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Working conditions

Amazon A–Z: Controversy

2011 is the beginning of a real controversy related to Amazon’s activities. Although the company experienced bad press and criticism in the previous decade – after the stock market crash of the dot-comspeculation bubble – it was a criticism of the business model from the perspective of investors and business analysts.

This time the issue was more socially relevant. On September 18, 2011 Spencer Soper from the local newspaper “The Morning Call” described working conditions in the Amazon warehouse in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The article focused on the frightening problem of high temperatures inside the building. An exceptionally warm summer and the lack of air conditioning caused the temperature inside the fulfillment center to reach 40 degrees Celsius many times, and the employees spending there many hours during shifts fainted. The company even hired an ambulance team stationed on site to take the injured to the hospital if necessary.

After 15 people collapsed at work on June 2, as reported by Soper, worried workers alerted the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) about the situation. A week later, the agency carried out an inspection, and then received another report, this time from a on-site doctor, confirming dangerous working conditions.

Spencer Soper’s text echoed widely and was probably the first description not only of the specific extreme temperature situation, but of the working conditions in the Amazon fulfillment centres in general. After the OSHA inspection, the company promised to install additional fans and air conditioning in some parts of the building in Allentown, but the pace of work and the pressure on productivity still remain a dubious trademark of the company today.

Another milestone in describing Amazon’s business was an exhaustive piece prepared by Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld for “The New York Times”. The article published in August 2015 describes the situation not of manual workers, but of white-collar workers: engineers, programmers, executives or marketing and sales specialists. According to journalists’ interlocutors,

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overtime, pressure on results and constant criticism are everyday life in the corporate offices. It was also thanks to such publications that solidarity between office and warehouse employees began to emerge, as seen during the strike at the fulfillment center in Shakopee, Minnesota in 2019 or during the coronavirus epidemic in 2020.

sources:

1. Spencer Soper, *Inside Amazon's Warehouse*, "The Morning Call", 2011, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:eStyimr1NRkJ:https://www.mcall.com/news/watchdog/mc-allentown-amazon-complaints-20110917-story.html>
2. *Amazon Empire: The Rise and Reign of Jeff Bezos*, rež. James Jacoby, prod. PBS, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVVfJVj5z8s>
3. Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld, *Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace*, "The New York Times", 2015 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>