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Working conditions

Amazon A–Z: Effort

In 2018, Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy (State Labour Inspectorate) conducted a number of inspections at Polish Amazon Fulfillment Centers to examine working conditions. Both more formal matters (such as the timeliness of payment of wages, their underestimation, irregularities in protocols on accidents at work), but also those directly related to the effort and comfort of employees at the workstations were taken under scrutiny. Among other things, the inspectors examined energy expenditure (i.e. the amount of energy used by the human body) at 11 workstations. According to their measurements, 7 workplaces recorded exceedances of the applicable standards.

According to trade unionists from OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza (Workers' Initiative union), referring to the inspection report, in some departments the measured energy expenditure amounted to 8000 kJ or even 12000 kJ, whereas the norms for physical work specified in the regulation of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of Poland are respectively 5000 kJ for women and 8400 kJ for men. Thus, juxtaposing these numbers, one can clearly see how tiring the work on warehouse halls is.

Amazon, of course, disagreed with the measurements of specialists from the government agency, challenging them in court. The company claims that the energy expenditure at all workstations is within the norm and cites a study by an external certified agency it hired in 2015. For example, according to information obtained by the union, a study for an employee in the packaging department commissioned by Amazon showed an average energy expenditure of about 5700 kJ, while the measurement conducted by the public agency on the same department showed 12000 kJ. Similar conclusions are quoted by "Dziennik Gazeta Prawna" newspaper: referring to the post-audit report it indicates that "a woman employed in the warehouse consumes 9408 kJ of energy during a shift, i.e. almost twice as much as previously claimed by the company". Why such a large discrepancy?

The state inspectors took measurements using a more complicated method, measuring the amount of oxygen consumed by workers using a special mask connected to a meter. On the other hand, the survey of specialists hired by the employer was

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based on the so-called Lehmann method, which is an estimation method. In it, the measurement is made by observing the body position and movements performed by the worker and then multiplying them by time and the corresponding energy value derived from a table.

Based on its research, Amazon has also compiled specific tables of the length of time spent performing each activity on a given position. For example, the Workers' Initiative published such a table for the packing station. According to it, during her 630 minutes at work (10.5 hours), a worker in the PACK department takes a full 60 minutes of rest in a sitting position, which is the total of three statutory breaks. However, the expert who prepared this table apparently did not take into account the average time spent by employees on their way from the workplace to the canteen, changing rooms or toilets, as well as in queues for food or water vending machines.

sources:

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