

Amazon steps up violations of workers privacy with new surveillance methods

Claude Delphian
2 May 2021

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the world's richest man, unveiled to shareholders this month a plan to track workers' motions on the job to the point where the company will control which muscle groups are used on a given day.

He said they are “developing new automated staffing schedules that use sophisticated algorithms to rotate employees among jobs that use different muscle-tendon groups to decrease repetitive motion and help protect employees from MSD [muscular-skeletal disorder] risks.” Presented by Bezos as a way to prevent injuries on the job, this invasive program will be used to ramp up Amazon’s exploitation of its workforce.

This is only the latest in a series of recent invasions of workers’ privacy by Amazon. Last month, Amazon confirmed that it was requiring delivery workers to install company surveillance software in their smart phones via an application called “Mentor,” which tracks their location both on and, in some reported cases off, the job.

This revelation was followed by a CNBC news report that Amazon was installing camera apparatuses from a company called Netradyn in drivers’ vehicles, which record “100 percent of the time.” The corporation is a 2015 San Diego startup founded by two former senior Qualcomm employees.

Netradyn’s camera system is designed to capture the road, the driver, and both sides of the vehicle. The camera system, called “Driveri” is powered by Artificial Intelligence that not only can note any accident or near-mishap, but also drivers’ facial expressions, hand signals, and personal activity.

While Amazon management has responded to criticism by claiming these systems are to “improve driver safety,” this extensive surveillance is used in the first instance to pressure workers to work throughout

their shifts at the fastest possible pace, at the expense of their own safety and sanity.

Amazon’s offsite monitoring mirrors the character of work in its warehouses, where workers are expected to complete a task every six to nine seconds. The surveillance tech is also used to degrade and demoralize workers, discourage socializing and conversation, and suppress free speech in opposition to unsafe working conditions and poor wages.

Amazon delivery drivers face grueling hours, intense scheduling, and increasing harassment from operational managers. The Mentor system developed by Amazon monitors the activity of contract drivers who provide “last mile” deliveries. The intent of such surveillance is designed to log the third parties’ performance while giving management a vast amount of data in order to exert power over the workers.

Amazon is at the forefront of a corporate campaign to normalize the most extreme forms of workplace surveillance. The invasive practices recall the infamous National Security Agency slogan revealed seven years ago by whistleblower Edward Snowden: “Collect it All,” “Process it All,” “Exploit it All,” “Sniff it All” and “Know it All.”

Amazon’s new recording systems are a radical increase over previous forms of invasive surveillance. In the 1960s, crude time-based clocks or stenographs often graphed the time it took for professional drivers to travel to a location, the time spent there and the speed of travel. Managers would review the graphs and on occasion have reason to discipline drivers for failures to perform.

In the 1990s, barcode scanners were used to track packages from the point of pickup to the point of delivery. This allowed management to see the time it took for a package to travel from the initial pickup to

the final destination. By the 2000s, most commercial truck fleets in the United States' over-the-road industry used Qualcomm equipment mounted on top of their cabs to access satellites to see real-time vehicle movement and stop or down times.

Customers expecting delivery could track their shipment and know when to expect delivery. Such tracking is still in wide use today by the United Parcel Service, United States Postal Service, and FedEx.

Beginning around 2015, cameras mounted inside the windshield of vehicles, including motor coach buses, began to be used to follow the visual scene of the outside traffic movement as well as the driver. GoPro, Inc. was a popular vendor of these cameras often seen on the helmets of motorcyclists.

Amazon is developing this software to a higher and more sinister level, with every moment of a worker's shift monitored from multiple angles, and a worker cannot so much as sneeze without a permanent video and audio record being logged into management databases and preserved for eternity. This "drive for safety" policy is the framework for blaming workers for all injuries and property damage that occur on the road, the result of stress or overwork or simply from conditions that workers have no control over.

Amazon has invested heavily to expand its fleet over the recent period. Mercedes-Benz/Dodge vans with Amazon's logo on the side and similarly marked cars are a more common sight in US cities. Amazon is also investing millions in the acquisition of independent airplane fleets, much like the fleets owned by FedEx and UPS. With the growing reach of its monopoly, its abusive practices and systematic violations of workers' privacy are finding their way into more and more industries.

In November, leaked documents revealed the activities of a secretive division of the company entitled the Global Security Operations Center (GSOC), which employs former government intelligence officials dedicated to compiling and analyzing data for the purpose of anticipating and suppressing opposition within the workforce. This was followed by revelations that Amazon has hired the infamous Pinkerton agency, which has specialized in strikebreaking for US companies since the late 19th century, to infiltrate its facilities, spy on workers, and provide data for GSOC.

Amazon's surveillance of its workforce isn't limited

to workers at the job. In 2018, the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed the hiring by Amazon's workers' compensation administrator Sedgwick of a private detective to spy on an injured worker in an effort to undermine her claim for compensation. In December 2020, Amazon Web Services (AWS) introduced five services for sale to other companies that use sensors and artificial intelligence to monitor workers.

To defend their democratic rights in the workplace, logistics workers must organize rank-and-file committees to protect their democratic rights and privacy. Workers should subscribe to the International Amazon Workers Voice and link their struggle with fellow workers in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Latin America to fight for workers' rights and socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact