

Amazon conducts total surveillance of workers in new German plant

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“Big Brother is watching you” is the well known phrase from the famous novel *1984* by George Orwell. The horror of total control has arrived in 2017 at Amazon warehouses worldwide.

The company’s new logistics center at Winsen in Lower Saxony is considered to be the most modern in Germany and is the first to use transport robots. The German television program “Panorama 3” recently took a close look at the plant.

In the run-up to Christmas there is an increased need for workers at the logistics warehouse that usually staffs 2,000 people. The young “Panorama 3” journalist, Kaveh Kooroshy, did not find it difficult to infiltrate himself as a temporary worker. On December 12, his report, “Amazon: Violations of Employee Rights,” aired on German television.

Kooroshy was hired for the late shift, and he immediately began working with the company’s transport robots, called “Drives.” Here, workers do not run through the warehouse themselves, instead the “Drives” bring entire shelves to the worker’s “cage,” a workplace fenced off from three sides. There, the worker, called a “picker,” stands ready to take items from the shelf, scan and place them in a box according to exact computer specifications. These boxes then continue on an assembly line to the next station, where other workers pack the items for transport.

“Grasp, scan, drop”—this was Kooroshy’s work from just after three in the afternoon until midnight. Modern technology should make work easier and more enjoyable. But instead of the worker determining what needs to be done and at what speed, it’s the other way around: computers and robots tell him what he has to do and register how fast he’s doing it. The work rhythm is clocked to the second, and the worker is completely at the mercy of the machinery. Kooroshy

comments: “You actually become a robot yourself. ... One speaks of robots becoming more and more like humans, at Amazon it’s the other way round: humans become robots.”

At the same time, nothing remains hidden from the system. Computers register every movement, every process and every step in the labour process. (“How many items are transferred per minute? how many per hour? is the worker efficient enough?”) The tasks are laid down meticulously. Foremen can check every second what workers are doing and how long they need for the task. If there is any slacking, they will be immediately scolded by their supervisor.

The fact that Amazon is establishing vast levels of performance control in its logistics centres is not new. In Winsen, however, it is tantamount to total surveillance. The Panorama reporter discovered cameras on the ceiling everywhere. They are installed in the production halls, above the assembly lines and above workers’ lockers in the changing area.

The journalist presented the results of his research to a labour lawyer, Hajo Köhler, from Oldenburg, who commented in the film that, according to law, every control in a workplace must comply with the “principle of proportionality.” This means that workers be allowed to know when and what data about them has been collected and stored. At Amazon, however, an absolute control system had been established, which in effect amounts to an illegitimate “interference with the right to privacy.”

When asked to comment by “Panorama 3,” Amazon refused to be interviewed. Instead, the company stated in writing that there was no surveillance in its work halls. “The data collected helps employees in the execution of their tasks,” they said. The cameras in the changing rooms are only there to prevent theft. In the

work area there are “no cameras,” according to Amazon.

Even if the omnipresent “eyes” seen in Kaveh Kooroshy’s film were dummies, it would not make things better. Just the awareness of constant control leads to psychological pressure and stress. “The team leaders treat us like machines, not like humans,” an Amazon employee says in the film.

It has long been known that Amazon workers are subject to inhumane pressure, slave-like conditions and constant surveillance. In “fulfilment centres,” more than 300,000 workers around the world are working at miserable wages. At the same time, Jeff Bezos, owner and boss of Amazon, has once again massively increased his already obscene wealth. The multi-billionaire’s fortune soared to over \$100 billion recently. He earns more money in a minute than his employees in the US earn in a year. Amazon workers in poorer countries like India would have to work for eight years to make what Bezos makes in 60 seconds!

The levels of exploitation have provoked a series of protests and strikes at the company’s European facilities, including recently in Italy, Germany, France and Poland. In all of their struggles Amazon workers confront the hostility of the trade unions, which seek to isolate workers at individual plants from their co-workers in other facilities both in the same country and internationally.

In Germany, the Verdi trade union has made no attempt to solidarise with Amazon workers protesting in Poland. The French CGT trade union banned workers from striking at Amazon’s Lauwin-Planque facility (Northern France) at short notice.

The research by “Panorama 3” and the growing wave of industrial actions has alarmed the authorities. Barbara Thiel, the data protection officer of the Lower Saxony state government, has initiated a legal action against Amazon on suspicion that the company is violating the Federal Data Protection Act.

However, such token gestures will do nothing to improve the plight of Amazon workers. Politicians and political authorities across the globe are throwing themselves at the feet of the company, offering unprecedented tax breaks and subventions if Amazon sets up shop and exploits workers in their particular town, state or region.

In order to coordinate the struggle of Amazon

workers, the Socialist Equality Party and its sister international parties have launched the *International Amazon Workers Voice* newsletter. Amazon workers can network with their colleagues worldwide, report on their working conditions and coordinate their struggles. We call on all Amazon workers to subscribe to the newsletter and “like” us on Facebook .



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