

German Amazon worker denounces company's collective punishment tactics

Our reporters
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The *International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV)* has met with great interest among Amazon workers in Germany. Many workers took the *IAWV* flyer during the strike at the Bad Hersfeld Amazon Distribution Centre last weekend.

One of the first to register for the *IAWV* was an Amazon worker in Leipzig. He has worked in the Amazon Distribution Centre there since 2011 and has been involved in strikes against the miserable working conditions. On Sunday, he talked with reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions in the factory and gave an insight into the treacherous conditions of exploitation practised by the American multinational. He did not want us to use his name for fear or reprisals.

The Leipzig facility was built in summer 2006 and employs more than 2,000 workers on an area of 75,000 square metres. It is one of nine distribution centres in Germany employing approximately 12,000 people.

At the beginning of our conversation in Leipzig, he told us that he had subscribed to the *IAWV* mainly because he was interested in the international cooperation and coordination of all workers.

“Two things are important to me,” he said. “Firstly, Amazon is a global company and one cannot successfully fight against it without the international cooperation of the workers. During the strike last December, workers in Poland were forced to work extra shifts to undermine our strike. Secondly, Amazon plays a pioneering role. The merciless exploitation here is to be the benchmark in all other facilities.”

He then described his working day. He lives outside Leipzig and has to set off by bus before 5:00 in the morning for his shift that starts at 6:30. The early shift runs until 15:00 (3:00 p.m.). At that time, the late shift starts and goes on till 23:30 (11:30 p.m.). There is no

bonus for working nights, since that only kicks in after 24:00 (midnight). If he works the early shift in autumn and winter, he does not see daylight at all. It is still dark when he starts in the morning and when he returns in the early evening, too.

There are two breaks on each shift: one lasting 20 minutes and another of 25 minutes. Workers are not permitted to eat at their workstation, and it takes 3-5 minutes to walk to the canteen. “Usually, only 10 minutes remain in which you have to eat your food and then walk quickly back to the warehouse,” he says.

He is a packer. This means he has to pack the orders into a parcel and put it on a conveyor. This is done as follows: He stands at a packing table in front of a monitor. This displays the order, and the items are placed ready in a so-called Silver Cart, where they have been collected by the “pickers”.

The monitor also shows the size of the box to be used and the type of shipping, with or without instruction leaflet, delivery note and the type of packing material. Then the box has to be unfolded, the goods inserted, secured with packing material, closed and taped shut. Then a barcode sticker has to be stripped from a roll and stuck on, and then the package has to be placed on the conveyor.

Amazon's default work rate is to pack 75 parcels an hour. This means barely 50 seconds for a parcel, which is impossible to achieve despite working intensively. “On average, one can achieve no more than 65 or 66 packages”, the worker explained. From time to time, a “leader” or “manager” passes by and shows the performance rate on his laptop, “demanding a performance increase.”

The work is physically and mentally very strenuous. A packer does not have to run about as much as the pickers, who have to walk 25 kilometres on some days.

But the intense concentration, the long periods standing at the packing table and the constant repetitive movements are a big strain and cause permanent health damage. For this work, he earns €11.96 an hour (US\$13.36), which equates to a monthly income of barely €1,400 (about US\$1,550) total.

You have to be at your workstation just before the beginning of the shift, he says. Each shift begins with a 10-minute departmental meeting where a manager, or sometimes a leader, speaks and reports on “incidents”. Sometimes the official says: “Today will be an athletic day.” This means that the order situation is intense, the work rate has to be intensified. The departmental meeting usually ends with an appeal about work safety. This also includes the tidiness and cleanliness of the workplace, for which every employee is responsible.

The managers and leaders speak in commanding tones, the Leipzig packer reports. He knows that several are former army soldiers and officers. For them, issuing commands is a matter of course, and sometimes colleagues are spoken to very harshly for minor mistakes. That is very humiliating.

The work pressure is reinforced by an insidious bonus system called “PRP”. This operates as follows: There is the possibility of earning a 12 percent bonus each month, but only if there are no mistakes in terms of work safety, productivity and inventory accuracy. The 12 percent is almost never achieved. Usually, there is no more than 3-5 percent bonus; often it’s zero.

But the group pressure that is generated by this is huge. If there are three accidents or even minor work safety issues, 3 or 4 percent is already lost from the bonus. If several workers do not achieve the defined productivity level, another 4 percent also falls away. And if many “stowers”, those who stock the goods onto the shelves, wrongly place items, or if for some other reason there is an inventory error exceeding a certain tolerance, then more bonus points are also gone.

The bonus points apply to the whole department. This means that the mistake of an individual worker can mean all workers are “punished”, and therefore everyone tries to perform fully in order not to harm other colleagues.

A few weeks ago, the garbage compactor caught fire at the Leipzig facility. The cause was unclear. Workers suspected that as the rubbish was not being separated, batteries ignited under the pressure of the compactor.

Waste separation has been introduced since the fire, he said, but several firefighters suffered smoke poisoning and had to be treated by a doctor. Although they were not part of the workforce, the incident was classified as a work accident and the bonus was cut.

Another time, a worker suffered a stroke and had to be taken to hospital. Although neither the worker nor any other employee could be held responsible, a point was deducted for breach of work safety, the Leipzig Amazon worker reports.

This bonus system is to be expanded in the future. Due to persistently high sickness levels, a special “health bonus” is to be introduced. Even if you do not have any absences due to illness, you can only achieve the health bonus if the whole team in which you work has no or few absences.

The system puts employees under pressure to drag themselves to work even if they are sick. These measures pit workers against each other and help poison the working environment. It pushes elderly and chronically ill colleagues to the sidelines.

In reality, the reason for the high sickness absences is the extremely harsh, energy-sapping work. The constant work stress, the pressure and the permanent checks are physically and mentally exhausting in the long run. In many Amazon facilities in eastern Europe, the work pressure and levels of exploitation are even greater than in Leipzig, our interlocutor explains, and stresses the urgency of workers cooperating internationally.



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