

Striking German Amazon workers describe grueling conditions and digital surveillance

Dietmar Henning
7 June 2017

The day-to-day working conditions at Amazon's Rheinberg facility in the Lower Rhine region of Germany are reminiscent of the worst kinds of slavery, combined with constant digital surveillance, striking workers told the *International Amazon Workers Voice*.

Five hundred workers conducted a three-day strike at the giant fulfillment centre from June 1 to June 3. The walkout was called by the Verdi trade union. Striking workers participated in a union demonstration in the state capital of Düsseldorf, located some 40 kilometres (25 miles) away last Friday.

Around 1,900 workers labor at the warehouse, which was opened in 2011. The centre, which is the size of 17 football pitches, provides same-day deliveries to customers throughout the Ruhr region, including Cologne, Bonn, Düsseldorf, Aachen, Münster and as far as Bremen. There are 12,000 Amazon workers in Germany.

Several Amazon workers told the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) about the grueling working conditions at the centre. The names of the workers have been changed at their request to prevent management retribution.

Diana has worked at Amazon since 2013 and is currently employed in the Receiving Department. She must stay on her feet for eight hours a day, she said, adding, "But, of course, the pickers have it a lot worse."

Senol from Duisburg has been employed by Amazon for four years. Prior to that, he was employed on three short-term contracts at Amazon. As a picker, he collects the various goods and puts them together in packages. It is well known that Amazon pickers walk between 20 and 25 kilometres per day. Every day, Senol collects between 1,300 and 1,400 articles.

"There is stress with each package," he said. He receives them throughout the day in lists of items that Amazon has promised to ship on the same day. Senol then receives a list of "cut-off" articles, with the times when they must be ready for packers to prepare. "Then everything must be done quickly so the customer gets their goods on time."

He does not always manage to keep up. "When you gather

together various articles that are located at different ends of the warehouse, that happens sometimes." The 11,000 square-metre facility has four levels which are only connected by stairs. Lifts are reserved for pallets and cannot be used by pickers. If he is not ready on time, a supervisor comes and warns him. "But what should we do, we can't do anything more than work," Senol said.

He has also been given warnings for stopping briefly to rest. "You are constantly under surveillance and observed," he complained. "They follow your steps via GPS through the scanner on your wrist. And they always want more. I regularly achieve 200 percent of what is required as a minimum, that is, double the work. When I once reached 185 percent, one of the managers called me over and asked what was wrong with me. My effort was declining, he claimed. Hello? I was at 185 percent! But that's how it is here."

His colleague Thomas detailed even more onerous working conditions. A physically strong worker, he is employed as a cart-runner and must put baskets (referred to as "tools") at various stations for the pickers. He pushes a double pallet cart, loaded with two pallets containing 48 baskets each, and then manually unloads them for the pickers.

Although he has the required license, Thomas is not permitted to use an electric cart. "Amazon does not want that." Instead he must push the cart around for eight hours a day with 96 baskets. "Once we weighed it," he said. "All together it weighs 360 kilograms (793 pounds)."

The image of slaves dragging the huge stones for the Egyptian pyramids comes to this reporter's mind.

"By the end of the shift, I am wearing my third T-shirt, which like the two previous ones is wet through with sweat.

"When I help as a picker, I can go and play football for two hours afterwards. As a cart-runner, you can forget about that. I got home from a shift in the afternoon recently, fell completely worn out into bed and slept through until the next morning."

Like Diana and Senol, Thomas was also frustrated with the

constant surveillance, was well as the performance bonus system. “The constant surveillance is brutal.”

The bonus is calculated based on the number of packages packed and the quality of their work, Diana told us. “A computer randomly checks a selection of areas. The fewer mistakes it discovers, for example, the fewer wrong articles that have been included, the higher the bonus.”

But mistakes are unavoidable due to the burdens of the job, Thomas added. “Especially in the summer, when the temperature on the top level can rise above 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), you lose focus.”

The “health bonus” was introduced in Rheinberg at Christmas time. This bonus, which is based on the number of sick days in an entire department, results in workers being punished for the days when their colleagues are ill. “The individual bonus already drops if you are sick,” Diana said, “Now it also declines when a colleague is unwell.”

The typical worker exposed to this brutal exploitation by Amazon is shown by Senol’s career. He is a trained engine fitter who was employed at the Mannesmann plants in Mülheim as a crane driver.

“I earned good money there,” he said. “But I was laid off with 1,500 colleagues in 2008 with the economic crisis.” He has not been able to find a decent job ever since in the Ruhr region, where the unemployment rate is in double digits. “And that is even though I am trained in three different areas, and in addition a pipefitter and retail salesman.”

Senol’s 400 job applications proved unsuccessful, forcing him to continually seek work at Amazon. “I am happy to have a job at all,” he said. He has a wife and two small children aged 3 and 6.

Like all Amazon workers, Senol earns roughly €1,600 (US \$1,805) per month after tax, bonuses included. “The money just covers my basic costs,” he explained. “Without housing and child benefits, we would have nothing. I often stay at home when my family visits relatives on holiday,” he added. “I just can’t afford to go along.”

He supports the demand for an improved collective pay agreement for the workforce. But he doubts whether Verdi will achieve this. “They don’t even have a collective agreement themselves.” The isolated strikes are also not the right approach, he went on. “When we strike here, our colleagues at other centres like Bad Hersfeld have to do our work.” When they strike at Bad Hersfeld, they take on more work in Rheinberg, he said.

The company, one of the largest in the world, also outsourced work to Poland during a strike called by Verdi three years ago in Rheinberg.

A real fight requires the united struggle of Amazon workers around the world. The trade unions, whether it is Verdi in Germany or the Teamsters and Service Employees

International Union (SEIU) in the United States, are opposed to such a struggle because it would threaten the close relations they have established with their “own” corporations and governments.

While Amazon workers were on strike in Rheinberg, Verdi leader Frank Bsirske was attending an elite gathering of corporate, financial and political figures at the highly secretive Bilderberg Conference in Chantilly, Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC. Participants included the top executives of Google, AT&T, Bayer, Airbus, Deutsche Bank, Ryanair, Fiat Chrysler, and the Frankfurt Stock Exchange, as well as the US National Security Advisor, two former CIA chiefs, Trump’s billionaire commerce secretary Wilbur Ross and former SEIU president Andrew Stern.

Bsirske—who sits on the board of German airline Lufthansa and other corporations—said he wanted to use the opportunity to “exchange ideas” with the 140 participants. One of the topics the assembled billionaires, spies and union bureaucrats reportedly discussed was the danger of working-class opposition to social inequality around the world.

The wealthy elites, including Amazon boss Jeff Bezos—who makes \$23,782 every minute, or almost as much as an average Amazon worker makes in a year—have a lot to fear.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* newsletter was established by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International to provide a platform of opposition for the 340,000 Amazon workers around the world, report on their conditions and unite their struggles. We call upon all Amazon workers to subscribe to the newsletter, “like” our page on Facebook and share it with colleagues.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact