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Social context

Amazon A–Z: Pandemic

“Many people have gone on sick leave recently. Meanwhile, Amazon now has the level of sales it normally had before Christmas. People are not making it to work. I try to keep a safe distance from other employees, but I’m afraid I’ll get infected. The warehouse should be closed for the pandemic – there is no doubt about that.” This is what one of the Amazon employees in Poland told the “Onet” news website in April 2020. Despite the appeals of some crews and trade unions, no such thing happened – at least not in Poland.

From a certain point of view, it is hardly surprising that a company so profiting from the pandemic and so key to the delivery of purchases in many countries, defends itself with all means against the closure of logistics centers and reduction of efficiency. Over the years, Amazon has made customers in countries such as the U.S., U.K. and Germany significantly dependent on it, and with the advent of the epidemic, it has praised its warehouse staff as “essential workers” or “heroes.”

Amazon’s relevance at the time can be seen in the numbers. In the first quarter of 2020, when the first COVID-19 outbreaks were diagnosed around the world, growth in the number of products purchased on Amazon (year-over-year) shot up to 32 percent, the highest increase since the fourth quarter of 2012. Sales for the entire “pandemic” year of 2020 totaled \$386.06 billion (up 38 percent year-over-year), and net revenue for Amazon as a whole (counting product sales, cloud services, etc. together) grew by a whopping 84 percent, topping \$21 billion. The following year, it’s hard to see them slowing down – net revenue grew by more than 50% and broke through \$33 billion. However, not everyone wanted to put their hands on this success, fearing for their health or lives.

The first case of coronavirus in Amazon’s US warehouses was officially confirmed on March 18, 2020. After noting more and the company’s initially slow reaction, employees at the JFK8 warehouse in New York staged a protest on March 30, walking away from their posts. They demanded that the facility be temporarily closed due to the disease confirmed there and that additional safety measures be put in place. The very next day Chris Smalls, one of the organizers of the protest, was fired from

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his job on charges of...failure to comply with the principle of social distancing.

Another important place of workers' protests in the US Amazon was the DCH1 warehouse in Chicago. There the employees managed to fight the company to respect their right to paid sick leave, which according to Amazon was initially only due to full-time employees – although, as the employees claimed, according to internal regulations it was also due to most part-time employees. Eventually, the company agreed to cover all employees, introduced a temporary “covid” addition to pay, unlimited unpaid leave (valid only at the beginning of the pandemic) and a number of safety measures.

However, the controversy over the policy of informing workers about detected cases of the virus dragged on for a long time. Back in 2020, the California state attorney general launched an investigation into the matter, and a year later, as part of a settlement, Amazon agreed to improve communication with workers and local health services and additionally pay half a million dollars to better implement consumer protection laws. French warehouse workers also took legal action in their dispute with Amazon, accusing it of failing to provide workers with sufficient protection from the virus. In April 2020, the court ordered the company to review its safety measures and in the meantime halt shipments of non-essential goods. In response, Amazon shut down its French warehouses entirely, claiming it was unable to operate as the court ordered. The warehouses only resumed operations after a month.

Polish workers also demanded additional protection from the start, and one of their demands was that Amazon suspend its controversial performance assessment system, which the company agreed to. There was criticism of Amazon's actions, which initially introduced distance rules on the warehouse floor and in the canteen, but crowding still prevailed in queues and corridors during breaks. Also of concern, as everywhere else in the world, was the company's method of communicating with employees. Information about new cases of the virus reached a narrow group of employees, and the rest of them learned about it from co-workers.

As “Business Insider” magazine notes, while many consumers and investors see Amazon as the “hero” of the pandemic because of

its provision of essential products to those protecting themselves from the virus, the company can be seen as a villain because it inadequately responded to employee allegations. “Amazon can do more,” says Andrew Murphy, an analyst at investment firm Loup Ventures, quoted by the newspaper. “There’s an evident lack of clarity around the mission, vision, and values at the most senior levels of the company.”

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