



**ATHENA**

Delivering Democracy

# Monitored: How Amazon Undermines the Safety of Workers and Our Communities

Report by  
The Athena Coalition

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# Athena Coalition

Athena is a nationwide coalition dedicated to defeating unchecked corporate power and advancing a democracy that represents us all.

Our attention is focused squarely on Amazon, which perpetuates the intersecting harms and impacts of corporate power in numerous ways: eroding worker rights and protections, hollowing out of local economies, expanding the police state, and undermining critical social and economic institutions and policy.

Our members are racial justice and worker organizations, think tanks and public policy advocacy organizations, and grassroots groups around the country – and together we are building a popular movement to ensure that the rules of our economy are set by the people, not by the biggest corporations in the world.

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# Executive Summary

Over the last year, Amazon's needless abuse of power over workers, communities of color, and small businesses put it in the center of investigations, state and federal oversight, legislative action, and civil society campaigns. Amazon's continued failure to address these abuses is resulting in escalating actions to hold it accountable across major areas of its business operations, including: logistics, the online marketplace, and Amazon Web Services.

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***Now, in response to Amazon's continued inaction, investors, warehouse and tech workers, and community members are making the company's annual meeting into a referendum on whether Amazon will be allowed to continue to disregard worker safety and the rights of communities of color.***

While concerned parties have raised these issues over many years, efforts to hold Amazon accountable are accelerating. In just the last year, Members of Congress asked the Department of Justice to launch an investigation into Amazon and some of its executives for lying about its use of data to undermine small businesses;<sup>1</sup> for the second time, a warehouse worker testified before Congress about unsafe and oppressive working conditions;<sup>2</sup> tech workers at Amazon began to organize against a large contract with a foreign government with a history of human rights abuses;<sup>3</sup> university students signed pledges<sup>4</sup> not to work for Amazon; Amazon Mechanical Turk workers wrote a series of letters to the CEO describing serious issues with the platform;<sup>5</sup> the National Labor Relations Board found that Amazon violated labor law in Bessemer, Alabama<sup>6</sup> and illegally retaliated against a worker in Staten Island;<sup>7</sup> and Washington State's labor department found that Amazon willfully violated workplace safety laws.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time: *The New York Times* published an investigation that found turnover is so high that Amazon could churn through entire workforces in some places, and that Black workers in Staten Island were 50% more likely to be fired than their peers;<sup>9</sup> *NBC* documented that there were 37 complaints filed with the National Labor Relations Board in 2020 alone;<sup>10</sup> a *Consumer Reports* study found that most Amazon warehouses are located in Black and brown neighborhoods<sup>11</sup> and may contribute to poor air

quality in those neighborhoods; a *Reuters* investigation found that Amazon had gutted privacy protections in two states;<sup>12</sup> a *Washington Post* investigation found Amazon's injury rates were almost double that of other warehouses in 2020;<sup>13</sup> and a Rutgers University study found that Amazon was using police to "subdue workers and enforce obedience," particularly in the South.<sup>14</sup>

**This report focuses on Amazon's corporate practices and impacts in two areas where Amazon workers themselves have raised the alarm:**

- Unsafe working conditions in Amazon warehouses, where the rates of injury,<sup>15</sup> turnover,<sup>16</sup> and reports of retaliation<sup>17</sup> greatly exceed industry rates, year after year.
- Amazon's expanding technology partnerships that undermine the rights and safety of communities of color.

The report finds that Amazon has not taken meaningful steps to address the concerns of workers, racial and economic justice advocates, and the public.

For years, Amazon warehouse workers have spoken out about unsafe conditions in the warehouses, but the company has failed to address their concerns. In fact,

injury rates at Amazon facilities increased almost 20% in 2021 and serious injuries are now more than twice the industry average,<sup>18</sup> despite Amazon's pledge last year to create a safer work environment.<sup>19</sup>

While CEO Andy Jassy told shareholders the injury problem is not easily solved,<sup>20</sup> workers and health and safety experts have long identified the source of its epidemic injury crisis: an unsafe pace of work. To meet its intense and ever-accelerating delivery timelines, Amazon relies on a program of sweeping and pervasive surveillance to track workers' every move, pushing them to work harder and faster. This regimen of worker surveillance and punitive management fuels the unsustainable turnover rate and has been used to retaliate against workers fighting for better conditions.

The company's disregard for the ethical impacts of its

actions also extend to many of the business partnerships it has pursued. Just in 2021 alone, we saw: troubling accounts of the Los Angeles Police Department using Amazon Ring to track Black Lives Matter Activists;<sup>21</sup> Amazon's partnership with the Israeli government on Project Nimbus;<sup>22</sup> the expansion of biometric database (HART) meant to track immigrants using personal details;<sup>23</sup> over three hundred new police partnerships enabling warrantless searches at scale;<sup>24</sup> and we learned that Amazon's speech-to-text technology is being used by jails and prisons around the country.<sup>25</sup>

Amazon investors have asked for investigations into these issues through shareholder resolutions. Amazon's Board of Directors announced that it is formally opposing every single one being presented at this year's meeting – in many cases, without meeting with investors to address their concerns.

***In light of the continued crises unfolding at Amazon, shareholders will consider:***

A floor proposal brought by a Texas warehouse worker to end the injury and turnover crisis at Amazon by halting abusive productivity quotas and worker surveillance.

Resolutions that challenge injuries, high-turnover, retaliation, and racial disparities at Amazon.

(Items 9, 13, 16, 17)

Challenges to Amazon's decision to sell powerful surveillance technologies to governments with histories of human rights abuses.

(Items 6 and 19)

Calls to vote against two members of the Board of Directors who shareholders believe have failed to adequately oversee Amazon's employment practices and workplace safety programs: Daniel Huttenlocher and Judith McGrath.



# Introduction

Courtenay Brown is an employee in an Amazon warehouse in Newark, New Jersey. For the last five years she has worked as a process guide, sorting up to 50,000 groceries every day. And every day, she is subject to aggressive surveillance at her job to keep productivity up to Amazon's exhausting pace. Her movements are tracked down to the second with weight sensors, cameras, and scanners—practices which have caused stress injuries in her coworkers, who are constantly understaffed.<sup>26</sup>

But Amazon's information about Courtenay's person can extend beyond the workplace. Around her neighborhood, Ring doorbell cameras capture footage of Courtenay as she walks to the store or goes to visit friends. And because Ring, an Amazon-owned business, maintains a partnership with the Newark Police Department, the company can enable the local police department to access footage of her whereabouts.<sup>27</sup> If this police district contracted the Amazon Web Service product Rekognition, it could suggest images of her face as a suspect in a recent misdemeanor. If Courtenay had a friend or family member who had been incarcerated, a phone conversation between them could be cataloged and combed through by a prison system using Amazon Transcribe, its speech-to-text technology.<sup>28</sup>

Amazon's surveillance empire inside and outside the warehouse enables near constant tracking and control, and it is being used against people, especially people of color, in communities around the world. Its unprecedented regimen of workplace surveillance and punitive management has been linked to injuries,<sup>29</sup> high-turnover,<sup>30</sup> and retaliation against workers who speak out.<sup>31</sup> And outside of the warehouse, civil rights and civil liberties organizations regularly voice concern over Amazon's development of face recognition and its expanding partnerships with law enforcement, prisons, and militaries, around the world.

Tech and warehouse workers at Amazon have raised the alarm about these practices, but so far, the company has failed to address their concerns.

Amazon.com, Inc. started out as an online store and distribution network. Over 28 years it has grown to be one of the Big Five information technology companies shaping the economy, competing with Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, Meta, and Apple for dominance.

**Being at the cutting edge of technology affords Amazon tremendous power and influence; if it continues to use this technological power to track, criminalize, and punish people inside and outside of its warehouses, the company will undermine safety, equity, and democracy for everyone.**

## A Referendum on Amazon's Worker and Surveillance Abuses

When Andy Jassy leads his first annual general meeting of shareholders as the company's new CEO on May 25th, 2022, investors can use their unique leverage to weigh in on Amazon's business practices. Shareholders have a voice when it comes to upholding Amazon's ethical responsibilities.

Concerned investors have filed several shareholder resolutions challenging these company oversteps and requesting new disclosures on: the end-uses of surveillance technology, spending on lobbying and political front-groups, warehouse working conditions, and tax payments. One Amazon worker is introducing a floor resolution calling on the company to end its production quota system and the New York City Comptroller is asking shareholders to vote against the re-election of two members of Amazon's board.

With so much at stake, it is essential that investors, elected leaders, and other stakeholders have a full picture of the implications of Amazon's innovations in surveillance practices and products, in and out of the warehouse. This report provides a detailed assessment of Amazon's safety performance and employee relations practices, as well as the wider uses and misuses of its surveillance technologies over the past year. Three important proposals are highlighted below.

### 2022 Annual Meeting Proxy Highlights

#### Worker Safety

**Shareholder proposal calling for the end to Amazon's dangerous and inhumane workplace productivity metrics and surveillance – Introduced by Daniel Olayiwola, employee at the SAT4 fulfillment center in San Antonio, TX**

"Shareholders of Amazon.com request that the company end the use of productivity quotas and worker surveillance across its warehouse facilities and distribution network, including, but not limited to the policies commonly known as Rate and Time off Task. These policies are to be ended for all Amazon employees, including drivers for Delivery Service Partners and other third-party contractor employees by August 31, 2022."<sup>32</sup>

#### Board Accountability

**Campaign to vote "Against" the re-election of two directors, Daniel Huttenlocher and Judith McGrath, at the company's annual meeting – Introduced by New York City Comptroller Brad Lander and New York State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli**

"Amazon is the second largest employer in the United States. The well-being of its workforce has a significant impact on its 1.6 million workers, their households, the long-term success of the company, and the economy as a whole. Yet Amazon stands out among its peers for high rates of injury, unsustainably high turnover, and labor rights violations..."

We're calling on shareholders to vote against the re-election of Daniel Huttenlocher and Judith McGrath to Amazon's board of directors. We believe that Mr. Huttenlocher and Ms. McGrath, both longstanding members of the Leadership Development and Compensation Committee, have failed to exercise adequate oversight of the company's human capital management practices."<sup>33</sup>

#### Safety of Communities of Color

**Shareholder proposal requesting a report on customer use of certain technologies – Introduced by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood**

"Shareholders request the Board of Directors commission an independent third-party report... assessing Amazon's customer due diligence process to determine whether customers' use of its products and services with surveillance, computer vision, or cloud storage capabilities contributes to human rights violations..."

'Know Your Customer' due diligence mitigates clients' risks and human rights impacts and informs business decision-making. It reveals whether technologies will be used to facilitate governmental human or civil rights or civil liberties violations....Inadequate due diligence presents material privacy and data security risks, as well as legal, regulatory, and reputational risks. These risks are present even if surveillance products are used according to Amazon's guidelines."<sup>34</sup>



# Workplace Safety at Amazon

Courtenay Brown testified to the US Senate that as a trainer at Amazon, she saw how 9 out of 10 of her new hires would quit after 2 months due to over exhaustion and injury. "One time," she recounted, "the burning sensation around my heels was so painful that I ended up in the emergency room. I begged the doctors not to keep me longer than a few hours because I had to go back to work." Her experiences led her to call the fulfillment center a "high-tech sweatshop."<sup>35</sup>

In his annual letter to shareholders recapping the company's progress in 2020, Jeff Bezos took note of the steady stream of criticism that the company had been facing for its employment practices and the standard practice of aggressively monitoring employees on their shifts.<sup>36</sup> He told shareholders, "If you read some of the news reports, you might think we have no care for employees. In those reports, our employees are

sometimes accused of being desperate souls and treated as robots."

While Bezos claimed that those reports were untrue, he admitted, "I think we need to do a better job for our employees." He promised that the company would make changes and even committed to making Amazon "Earth's Best Employer" and "Earth's Safest Place to Work." He went on to promise big investments in safety projects and to leverage the company's advanced technology and sophisticated algorithms to decrease risks of injuries and prevent accidents.<sup>37</sup> Bezos' proposal went against workplace health and safety research, which shows reduced autonomy has a negative impact on employees.<sup>38</sup>

**Meanwhile, over the past year, Amazon's health and safety crisis has only gotten worse.**

# "A high tech sweatshop"

# "Earth's Safest Place to Work"

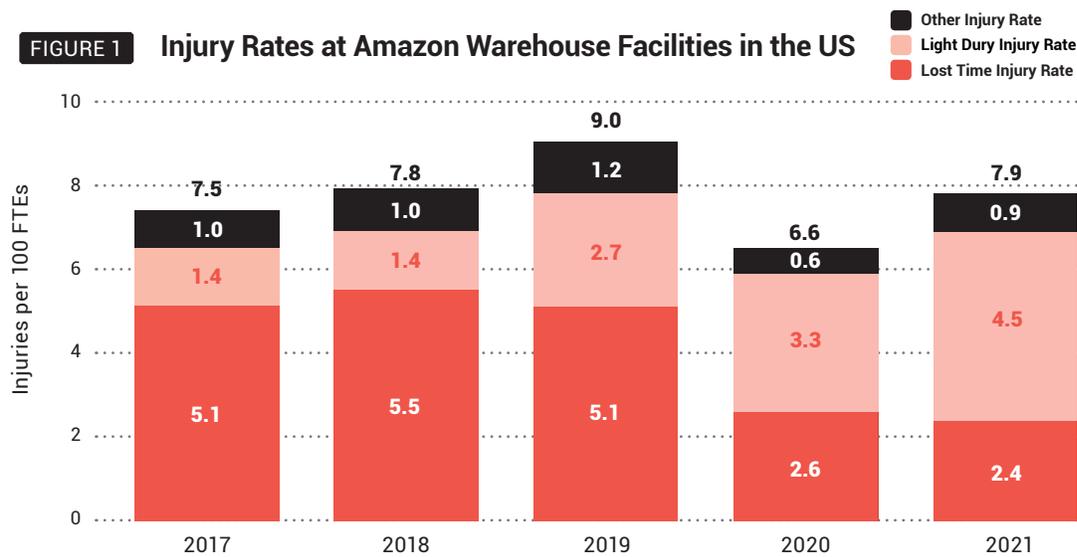
# Increase in Employee Injuries in 2021



When Amazon reported its \$33.4 billion in profits for 2021, recently installed CEO Andy Jassy crowed about the company's continued growth on top of its 2020 pandemic-induced boom.<sup>39</sup> He boasted about scaling the company's fulfillment network "to bring even faster delivery to more customers," and lauded the "extraordinary" growth of Amazon Web Services. **But Jassy failed to mention that injury rates at Amazon facilities actually increased in 2021.**

Recent analysis of federal data shows that the total recordable injury rate at Amazon facilities increased by 19.7% in 2021, amounting to 7.9 injuries per 100 workers.<sup>40</sup> The rate of serious injuries, defined as injuries requiring days away from work or light-duty assignments, increased by 18.6% from 2020 to 2021, to approximately 7.0 serious injuries per 100 workers – more than twice the average among all other warehouse employers.<sup>41</sup>

Since 2017, Amazon has had a substantially higher rate of workplace injuries as compared to non-Amazon warehouse employers. For injuries categorized as serious, the rate at Amazon is more than twice that of all other warehouse facilities.



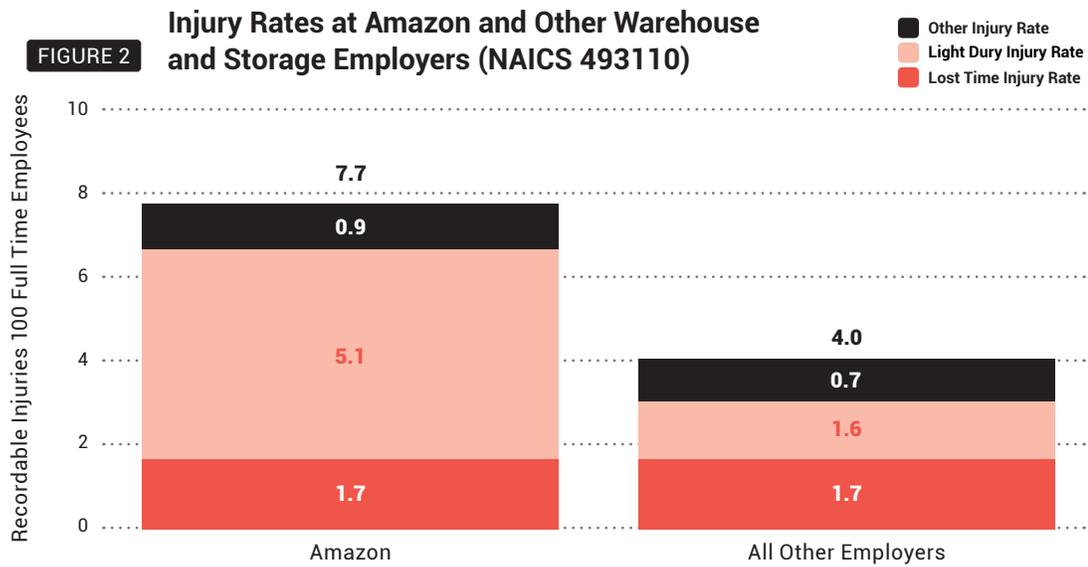
Source: *The Injury Machine*, The Strategic Organizing Center, 2022.

Total recordable injury rates do not exactly match the sum of injury injury rates due to rounding.



# Above Average Injury Rates in 2021

In total, Amazon reported 38,334 workplace injuries at its warehouses in 2021 resulting in 586,732 days away from work and 1,509,145 days of restricted duty assignments while workers recovered from their injuries.<sup>42</sup> Across the entire General Warehouse and Storage Industry, **almost half of total reported injuries (49%) in 2021 took place in Amazon warehouses.**<sup>43</sup>



Source: *The Injury Machine*, The Strategic Organizing Center, 2022.

*This chart compares the subset of Amazon facilities with NAICS code 493110 (Warehousing and Storage) to other employers in the same NAICS, allowing comparison across comparable facilities.*

# Amazon Fails to Act

Following Bezos' commitment to do better by workers, Amazon announced a program to reduce injuries by hiring 6,000 athletic trainers, and showing workers videos on topics like gripping and handling, and nutrition.<sup>44</sup> The program also included hourly prompts at workstations to ask employees to complete physical and mental activities, and an app to provide at-home access to education and training on wellness.

Amazon's focus on general wellness and reminders to work safer suggests that workers themselves bear primary responsibility for their own injuries. The program implies that if its employees would just get in better shape and follow instructions, they would stop getting injured. In its 2021 workplace safety report, the company notes that injury rates are highest among workers in their first six months at Amazon, hypothesizing that "many of them might be working in a physical role for the first time."<sup>45</sup>

However, there is much evidence showing that the problem is not out-of-shape workers improperly gripping and handling packages; the problem is that Amazon is forcing workers to work too fast. Amazon has failed to reduce injuries because it has refused to address one of the main risk factors leading to workplace injuries: the pace of work.

To meet its intense and ever-accelerating delivery timelines, Amazon relies on a program of sweeping and pervasive surveillance to track workers' every move, pushing them to work harder and faster.<sup>46</sup> In Amazon's fulfillment centers, when a worker picks a product for an order, a clock starts ticking. The timer tracks the amount of time until they pick another product, alerting supervisors if a worker spends too much "time-off-task" or fails to pick enough items and needs to be disciplined, pressured, or even terminated.

Workers and health and safety experts have long identified Amazon's obsession with speed as the source of its

epidemic of workplace injuries. In June of 2021, shortly after Amazon announced its injury prevention program, a former chief of staff in the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in the Department of Labor, told *The Philadelphia Inquirer*:

**"That constant surveillance and monitoring and discipline, which means they can't adjust when their bodies start hurting, is actually a big factor in causing these high rates of injuries."<sup>47</sup>**

Debbie Berkowitz  
Former Chief of Staff at Occupational  
Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)

In November 2021, the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries echoed this point while citing the company for violating safety laws. In its citation, the department noted,

*"The pace of work at the delivery station impacts worker safety and health in multiple ways. The pace directly affects repetition rates and the likelihood of fatigue and related injuries. The work pace also does not leave enough time for workers to use equipment intended to make the work safer, such as the step platforms intended to help employees access boxes and bags in locations above the shoulders. The pace of work also makes it impractical for workers to follow Amazon's safety training, including safe lifting methods and setting the brakes on carts while loading and unloading items."<sup>48</sup>*



Washington State Department of  
Labor & Industries

Despite this, as recently as April 2022, CEO Jassy has downplayed the crisis in Amazon facilities to shareholders, writing that Amazon's injury rate is "misunderstood."<sup>49</sup>



# What Happened When Amazon Eased Production Pressures?

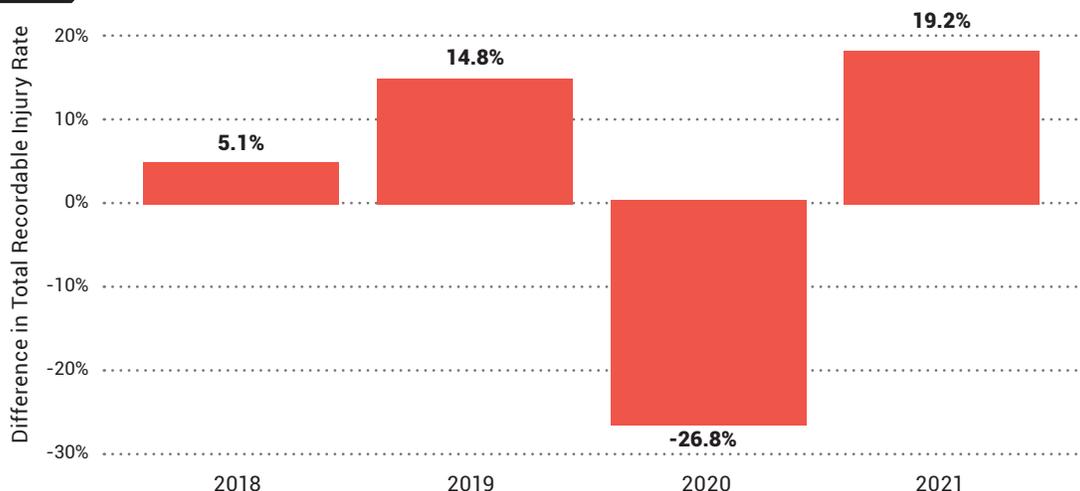
In 2020, responding to widespread scrutiny by elected officials and workers walking off the job at a number of sites at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns, Amazon partially suspended its practice of disciplining workers who failed to meet the company's aggressive production quotas ("rate") or for not moving fast enough between tasks ("time-off-task").<sup>50</sup>

That year Amazon experienced a number of challenges that could have led to an increase in workplace injuries. As consumers turned to ecommerce during pandemic

shutdowns, the company experienced a 127% increase in package volume.<sup>51</sup> At the same time the company onboarded a massive number of new employees as it expanded its workforce by 75%,<sup>52</sup> while backfilling for an astonishing 150% employee turnover rate.<sup>53</sup> And all this happened as Amazon workers navigated the stresses of working in the ecommerce industry during a global pandemic.

But in 2020, injury rates in Amazon's logistics network didn't go up; they went down.

FIGURE 3



Source: Athena analysis of data disclosed in *The Injury Machine*, The Strategic Organizing Center, 2022.

That year the company's total recordable injury rate dropped by 26.6% from an eye-popping 9 injuries per 100 workers in 2019 to 6.6 injuries per 100 workers in 2020. Amazon's 2020 injury rates were still significantly higher than injury rates at other warehouses but it is remarkable that in a year when the company onboarded a record number of employees, injury rates actually decreased. In fact, in the last five years, 2020 is the only year when Amazon reported a decrease in injury rates.<sup>54</sup>

And suspending its "rate" and "time-off-task" policies did not seem to have a negative impact on the company's bottom line. In 2020, Amazon reported \$21.3 billion in profits, an 84% increase from its profits the year before.<sup>55</sup>

Unfortunately, Amazon did not make its suspension of rate and time-off-task policies permanent. As the company readied for its annual shopping holiday Prime Day and the holiday season, managers reportedly resumed disciplining employees for failing to meet the company's ambitious production quotas.<sup>56</sup> The next year, with the two policies back in effect, injury rates jumped up nearly 20%, from 6.6 to 7.9 injuries per 100 workers.<sup>57</sup>

**PROFITS DURING RATE AND TOT SUSPENSION**

**INJURIES DURING RATE AND TOT RESUMPTION**





# Workers Rise Up

Amazon employees across the country and around the world have been fighting for safer working conditions and respect on the job for over a decade.

As far back as 2011, dozens of workers at an Amazon fulfillment center in the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania blew the whistle on dangerously hot working conditions at their warehouse.<sup>58</sup> After reports that conditions at the facility were so bad that managers decided to hire ambulances to wait in the warehouse parking lot to take workers experiencing heat illnesses to the hospital made headlines,<sup>59</sup> Amazon relented and installed cooling systems in the facility.<sup>60</sup>

Two years later, Amazon workers in Germany organized a series of strikes to demand that the company enter wage negotiations with their union, Ver.di.<sup>61</sup>

In 2018, workers at the Amazon fulfillment center in Shakopee, Minnesota staged a walkout to protest the hazardous conditions and grueling pace of work,<sup>62</sup> and the following year workers in warehouses in Minnesota<sup>63</sup> and Germany,<sup>64</sup> organized strikes during the company's Prime Day holiday.

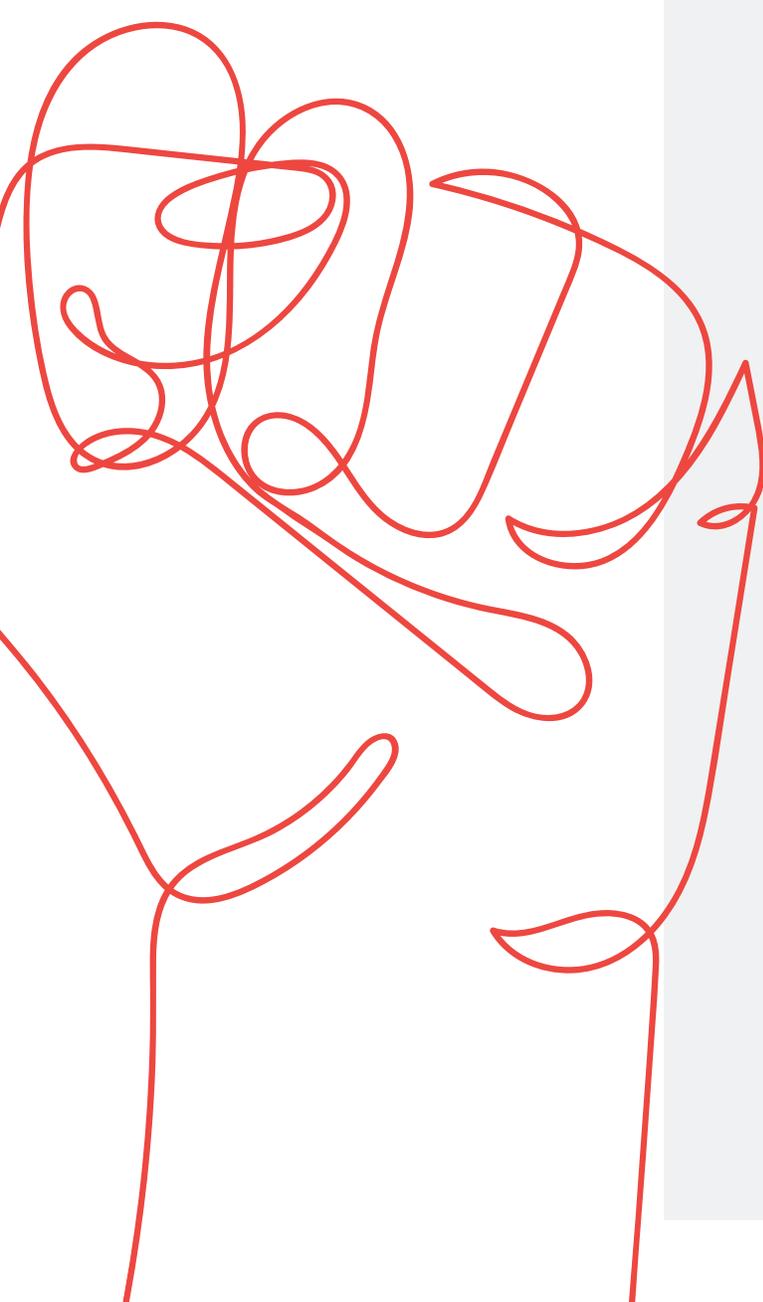
Workers in New York, Portland, and other cities around the US took to the streets to protest for safe jobs, reminding the company, "We're Humans, Not Robots." <sup>65</sup>

# Amazon Strikes Back

And as workers have risen up, Amazon has shown a pattern and practice of striking back to silence them. In 2019 the company hired the notorious Pinkerton Detective Agency to surveil workers and attempt to thwart workplace organizing.<sup>66</sup> Later, Amazon appeared to bring its worker surveillance in-house, releasing job postings for Intelligence Analysts within its "Global Intelligence Program" that would be responsible for tracking organized labor, activist groups and "hostile" political leaders.<sup>67</sup> In 2020, Amazon workers filed a record 37 charges to the National Labor Relations Board, across 20 cities.<sup>68</sup>

When workers in Bessemer, Alabama petitioned for a union election in 2020, Amazon engaged in such a widespread and pervasive program of union suppression that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that the company's "flagrant disregard" of federal labor law made a "free and fair election impossible," and ordered a rerun of that election.<sup>69</sup> A year later, Amazon entered into a nationwide settlement agreement with the NLRB stemming from another set of complaints in which the Federal Government required the company to take the extraordinary step of emailing more than 1 million current and former employees to advise them of their rights and roll back unlawful rules that limited workers' ability to communicate with each other about workplace organizing.<sup>70</sup>

# A Historic Win in Staten Island



In a historic win, workers at the JFK8 fulfillment center on Staten Island won the first union election at Amazon in the US in April 2021.<sup>71</sup> Their path to victory is an epic David-and-Goliath story, which started when workers walked out to protest the lack of precautions at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>72</sup>

Amazon executives including Jeff Bezos, Jay Carney (Senior Vice President and former Obama Press Secretary), and General Counsel David Zapolsky met to come up with a plan to respond. According to notes from the meeting that were obtained by *Vice News*, the executives decided to fire one of the walkout's organizers, Chris Smalls, and smear him in the press.<sup>73</sup> In his notes from the meeting, Zapolsky reportedly wrote that Smalls was "not smart or articulate," and that the company should, "make him the most interesting part of the story, and if possible make him the face of the entire union/organizing movement."

During the same meeting, Amazon executives also reportedly discussed building public support by giving away masks at police stations around the country. This practice of working with police forces and private security operatives to undermine workplace organizing was an integral aspect of the company's strategy for fighting workplace organizing.<sup>74</sup>

Over the last two years, workers at JFK8 continued to fight for change. Amazon management aggressively fought to suppress the organizing effort, spending millions of dollars on anti-union consultants,<sup>75</sup> forcing workers into high-pressure one-on-one meetings with managers, and even having a union organizer arrested for talking with workers at the facility.<sup>76</sup>

When votes were counted on April 1 of this year, 2,654 workers voted in favor of unionizing. They won the vote by a 10% margin.<sup>77</sup>



# Regulators Take Notice

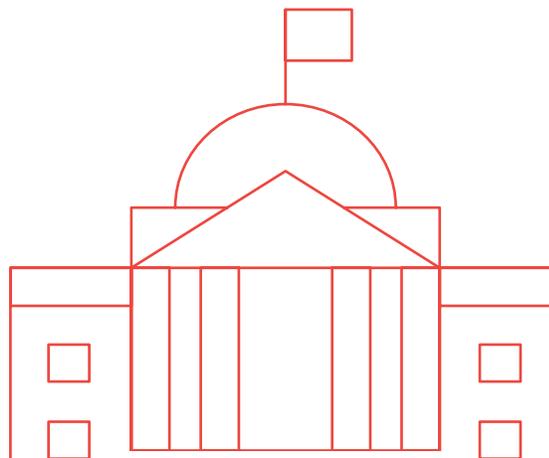
The problems in Amazon's facilities have come to the attention of regulatory agencies and lawmakers, who are beginning to take action to protect workers. Over the course of 2021 and the first four months of 2022, OSHA and its state counterparts cited Amazon for 41 different violations, including 20 serious violations, one repeat violation and one willful violation, issuing fines totaling \$231,162.<sup>78</sup>

While Amazon has faced some of the stiffest penalties of any employer for its workplace safety violations, the company's massive wealth and profitability have allowed it to refuse to make meaningful improvements to address its safety violations. After the Washington State Department of Labor and Industry fined the company \$81,000 over an eleven-month time period, Washington State Attorney General Bob Ferguson reported that Amazon was "unwilling to take any meaningful steps to reduce its high injury rate," adding that the company was now "knowingly putting workers at risk of injury."<sup>79</sup>

Over the last few years, worker advocates, racial justice organizations, and tech policy advocates have documented the problems with Amazon's model and pressed law makers and agencies to respond—citing

not only the human impacts, but also the racist history underpinning the domination and control of working people in low-wage jobs.<sup>80</sup>

Legislators in state houses around the country are starting to take action to stop the injury and turnover crisis at Amazon. On September 21, 2021 California Governor Gavin Newsom signed California's Warehouse Quotas Law (Assembly Bill 701) into law.<sup>81</sup> The law prohibits quotas that prevent meal or rest periods or prevent compliance with occupational health and safety standards. The California bill also requires employers to provide employees with information, in writing, about quotas that are being applied to them and prohibits retaliation for requesting information or complaining about quotas. Similar warehouse quota bills have been introduced in Minnesota,<sup>82</sup> New Hampshire,<sup>83</sup> New York,<sup>84</sup> New Jersey<sup>85</sup> and Washington state.<sup>86</sup> Legislation that addresses worker surveillance and automated management across all sectors, and motivated by Amazon's abuses, has been introduced in California,<sup>87</sup> Illinois,<sup>88</sup> and Massachusetts.<sup>89</sup>





# Surveillance-as-a-Service

## Criminalization, Incarceration and Police Violence

Amazon was in the throes building out its online retail business when it began developing a server infrastructure that it could lease to others. Now the largest cloud computing service available in the world, Amazon Web Services (AWS) hosts a range of services, from data storage and transfer, to infrastructure for blockchain systems and app builders.<sup>90</sup>

AWS provides any customer access to unprecedented computational and data processing power.<sup>91</sup> In particular, scalable data processing unleashes the potential for widespread data collecting, tracking, and analysis of information about individuals and communities. With this tremendous power comes the potential for abuse.<sup>92</sup> Civil rights and privacy concerns have been so widespread that they have resulted in new legislation to ban face recognition and stop law enforcement from circumventing the constitution and buying personal data, as well as congressional investigations into the power of tech monopolies, including Amazon.<sup>93</sup>

In the internet age, where warfare and counterinsurgency are conducted using the same technology that enables us to connect, socialize, and organize globally, the potential for technology to supercharge violence and oppression is very real. Used in the wrong hands, powerful technology has the demonstrated potential to fuel state violence and be turned against Black and brown people around the world, contributing to criminalization, mass incarceration, and police violence.

Amazon and its subsidiaries have built out a massive business of surveillance-as-a-service to other companies and government entities with a record of human rights abuses.<sup>94</sup> Over the last year, the company energetically expanded partnerships with militaries, prisons, and police, to the recorded detriment of civil rights.<sup>95</sup> A few examples of Amazon's technology partnerships are detailed in this section.



# Amazon Web Services Hosts ICE's Massive Biometrics Database

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is building a new massive, invasive biometrics collection database called the Homeland Advanced Recognition Technology (HART) on a platform hosted by Amazon Web Services.<sup>96</sup> This \$4.3 billion database project, set to be the largest biometrics database in the country, is a dangerous step forward in DHS' surveillance capabilities.

The database will store troves of sensitive personal information about individuals, including biometric information like facial recognition data, digital fingerprints, iris images, palm print, voice print, and DNA as well as political affiliations, religious activities and relationship patterns. Privacy and immigrant rights organizations have sounded the alarm that HART will result in increased criminalization, detention, deportation, and undermine civil liberties.<sup>97</sup>



# Project Nimbus Fuels Israeli Apartheid Policies

In June of 2021, Amazon Web Services, along with Google signed a \$1.2 billion contract with the Israeli government for a flagship project called "Project Nimbus," to provide a cloud services "ecosystem" for the Israeli government.<sup>98</sup> The contract, which was signed in the same week that the IDF killed 250 Palestinians including at least 60 children in the Gaza Strip,<sup>99</sup> drew condemnation from hundreds of tech workers from both Amazon and Google.

Amazon employees spoke out against Project Nimbus in an open letter published in the *The Guardian*.<sup>100</sup> More than 300 employees signed the statement, which argued that "this technology allows for further surveillance of and unlawful data collection on Palestinians, and facilitates expansion of Israel's illegal settlements on Palestinian land."

They wrote, "we cannot look the other way, as the products we build are used to deny Palestinians their basic rights, force Palestinians out of their homes and attack Palestinians in the Gaza Strip—actions that have prompted war crime investigations by the international criminal court." As of this writing, the billion(s) dollar deal to move Israel's government computer systems to cloud based computing is still underway.

Project Nimbus is one of many contracts that demonstrate the role Amazon increasingly plays in human rights conflicts. Between 2012 to 2019, Amazon's contracts with the Department of Defense increased by 20 times. And since 2004, 86 percent of Amazon's government contracts have been with agencies central to the Global War on Terror, directly impacting Black, brown, and Muslim communities.<sup>101</sup>



# Amazon Transcribe: Speech-to-Text Tools Power Prison Surveillance

The technology that Amazon's Alexa-enabled devices uses to recognize voice requests is now being used to monitor phone conversations between families and their loved ones in some prisons and jails. In November 2021, an investigation revealed that California-based LEO Technologies sold artificial intelligence technologies which use Amazon's speech-to-text technology to transcribe phone conversations and flag calls based on key-word searches to jails and prisons across the country.<sup>102</sup>

LEO Technologies and their law enforcement partners insist that the data is being used to improve safety and stop crime, but contracts obtained by the *Thomson Reuters Foundation* indicate that the technology is being used much more widely. In eight states the system was reportedly queued up to scan for conversations involving the Spanish word for 'lawyer'.<sup>103</sup>

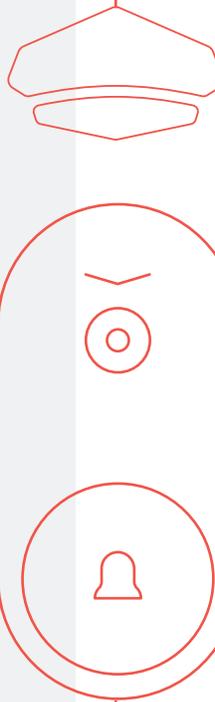
In Calhoun County, Alabama, authorities used the technology to identify calls where prisoners commented on the cleanliness of the facility in an effort to identify data to fight lawsuits. And in Suffolk County, New York, jail administrators used the system to find a call where an inmate reported a COVID outbreak cover-up to a family member and discussed the possibility of contacting the media.<sup>104</sup>

# Amazon Ring Creates World's Largest Private Surveillance System

Amazon's subsidiary Ring is a security camera and video doorbell product that has created an unprecedented private surveillance network with as many as 1.4 million cameras placed in homes around the world all networked together through Amazon.<sup>105</sup>

Until very recently, Amazon allowed partner law enforcement agencies to request footage from Ring users' cameras directly through the app. But starting the week of June 7, 2021, following years of criticism over civil liberties issues, Amazon made a small tweak to the platform to no longer allow police to directly contact users on the Neighbors app.<sup>106</sup> Instead, police now post a request for help and individual users can offer their footage.

It is unclear how much Ring data law enforcement officials are accessing. The company maintains partnerships with over 2,000 law enforcement agencies across the country.<sup>107</sup> In 2019 and 2020 the company published reports on Law Enforcement Requests for Information.<sup>108</sup> Those reports showed that Ring received over 1,800 legal demands for data in 2020, more than twice as many requests as the year earlier. But those reports only included requests that were compelled by a subpoena, search warrant, or other court order and not the total number of videos voluntarily turned over to police by users on the Neighbors app. And by 2021 the company stopped disclosing data on police requests altogether.<sup>109</sup> Little is known about how police are using Ring video footage and if they are feeding it through other technologies, such as facial recognition.





# Amazon Rekognition

Police abuse of facial recognition technology is not just a possibility; it's a current reality. As early as 2018, Amazon was working directly with the Orlando police department to implement real-time facial recognition which could identify a "person-of-interest" and reconstruct the person's past movements on city cameras.<sup>110</sup>

In addition to exacerbating the policing of Black and brown communities, research from Massachusetts Institute of Technology has shown that Amazon's Rekognition software struggled to identify individuals with darker skin tones.<sup>111</sup> After the study was published, Amazon attempted to discredit the Black women that led the research.<sup>112</sup>

In June 2020, at the height of the George Floyd uprisings, Amazon was under intense pressure from civil rights organizations to end its partnerships with law enforcement.<sup>113</sup> Amazon responded, announcing that it would place a one-year moratorium on selling Rekognition to police departments.<sup>114</sup> A year later, as the one-year moratorium drew to a close, Amazon rebuffed calls to make the ban permanent but did agree to extend the moratorium on the sale of Rekognition software to police for an unspecified period of time. Meanwhile, Rekognition continues to be developed and deployed for other uses, and Amazon is actively lobbying against civil rights groups seeking robust protections.<sup>115</sup>

Organizers leading the fight to push Amazon to end the sale of facial recognition argued that continuing the moratorium was not enough. In a statement reacting to the announcement, Myaisha Hayes, Campaign Strategies Director at MediaJustice said,

*"Extending the moratorium on the further sale of Rekognition to law enforcement, announced today, is not enough for those targeted before the moratorium or for our activists, family members and neighbors whose right to exist and move freely in public space remains threatened every day Amazon refuses to enforce a permanent ban. Amazon must make a commitment to prevent any future sale of their surveillance tech to police and federal agencies, anything less is unacceptable."* <sup>116</sup>

# Conclusion

In January 1997, in Amazon's infancy, Jeff Bezos bussed the company's entire staff to a mountain resort two hours outside of Seattle for a strategy retreat.<sup>117</sup> He kicked the meeting off by announcing that he wanted to create "a culture of metrics" and begin tracking and analyzing data on customers' behaviors to measure enjoyment, anticipate demand, and increase sales. That culture extends far beyond the company's online marketplace.

Amazon applied this focus on measurement, tracking, and monitoring to its fulfillment centers, which would grow to employ 1.1 million people in the U.S. alone. The result? Amazon uses an unprecedented regimen of workplace surveillance to drive its extreme delivery pace. And every single day, workers pay for the high cost of Amazon's fast delivery by suffering serious and often life-altering injuries.

The company's disregard for the ethical impacts of its actions also extend to many of the business partnerships it has pursued. As a result, people in their own neighborhoods, Black Lives Matter activists, immigrants, Palestinians, and incarcerated people face increased tracking and criminalization—giving lawmakers, and everyday people legitimate reason to call for accountability.

For too long, Amazon's technology has been turned against working people and people of color. Technology can be leveraged for social good, but Amazon has not taken that responsibility seriously. Instead, this technological power has been turned against its own workers and been used to expand criminalization and state violence in our communities and around the world.

On May 25th, shareholders can begin to change this when they vote on resolutions aimed at reining in the company's behavior. Amazon's Board of Directors has announced that it is formally opposing every single one of the shareholder resolutions being presented at this year's meeting – in many cases, without meeting with the investors to address their concerns. Shareholders will choose whether to cast their votes with Amazon's Board of Directors or with workers and communities.

## *We call on shareholders to:*

**Stand with workers fighting for better working conditions. Daniel Olayiwola, a warehouse worker in San Antonio, has a floor resolution that seeks to end the injury and turnover crisis by halting dangerous productivity quotas and punitive worker surveillance.**

**Vote "Yes" to resolutions that challenge injuries, high-turnover, retaliation, and racial disparities at Amazon. (Items 9, 13, 16, 17)**

**Vote "Yes" on proposals challenging Amazon's decision to sell powerful surveillance technologies to governments with histories of human rights abuses. (Items 6 and 19)**

**Support a call by the New York State and New York City Comptrollers to vote "Against" two members of the Board of Directors who oversee Amazon's employment practices and workplace safety programs, for their failure to address the crisis described above.**



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