

Amazon unleashes army of Twitter trolls to improve its image

Erik Schreiber
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Amazon has unveiled a new program to burnish its worsening image through social media. In the middle of August, the company began introducing a corps of “Fulfillment Center Ambassadors” on Twitter. The group’s primary responsibility is to mitigate the damage from increasingly common exposures of the punishing conditions at Amazon’s warehouses.

This diplomatic corps includes at least 12 accounts so far, and the users’ profiles follow the same pattern. Their usernames all end with the title “Amazon FC Ambassador,” they all include the Amazon smile logo, and they all show a photograph of an employee in a warehouse, although his or her face often is outside the frame. In addition, the ambassadors’ profiles include a link that allows users to schedule a tour of an Amazon fulfillment center.

When Twitter users criticize Amazon for its low pay, dangerous working conditions or inhuman workloads, these ambassadors spring into action. They insert themselves into the conversation and cheerfully defend the company. Their favorite topics are wages, bathroom breaks, and the temperature of the warehouses where they work. The following comment from Phil is representative: “Working conditions are very good—clean/well lit— Safety is a top priority at my facility!”

The ambassadors affect a uniformly chipper tone and often cite the same talking points. For example, several ambassadors have posted variations on the following remark, again from Phil: “We make ~30 percent more than traditional retail stores. We also have great medical benefits from day one.”

Some comments express a nauseating affection for the company. In one post, Carol remarked, “I can safely say that none of MY ideas have panned out anywhere near what Jeff Bezos has accomplished. I am more than happy, though, to continue working here, at BFI4, in

WA. I receive a (more than fair) wage and work with some really good people. Making history, every day.”

Such cloying paeans to the mammoth retailer and its obscenely wealthy CEO might make Twitter users think that they have stumbled into *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In fact, skeptics have challenged the ambassadors to prove that they’re real people, rather than bots. Ambassadors have obliged them by posting photos of themselves holding sheets of paper bearing the names of their interlocutors.

Real Amazon workers are, in fact, maintaining these accounts. These employees are stockers, stowers and managers at warehouses in places like Jacksonville, Florida; San Marcos, Texas; and Kent, Washington. Most of the ambassadors have worked at Amazon for a year or longer. They openly tell other Twitter users that the public relations campaign is part of their job responsibilities. It would be easy, though, to mistake the ambassadors for workers who are spontaneously defending Amazon without prompting.

“FC ambassadors are employees who understand what it’s actually like to work in our FCs,” said Ty Rogers, an Amazon spokesperson, in an interview with the *Guardian*. “The most important thing is that they’ve been here long enough to honestly share the facts based on personal experience. It’s important that we do a good job of educating people about the actual environment inside our fulfillment centers, and the FC ambassador program is a big part of that, along with the FC tours we provide.”

The truth of the matter was revealed to Yahoo Finance by a former Amazon employee who described his ambassadorship. “Ambassador isn’t a job you do every day, it’s just something you are trained to do,” said Chris Grantham, who worked at a warehouse in Florida for three years. “Becoming an ambassador was

a way to get out of loading trucks or packing boxes for 10 to 12 hours. You may ‘ambassador’ one day, then unload trucks for the next three.”

Ambassadors receive an additional paid day off, which they must use within three weeks, and a \$50 Amazon gift card. “Plus, they gave us lunch: cold cuts and sandwich bread,” said Grantham. Managers pick workers for this job. “Generally speaking, ambassadors are the kiss-asses of the department,” said Grantham. “I stopped doing it after the first year I was there because it didn’t pay more. It’s voluntary.”

Naturally, the ambassadors do not describe the actual working conditions at Amazon warehouses. These details can be found in the book *Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain* by journalist James Bloodworth, who worked at Amazon as part of his research. He describes an atmosphere of stress, high pressure and abusive managers. After workers enter the facility, they undergo screening reminiscent of that at a major airport. Hoodies, sunglasses and phones are forbidden, and workers are patted down upon leaving to discourage theft.

Other appalling details are presented in a survey that the workers’ rights group Organise conducted. Between December 2017 and March 2018, the group gathered information from workers at Amazon warehouses in the United Kingdom. Employees described being forced to stand for 10-hour shifts. A pregnant woman was reprimanded for being sick. About 73 percent of workers had had their targets (i.e., the number of items that they must pack or sort) increased from already unreasonable levels. An incredible 74 percent of workers avoided using the bathroom so that they would not miss their targets. Approximately 55 percent of workers reported having developed depression since they started their jobs at Amazon. About 42 percent of workers reported having witnessed bullying or harassment. Not surprisingly, 82 percent of workers said that they would not apply for a job at Amazon again.

A legion of Amazon workers has expressed its anger at their low pay and abominable working conditions. In the US, Amazon worker Shannon Allen, for example, has produced a series of videos that detail the mistreatment to which she was subjected.

Above all, the billion-dollar corporation is threatened with the possibility that its workers may take matters

into their own hands. The *World Socialist Web Site’s International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) has undertaken a campaign to expose conditions at Amazon facilities around the world. This campaign has unquestionably caused deep disquiet among Amazon executives, particularly since the IAWV proposes a program of political and industrial action with which Amazon workers can fight back. The IAWV’s calls for rank-and-file committees at fulfillment centers and for Amazon workers to link their struggles to those of millions of other logistics workers globally—especially with those of UPS workers—is a direct threat the superprofits of Jeff Bezos and his lackeys.

Because information about Amazon’s exploitation of its workforce is emerging steadily as workers gain the confidence to speak out, the company’s charm offensive is falling flat. Twitter users have taken to arguing with the ambassadors and even insulting them.

Pranksters have created Twitter accounts to satirize the ambassadors, posting expressions of loyalty to “father Bezos” and hymns of gratitude for “three-minute regulated breaks between shifts.” But as part of the ongoing campaign to censor left-wing and oppositional viewpoints on the Internet, including, apparently, of criticism of corporations, Twitter has suspended some of these parody accounts. Nevertheless, the truth about Amazon’s slave driving is out, and workers coming into struggle will not be satisfied with the company’s transparently false happy talk.



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