

Amazon office workers subjected to brutal exploitation

Gabriel Black
20 August 2015

The online retail giant Amazon is notorious for subjecting its fulfillment center employees to grueling working conditions and Orwellian supervision at poverty wages. But according to a *New York Times* report published Saturday, its treatment of white-collar workers is just as bad, if not worse.

The *Times* exposé declares that Amazon “is conducting an experiment in how far it can push white-collar workers to get them to achieve its ever-expanding ambitions.”

The report documents how Amazon uses performance ratings, data monitoring and an annual culling of its staff to get 80-hour workweeks out of its office employees, encouraging them to sacrifice their health and family life for productivity gains that will enrich the company’s shareholders.

Workers, for instance, are expected to be on call to answer emails at all hours of the day and night. Employees spend “hours” working at home “most nights” and on weekends. Not immediately returning an email, even well after midnight, can result in text messages 15 minutes later asking for an explanation and negative consequences for an employee’s performance evaluation.

Each worker is ranked in a metrics system. Workers who are at the bottom of that list are put on “performance improvement plans” that are essentially warnings that they are about to be fired.

An employee with breast cancer, for instance, was told that she was put on one of these plans. Amazon explained to her it was “because ‘difficulties’ in her ‘personal life’ had interfered with fulfilling her work goals.” Another female employee was pressured to go on a business trip the day after undergoing surgery in relation to a miscarriage of twins. Her boss told her, “I’m sorry, the work is still going to need to get done...

From where you are in life, trying to start a family, I don’t know if this is the right place for you.”

Liz Pearce, who spent two years managing projects at Amazon, told the *Times* that she “would see people practically combust” at the company. Another former employee said that “his enduring image” of working at Amazon “was watching people weep in the office.” He told the *Times*, “Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk.”

These disturbing stories puncture any illusions that the relatively higher-paid workforce of the tech industry is somehow immune from capitalism’s drive to ruthlessly exploit all sections of the working class.

These higher-skill workers are being subjected to what among factory workers is known as “speed-up.” For most workers this takes the form of the elimination of the distinction between working and nonworking times. A 2014 Gallup poll found that about a third of all US workers are expected to check and answer email outside of business hours.

Workers are also increasingly being watched and surveyed using new data collecting apps that allow employers to track their employees’ work life. Paul Hamerman, a workplace technology analyst, told the *Times*, “People in sales are continually measured and always know where they stand. Now this is happening in the rest of the white-collar work force.”

One worker, who was a member of the Kindle reading tablet team, had to stop working on nights and weekends for the company after her father got cancer. Once she began caring for him, her ratings dropped and the company prevented her from transferring to a slower-paced section of the company.

She concluded, “When you’re not able to give your absolute all, 80 hours a week, they see it as a major weakness.”

If workers are not performing well, their colleagues are encouraged to report on them, using a feedback app that goes to the company's bosses. The *Times* reports that this encourages employees to team up to heap criticism on someone they wish to remove from the competitive pool. Because only bosses can see who wrote the criticisms, workers are not able to respond directly to what is being said about them.

Similar metrics are, of course, also applied to employees at Amazon's warehouses--who are paid as little as \$11 to \$12 an hour. Like their office counterparts, their productivity has been quantified into a point system that results in firing if they are not fast enough or call in sick too many times.

A 2012 exposure by the *Morning Call*, a local paper in Allentown, Pennsylvania, revealed the horrific conditions in its warehouses. A former worker told the paper, "When the heat index exceeded 100, they'd give you voluntary time off. But if you didn't have a doctor's note saying you couldn't work in the heat, you'd get points." During the summer, Amazon would place ambulances outside the factory because paying to take care of a worker fainting every few days was cheaper than installing air conditioning.

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the 15th richest man in the world, who made \$7 billion in a single day last month, told his employees in a letter that the *New York Times* article "doesn't describe the Amazon I know or the caring Amazonians I work with every day." He told employees that they should contact human resources or email him personally if they had experienced such practices.

Bezos's blanket denial of the *Times*' voluminous and well-documented accounts of the exploitation of Amazon employees is a cynical lie. It expresses a smug self-assuredness that the cruel exploitation of Amazon's workforce for the enrichment of shareholders and executives will, given the present state of American politics, go unpunished.

This reality was made clear by the statements of former White House press secretary Jay Carney, who now serves as senior vice-president of global corporate affairs at Amazon, where he presumably makes a six-figure salary.

In an interview with CBS, he called Amazon a "compelling place to work" and declared that it is impossible for an American technology company to

have a "cruel Darwinian or Dickensian atmosphere in the workplace."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact