

More evidence of management spying on Amazon workers' political activities

By Tom Carter
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A whistleblower inside Amazon sent a message last week to a number of internal company listservs, warning fellow workers that the company is monitoring opposition on those forums.

This event is significant both as a show of internal resistance to management's secret spying apparatus as well as for the additional facts that have been brought to light.

According to the whistleblower, the company's internal intelligence agency, known as Amazon Global Security Operations, is conducting surveillance operations against the workforce with respect to "Whole Foods Market Activism/Unionization Efforts, Internal Communications-Social Listening, Presence of Local Union Chapters and Alt Labor Groups, Presence of Community Organizations, Union Officials, and Social Influencers," according to a report by *Vice News*.

The whistleblower sent the warning to at least two employee listservs: "indigenous@amazon.com" and "transgender@amazon.com." A listserv is an electronic mailing list, with a common email address that can be used to email all subscribers of a list. The whistleblower listed numerous other listservs that were allegedly being monitored, including the "we-wont-build-it@amazon.com," which is a group of workers opposed to the company providing services to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), as well as other groups that are designed for national and ethnic minorities.

The whistleblower pointed out that "muslims@amazon.com" is among the lists being monitored by the company, while "christians@amazon.com" is not.

An account linked to Amazon Human Resources, according to the whistleblower, had subscribed to 78 listservs, which it then used to snoop on workers' conversations and monitor opposition.

"Good day! If you are a moderator or a user of this list, please note that it is being explicitly watched," the anonymous whistleblower wrote.

"While we may be under the impression that everything we write at Amazon is at least saved somewhere for review, it is important that those on this list know that they are being explicitly watched and processed in a data farming project from GSO," the whistleblower continued, referring to Amazon

Global Security Operations.

Amazon management responded to the revelations with an official denial that was written in such equivocal corporate doublespeak that it all but acknowledged that the company is spying on its employees. "We continually work to improve the Amazon employee experience, and with hundreds of thousands of employees located around the world, we use several methods to gather feedback at scale," wrote Amazon spokesperson Jaci Anderson.

The whistleblower's disclosures were reviewed by *Recode*, a technology news reporting project affiliated with *Vox*, which concluded that the email account subscribed to the groups in question "appears to be linked to a larger data visualization project run by Amazon's employee relations team called 'SPOC' (geoSPatial Operating Console), which involves monitoring threats to Amazon's operations[.]"

This latest exposure comes on the heels of revelations that Amazon has been hiring former government agents and police officers to assist in its efforts to spy on its own workforce, and has been conducting spying operations specifically against private social media groups used by Amazon Flex drivers.

These company spooks are given titles like "Intelligence Analyst" and "Senior Intelligence Analyst," and their job is to report to management on the "threats" of industrial actions by workers.

In a job listing that surfaced for one of these positions (and was quickly deleted), management wrote that it preferred "experience in Intelligence analysis and/or watch officer skill set in the intelligence community, the military, law enforcement, or a related global security role in the private sector."

A century ago, the industrial conglomerates hired companies like the infamous Pinkerton National Detective Agency to uncover and suppress efforts to develop collective resistance among workers. Today, the Amazon conglomerate, with the world's richest man at its head, is developing its own "in-house" high-tech Pinkerton squads, staffing these operations with veteran agents from the repressive apparatus of the state who have honed their skills in the so-called "war on terror."

This is a company that has no qualms about invading

workers' privacy. In 2018, the *International Voice* interviewed an injured worker who was stalked and photographed by a private detective, in an effort to falsely downplay the extent of her injury. In the warehouses themselves, workers are subject to constant tracking and surveillance.

Clearly, management is frightened by the prospect of organized resistance by the estimated 935,000 Amazon employees worldwide.

Amazon was rocked by walkouts and mass absences of workers earlier this year, as workers revolted against management's insistence on keeping workers at their stations without adequate safety precautions or equipment as the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated.

Walkouts were often triggered by workers discovering that a coworker had contracted the virus. Amazon whistleblower Jana Jump, interviewed in June, had counted more than 1,500 reported cases of the virus among Amazon workers, spread out over 244 locations worldwide. While management refuses to disclose the number of workers who have gotten sick, Jump indicated that her statistics were just the "tip of the iceberg."

It is now known that the company maintained a secret "heat map" as workers' resistance peaked in April, which highlighted which warehouses management spies believed were likely to see worker rebellions.

With significant numbers of workers refusing or unable to come into the warehouses in the early stages of the pandemic, management was compelled to announce a \$2-per-hour pay raise, together with unlimited unpaid time off, in order to maintain an adequate number of laborers in the warehouses.

Once the numbers stabilized in the warehouses, in part due to the mass hiring of tens of thousands more workers, management quickly cancel led these concessions in May. The company's strategy paid off, as it was able to continue operations as competitors floundered and folded. The company's stock soared, together with the wealth of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, whose net worth has now surpassed \$200 billion.

The unions, with large financial resources at their disposal and with the backing of the Democratic Party, are indeed waging their own campaign to corral and control workers' opposition at Amazon, and some of their activities have been swept up in the company's surveillance net.

Thoroughly discredited in the eyes of the working class by decades of sellouts and betrayals, the unions are compelled to operate through various front groups and personalities. A union-backed "general strike" at Amazon on May 1 failed to generate any substantial interest among workers, much to the embarrassment of the organizers, who had announced the stunt to the press as a historic event.

With approximately 500,000 workers in the United States, the union that signs a contract with Amazon will expect to receive a vast and permanent flow of cash in the form of union

Amazon dues, which the ~~Union~~ bureaucrats can use to line their own pockets as well as to fuel the campaigns of Democratic Party politicians.

But more importantly, the unions' increasingly desperate efforts to gain a foothold at Amazon are driven by a fear in Democratic Party circles that if workers mobilize against the company independently, their struggles will prove more difficult to suppress than if the unions are in charge.

There is little doubt that the reports drawn up by company spies regarding the "threats" to "Amazon operations" include the efforts by the *International Amazon Workers Voice* to establish rank-and-file committees among workers at Amazon and throughout the logistics industry. In the jargon of the company spies, these committees are likely categorized as "Alt Labor Groups."

Controlled by workers themselves and independent of the Democratic Party and the unions, rank-and-file committees are necessary for workers to take effective collective action and to advance their own interests in the midst of the global crisis.

The looming threat of dictatorship that accompanies the murderous "herd immunity" policy of the ruling class, which is mirrored at Amazon by the construction of a repressive surveillance apparatus directed against workers, can only be stopped by the working class, united and mobilized as a class and fighting for socialism.

For help setting up a rank-and-file safety committee at your own site, contact the World Socialist Web Site 's International Amazon Workers Voice .

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