

Amazon Web Services offers companies new tools for spying on workers

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Earlier this month, Amazon Web Services (AWS) introduced five services that use artificial intelligence and machine learning to monitor industrial processes and personnel. The company is promoting these services, which incorporate sensors and computer vision technology, as tools that enable manufacturers and warehouses to improve efficiency, maintain security and ensure workplace safety. But the danger is very real that these services will be used to identify, monitor and retaliate against workers who attempt to organize industrial actions in the workplace.

AWS, a subsidiary of the e-commerce behemoth Amazon, offers cloud computing platforms and application programming interfaces to businesses and governments. The company reported revenue of \$35.03 billion in 2019.

Two of the new services, Amazon Monitron and Amazon Lookout for Equipment, focus on machinery. Amazon Monitron is designed to detect equipment anomalies and predict when maintenance will be needed. Amazon Lookout for Equipment allows users to send sensor data to AWS for analysis and predictions of equipment failure.

The more insidious services are the AWS Panorama Appliance, the AWS Panorama Software Development Kit (SDK) and Amazon Lookout for Vision. Customers can install the AWS Panorama Appliance to add computer vision capabilities to their existing camera systems. The appliance interacts with the customer's cameras and analyzes video feeds for unusual activity. To perform this analysis, the appliance uses computer vision models that previously have been trained for analyzing manufacturing, construction and other industries, according to an AWS press release.

The company says that the appliance can ensure workplace safety by monitoring social distancing and

enforcing the use of personal protective equipment. But companies will use the AWS Panorama Appliance to safeguard their profits. The computer vision models that the appliance uses can undoubtedly be "trained," if they have not been already, to detect workers doing "suspicious" things such as talking together discreetly or passing literature to each other.

The AWS SDK allows manufacturers to build their own cameras and train their own computer vision models. Amazon Lookout for Vision analyzes images that customers send to it and alerts them about defects in products or machine parts. Although promoted as a quality control service, it conceivably could likewise be directed toward identifying "unusual" worker behavior.

Management at Amazon is aware that the company's well-deserved reputation for workplace surveillance and retaliation could contribute to a public backlash against its new services, and the company is anxious to dispel such concerns. "AWS Panorama does not include any pre-packaged facial recognition capabilities," an Amazon spokesperson told *Business Insider*. Even if this statement is true, it provides no reassurance to workers. Indeed, even if a computer does not recognize a worker on camera, his or her supervisor will.

Amazon itself has an entire division, the Global Security Operations Center (GSOC), that is tasked with spying on its workers in every country and thwarting their efforts to oppose unsafe and grueling conditions. Among GSOC's managers are John A. Barrios, an 11-year veteran of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Nathan Nguyen, a former US Army intelligence analyst. Leaked documents show that GSOC is tracking very carefully the time, location, and number of participants in organizing efforts and industrial actions by Amazon workers.

Amazon does not limit itself to physical surveillance of its employees. It also spies on communications between its workers on company listservs. Amazon has also been exposed for monitoring for communications related to labor organizing efforts at its facilities and its Whole Foods Market grocery stores, according to a report in *Vice News*.

Nor does Amazon limit its surveillance to internal communications. The company monitors its workers' posts on social media platforms such as Facebook. It scrutinizes these posts for any signs of an attempt by workers to organize or to plan a strike. One example is the company's elaborate spying on Amazon Flex Drivers, who work as independent contractors. Amazon created a special Advocacy Operations Social Media Listening Team to monitor drivers' interactions with journalists and conversations about potential strikes.

Other leaked documents show that Amazon has developed ties with the notorious Pinkerton detective agency, which has physically attacked workers and broken up strikes for more than a century. Documents from November 2019 show that Amazon sent Pinkerton spies into a company warehouse in Wroclaw, Poland. More recently, the Spanish newspaper *El Diario* reported that Amazon had hired Pinkerton to spy on a strike near an Amazon warehouse not far from Barcelona.

These surveillance methods constitute only what is known publicly about Amazon's practices.

Since mid-March, the approximate beginning of the pandemic in the United States, Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos has increased his wealth by tens of billions of dollars. Bezos has gained this windfall while keeping workers at their posts in warehouses and fulfillment centers where social distancing is impossible. He initially told employees that they would have to wait their turn for masks and allowed weeks to pass before he implemented even cosmetic safety measures. In all, 19,816 Amazon employees in the US had become infected with COVID-19 by early October, according to company figures.

Amazon workers are speaking out on social media and have organized walkouts. They are joining auto workers, teachers and other workers who have begun to fight back against the criminal response to the pandemic perpetrated by all the major employers together with the entire political establishment. In the

face of these looming struggles, Amazon has recognized a business opportunity in this situation—and has offered its specialized industrial surveillance tools to companies facing similar dangers of a workers' insurrection.

Amazon's history shows that the company is irreconcilably hostile to workers' most fundamental democratic rights: the right to free speech, the right to assemble, and the right to privacy. The only way for workers to fight back effectively is to unite and organize rank-and-file committees at each warehouse or fulfillment center. These committees will be responsible for monitoring workplace conditions, protecting workers from the pandemic, and demanding wages that permit a decent standard of living. The *International Amazon Workers Voice* will help workers interested in forming such committees in any way possible.



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