delfanti writes, "The warehouse's walls are not transparent, and capital always does its best to make workers, the human side of its operation, invisible".²⁰ The book opens Amazon's gates and allows readers to see the reality behind "one-click" consumerism. Throughout the book, Delfanti compares Amazon's operation to early industrial capitalism, even if fulfilment centres are no mere replicas of the factory system. Admirably, the author shows that living labour is still the real engine of Amazon's growth and, despite widespread automation, workers are key to resistance. Above all, Amazon's industrial characteristics—its reliance on frictionless logistics and an extreme form of the just-in-time system—make the company vulnerable. Workers can indeed "make history", but in a very different way to how Bezos envisions.

19 Delfanti, 2021, p160.

20 Delfanti, 2021, p16.

Reference

- Braverman, Harry, 1974, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (Monthly Review Press).
- Carter, Bob, 2021, "Defending Marx and Braverman: Taking Back the Labour Process in Theory and Practice", *International Socialism* 171 (summer), <https://isj.org.uk/marx-and-braverman>
- Delfanti, Alessandro, 2021, *The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon* (Pluto).
- Milkman, Ruth, 2020, "Amazon and the Future of Work", in Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese *The Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy* (Pluto).
- Moody, Kim, 2020, "Amazon: Context, Structure and Vulnerability", in Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese (eds), *The Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy* (Pluto).