

## Amazon Workers on the Move

A union drive launches at the Internet's premier retailer

By David Moberg

To many workers, the "new economy" is starting to look a lot like the old one. With once high-flying Internet companies crashing earthward and Wall Street pressuring them to show profits, entrepreneurs who promised a revolutionized workplace and stock-option riches for all have turned into tough-minded bean-counters looking for ways to shave costs at the expense of employees. That has prompted some new economy workers to think about organizing themselves into unions. In turn, the barons of the new economy are responding with classic anti-union tactics.

In mid-November organizers launched campaigns among two different sets of workers at Amazon.com, the premier Internet retailer. The experience of Amazon workers in Seattle, who are organizing with the assistance of WashTech, an innovative Communications Workers local, demonstrates the limits of the Internet as a source of high-skill jobs in a global economy that has relocated much manufacturing to lower-wage havens.

There had been little pro-union activity at most Internet companies. Their often youthful workers saw themselves catching a new economic wave that they could surf to quick fortunes while working in a casual setting with computer technologies. But working in an Amazon warehouse or being a customer service representative is not much different from other warehouse or customer relations jobs. Indeed, these "e-commerce" jobs often offer lower and less stable incomes and impose more demanding and unpredictable routines than their conventional equivalents.

One middle-aged warehouse employee in Kansas—call him Ralph, since he fears using his real name after the company threatened to fire a co-worker if he ever mentioned the word "union" again—had worked at an electrical

equipment factory for many years until it moved to Mexico last year. He previously had earned more than \$13 an hour, but Amazon pays him less than \$10, and he has endured mandatory schedules of 50 to 60 hours a week around Christmas as well as periods in the summer when he was lucky to work 20 hours a week. Since Amazon's stock price has plummeted, his stock options—like those of most workers hired in the past year and a half—are worthless. "I'm a hard worker," Ralph says. "But what they want is damn ridiculous for the pay and the hours."

In Amazon's hometown of Seattle, college-educated workers like 23-year-old Susan—again, she asked that her real name not be used—work as customer service representatives for around \$13 an hour (with starting pay at \$11). She

came to Amazon seduced by the Internet hype and by seeing "a lot of my friends who'd been there for years who were millionaires." But like other customer service representatives, she is upset not simply by the worthless options and inadequate pay, but also with the continued bonuses to top executives that contrast starkly with the customer service representatives' \$50 Christmas bonus—down from \$200 last year—in the form of a taxable Amazon gift certificate. She's also distressed with mandatory overtime, declining professionalism, low morale and the "constant fight between productivity and quality," with quality losing out "because higher-ups want to see numbers before anything else."

Jobs in Seattle are threatened not only by new, lower-wage service centers



LOREN CALLAHAN/NEWSMAKERS

Seattle, Round Two: After protesters successfully shut down the World Trade Organization in Seattle last year, *Adbusters* magazine asked its readers to designate an annual "International Day of Solidarity Against Corporate Globalization." Readers suggested November 30 in honor of the Seattle protests, and N30, as the day is now known, became a highly anticipated event among anti-globalization activists.

This year's N30 celebration drew 2,000 marchers to the streets of Seattle to raise awareness about globalization's harmful effects. The protest was mostly a peaceful, low-key affair; around 8 p.m., however, the "quiet riot" turned violent.

When Seattle police tried to sweep the streets of lingering protesters, 50 activists

gathered near Westlake Plaza, a bustling shopping district, and refused to leave. Hundreds of police descended on the crowd, which had grown to about 200 people, and ordered them to disperse. But protesters at the scene say there was nowhere to go; police had the area completely surrounded.

According to police, protesters turned violent, hurling rocks, bottles and firecrackers at the officers. Police retaliated by firing pepper spray into the crowd and arrested 140 people, including 10 legal observers from the National Lawyers Guild and the executive director of the King County Labor Commission.

At least six protesters were being held on felony charges at press time. Attorneys for the remaining protesters expect their misdemeanor charges will be dropped. **Evan Endicott**

in West Virginia and North Dakota, but also by Amazon's opening earlier this year of an e-mail service center in India, staffed in collaboration with an Indian firm by highly educated workers paid less than one-tenth the Seattle wage. Amazon has already shifted most warehouse work from locations like Seattle to smaller cities in Kansas, Kentucky and Nevada, where prevailing wages are lower and, in at least two cases, big factories recently shut down and moved overseas.

WashTech had a low-level presence at Amazon for the past couple of years, but new insecurity, job pressures and management unresponsiveness to workers' suggestions triggered a movement among the more than 400 customer service rep-

resentatives, according to WashTech organizer Marcus Courtney. "These people are organizing because they're committed to the company and its future success," he says, "but they feel they need a true representative voice so they can deliver the quality of service necessary for Amazon to be profitable in the future."

Amazon has responded to the organizing drive by offering some perks—such as rescinding a charge for massages provided to overstressed workers—and by holding anti-union meetings. Despite fears of retaliation, this strategy appears to have backfired. "I love the company, but they're making bad decisions," says Scott Alan Buss, a self-described right-winger who initially opposed the union. "They are a cutting-edge e-company and also a throwback to old 1930s anti-unionism. They keep trying to label the union movement as an evil outside force, when

this entire movement is driven 100 percent from inside. If anyone is to blame for someone like me being out there supporting a union, it's management."

Amazon CEO Jeffrey Bezos argues that his "associates" don't need a union because they are owners. But that hasn't stopped Amazon from resorting to conventional corporate tactics—attacking unions as "for-profit businesses" that foment conflict among workers, eliminate employee individuality and may deliver less in a contract than workers have now. WashTech pressure did force Amazon to back off its demand that customer service representatives send an anti-union message to customers who inquire about the organizing campaign.

Meanwhile, organizers are also at work among the roughly 5,000 full-time Amazon warehouse employees (now swelled to as many as three times that



## Appal-o-Meter

By David Futrelle

### SWAT-ing Fries **8.4**

When 12-year-old Ansche Hedgepeth was discovered violating the Metro's "zero tolerance" policy by Washington transit police, she was arrested, handcuffed and taken off to a detention center. But Hedgepeth wasn't holding drugs or a gun: she was eating French fries, and just happened to be caught in the Great Snack Scofflaw Crackdown of 2000.

After hearing numerous commuter complaints about snacking on Metro trains, the *Washington Post* reports, Metro Transit Police Chief Barry McDevitt decided that enough was enough and launched a week-long crackdown on snackers involving a dozen undercover officers (who apparently don't have anything better to do). In all, 35 violators were nabbed by police.

While most of the adults were simply given citations, juveniles charged with criminal offenses have to be taken into custody. And, as the chief told the *Post*, "Anyone taken into custody has to be handcuffed for officer safety" because youngsters "can kill you too." (Though probably not, even the chief would admit, with a side order of fries.)

Hedgepeth, who some say was targeted for arrest because she is black, is being forced to atone for her, er, crime, with community service and counseling. She may

also face disciplinary actions at school for her reckless snacking, the *Post* reports.

### Hard-Knock Life **6.8**

The BBC is in hot water after one of its film crews left a child pretending to be a homeless African orphan on the doorstep of a London-area resident—as part of an ill-conceived, *Candid-Camera*-style practical joke. According to London's *Daily Telegraph*, Gillian Dumbarton answered the door of her Croxley Green home to find a man claiming to be raising money for African children. After she gave the man a one-pound note, the *Telegraph* reports, "a wooden box was unloaded from a lorry, out of which came a 7-year-old actor pretending to be an African child. As the boy ran toward her, she was told she would have to keep him."

After the film crew came out of hiding and revealed it had all been a joke, an angry Dumbarton called police. "I've got a sense of humor," she explained, "but this was in such bad taste when you think of all the disasters that have hit people in Africa."

The BBC has apologized for the incident, saying it didn't mean any offense.

### Say What? **7.9**

When Bill Clinton decided to make some critical remarks about Vietnam's lack of human rights in a recent speech at

Hanoi's National University, the translator for the Vietnamese government seemed to have wax in his ears. "Most of Clinton's uncontroversial remarks were rendered clearly," Reuters reports, "but the translation became hopelessly garbled when Clinton touched on human rights."

Clinton noted, for example, that "only you can decide how to weave individual liberties and human rights into the rich and strong fabric of Vietnamese national identity." But the translator rendered his comments as "only you can decide (pause) on how to live with the issue, um, (pause) in the issue that human rights in Vietnam and in the society then you make a decision on your own."

Not that Clinton was exactly forthcoming himself, pointedly refusing to apologize for American actions during the Vietnam War.



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