RESEARCH ARTICLE

Surveilling Amazon’s warehouse workers: racism, retaliation, and worker resistance amid the pandemic

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Drawing on insights from Cedric Robinson’s theory of racial capitalism, we analyse black and Latinx blue-collar warehouse workers’ concerns about health and safety in Amazon’s warehouses as well as their collective efforts to organise and improve working conditions during the pandemic. The pandemic increased the demand for home-delivered e-commerce, bringing Amazon’s (directly employed) global workforce to over 1.2 million workers and making Amazon the second largest company in the US. Amazon’s business model, particularly its Amazon Prime programme, has further driven consumer demand for expedited, free shipping. Amazon’s logistics system puts pressure on warehouse workers, who are electronically surveilled, to work very quickly, resulting in high rates of turnover and injury on the job. In the US, this workforce is not unionised and is disproportionately black and Latinx. Workers of colour are also leading workplace organising efforts in various cities in the United States. Our research combines information from in-depth interviews with current and former Amazon warehouse workers in Inland Southern California, one of the largest hubs of Amazon warehouses in the world. We also analyse interviews with leading high-profile current and former black Amazon warehouse worker activists across US cities, affiliated with the Congress of Essential Workers, Amazonians United Chicagoland, the Awood Center, and Bay Area Amazonians who have demanded improvements in their working and safety conditions and faced retaliation, disciplining and/or firing during the pandemic.

Key words Amazon • workplace health and safety • logistics • labour organising • racial capitalism • warehouse workers • COVID-19 pandemic

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The meteoric rise of the Amazon corporation, which accelerated during the pandemic, represents a significant shift in the global political economy, that we have previously identified as Amazon capitalism (Alimahomed-Wilson et al, 2020). By naming this phenomenon, we draw attention to the concentration of corporate power manifest in the scale and magnitude of Amazon’s influence over the world’s economy and to highlight the true costs of its ‘free shipping’ for workers. Although not omnipresent around the globe, Amazon capitalism remains important not only due to its sheer size and value, but also because it has propelled many novel features that currently animate the world’s economy, including one-click instant consumerism and new modes of electronic surveillance of workers and consumers. Amazon’s business model, particularly its Amazon Prime programme, has greatly increased consumer demand for expedited, free shipping; this puts pressure on warehouse workers, who are electronically surveilled, to work very quickly, resulting in high rates of serious injury and turnover (Tung and Berkowitz, 2020).

In this article, we argue that, and explore how, in the United States, Amazon capitalism is bound up in, and depends upon, racial capitalism, drawing insights from Cedric Robinson’s theory of racial capitalism and intersectional feminist theory. In doing so, we build upon Lee and Tapia’s (2021) work on Critical Industrial Relations Theory (CIRT), which problematises colourblind approaches in traditional industrial relations research, including labour studies. In line with Lee and Tapia’s (2021) approach, we combine theoretical and methodological ideas from critical race and intersectionality frameworks. Our analysis of the working conditions inside Amazon warehouses and rising activism among Amazon warehouse workers thus centres the experiences of black, Indigenous, people of colour (BIPOC) workers.

The racial dimensions of Amazon’s rise in the contemporary world capitalist system and warehouse worker resistance has remained largely absent in many popular analyses of Amazon. Yet, the rise of Amazon clearly depends upon white supremacy, or systemic ‘white racial domination’ (Lee and Tapia, 2021: 640), and other interlocking relations of domination that operate at multiple scales, from the local to the global, within contemporary capitalism. In the United States, Amazon’s urban markets, where Prime membership rates are the highest, thousands of low-paid workers of colour, predominately black and Latinx, comprise the majority of Amazon’s blue-collar workforces in warehousing and last mile delivery. While mostly native-born, many are immigrants of colour. And this workforce grew rapidly during the pandemic in response to surging consumer demand for home-delivered goods. By late 2020, Amazon’s global workforce soared to over 1.2 million workers (Shendruk, 2020). Amazon is now the world’s fifth largest company, and in the United States, Amazon’s largest national consumer market in the world, Amazon is the second largest private employer (behind Walmart). Amazon’s workforce is even larger if we consider its subcontracted last mile delivery workforce, about 500,000 workers by late 2020.

In particular, we address the following research questions: first, how do BIPOC workers, disproportionately employed as Amazon blue-collar warehouse workers in the United States, experience racial capitalism as it manifests in their oppressive working conditions and mass workplace surveillance? Second, how are Amazon warehouse workers resisting their oppressive conditions and how are black workers leading such efforts? Finally, what challenges does workplace surveillance create for organising and how has it facilitated retaliation against black worker activists?
To address these three questions, we analyse findings from three sets of interviews with Amazon warehouse workers and place our findings into national context through relevant information from newspaper coverage and research reports. The first set of interviews are 35 in-depth interviews with current and former Amazon frontline workers employed in Inland Southern California, one of the largest hubs of Amazon warehouses in the nation, during the pandemic. These interviews, mostly with Latinx workers, provide first-hand insights into the everyday pressures of working under continual electronic monitoring during the pandemic and the dangers this poses to workers. Second, we analyse leading high-profile black Amazon warehouse worker activists across US cities, including black women and immigrants, who have demanded improvements in their working conditions. These latter interviews provide additional insight into how black workers in particular have experienced racialised mass surveillance, as well as how they have been on the forefront of resisting racism and labour exploitation in Amazon warehouses. Finally, we conducted a group interview (via email) with ten members of Amazonians United Chicagoland (formerly known as DCH1 Amazonians United) about their collective resistance to Amazon’s exploitive working conditions, the pandemic and their international anti-retaliation campaign against Amazon.

In what follows, we first discuss our theoretical perspective, which combines ideas from Cedric Robinson and Laura Pulido on racial capitalism as well as intersectional feminist theory. We also introduce Shoshana Zuboff’s concept of ‘surveillance capitalism’ and discuss how it is carried out within Amazon’s warehouses. After discussing our interview data and methods, we then present our findings.

Amazon’s corporate power is a constituent element of contemporary racial capitalism

Cedric Robinson’s indispensable work on racial capitalism provides a useful analytic framework to understand both the historical origins of racial capitalism along with contemporary racialised manifestations of corporate power.1 Jodi Melamed (2012: 77) points out, that although ‘We often associate racial capitalism with the central features of white supremacist capitalist development, including slavery, colonialism, [and] genocide … we also increasingly recognize that contemporary racial capitalism deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders.’ Similarly, Steven Osuna’s (2017; 2021) research demonstrates how racial capitalism has taken a distinct shape under the ‘neoliberal turn’ in contemporary global capitalism. It is precisely within the neoliberal era of racial capitalism that Amazon’s economic power has taken form.

White supremacy is such a normalised aspect of capitalism and the global economy that it often obscures the racial violence inherent in capital accumulation processes. The lens of racial capitalism brings to light how Amazon’s increasing dominance in the logistics-driven global economy is made possible by the large-scale exploitation of a vast blue-collar labour force that is often racialised and/or marginalised in particular ways, that differs somewhat across continents, nations and even subnational labour markets. In the United States, Amazon warehouse workers are composed primarily of black and Latinx workers, including many immigrants of colour, similar to what is found in last mile logistics delivery operations. Whereas black warehouse workers
predominate in many East and Midwest regions, Latinx workers predominate in much of the Southwest. Throughout much of Europe, workers of colour, including migrants or refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East, are commonly employed as Amazon warehouse workers. In India, Dalits and lower-caste workers are often employed in these jobs (Alimahomed et al, 2020).

In *Black Marxism* (2000), Robinson asserts capitalism developed amid the racialism that defined European society thereby shaping the modern world system of racial capitalism, in which race permeates the material, structural and ideological processes of capitalist production (Kelley, 2000: xiii). ‘The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force,’ Robinson (2000: 2) contends, ‘it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism.’ Within this context, capital accumulation must be connected to disposability, dispossession, ‘and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires’ (Melamed, 2012: 77). Therefore, racial capitalism provides new insight into the fundamental aspect behind Amazon’s record profit and rapid rise in corporate power; the corporation’s disproportionate exploitation of hundreds of thousands of low paid, hyper-surveilled black, Latinx and immigrant warehouse and last-mile delivery workers who do all the backbreaking labour to make Amazon’s Prime shipping possible (see Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2020).

The racialised production of differential value remains a key aspect in labour systems (Pulido, 2017: 528). According to Pulido,

Theories of racial capitalism highlight how racial difference is produced and how that relative valuation gets operationalized. This means not only how ideas and practices of devaluation circulate, but how they become institutionalized, and the implications for the racially subordinate and dominant. There are many ways racism can be harnessed by economic processes.

In other words, differential value can be both produced and extracted via racialised labour systems. The production of racial difference in global, national and regional supply chains also reinforces and naturalises a racialised hierarchy within both Amazon’s corporate structure and workforce.2 In the United States, black, Latinx and immigrant workers remain concentrated in the most labour-intensive, precarious, dangerous, low wage and surveillance-driven jobs in Amazon’s supply chain. Research suggests that the concentration of black and Latinx workers into low-wage occupations in the United States is produced through a combination of mechanisms, including employer discrimination, residential segregation, opportunity hoarding and unequal access to human capital, transportation and information about job openings (Stevans, 1996; Joassart-Marcelli, 2009; Hogan, 2013). Wage-setting processes are also not race neutral; workers of colour, and the jobs and occupations in which they are concentrated, tend to be devalued (Catanzarite, 2000; McCall, 2001). The devaluation of workers of colour, including a growing segment of women of colour workers, produces high rates of profit for (mostly) white-male corporate executives (see Bonacich et al, 2008).
Amazon’s corporate structure epitomises racialised labour exploitation within contemporary racial capitalism, with black workers representing 27 per cent of Amazon’s US workforce (compared to just 13 per cent of workers overall in the US), with the vast majority of these workers employed in the low-paid warehousing work (Perry et al., 2021). Amazon’s most recent report to the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission shows that, as of 2018, workers of colour made up 68 per cent of ‘labourers and helpers’, which include but go beyond blue-collar warehouse workers. Of these, 33 per cent were black and another 22 per cent were Latinx. In contrast, 71.4 per cent of top executives and senior-level employees that year were white (Kantor et al., 2021). At the top of this hierarchy sits Jeff Bezos, Amazon’s founder, who remained the wealthiest man on earth for the fourth year in a row, worth an astounding (USD) $211 billion dollars as of July 2021 (Forbes, 2021).

As intersectional feminist theory argues, we must also consider how racial capitalism interacts with other axes of oppression, including gender and immigration status (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Although blue-collar warehouse workers have traditionally been men, a significant and growing number are women, especially in the e-commerce sector (Gutelis and Theodore, 2019). Consistent with this, many ‘line workers’ in Amazon’s warehouses are BIPOC women (Reese, 2020). According to Amazon’s records, women make up 48.5 per cent of tier 1–3 ‘field and customer support’ staff worldwide and 50.5 per cent of those workers in the US. In contrast, men made up 77.9 per cent of its senior leaders globally and 77.2 per cent of senior leaders in the US in 2020 (Amazon Staff, 2021). Although often cross-trained, some workers observed that women are more likely to be assigned as packagers, while men are more likely to be assigned as loaders and forklift operators, although these patterns appear to vary somewhat across facilities and over time (perhaps due to increased automation, legal scrutiny, labour supply shifts, or other factors). Many US workers of colour who are employed by Amazon are also immigrants, including Somali and East African immigrants in Minnesota, Latinx and Asian immigrants in the Southwest, and black Caribbean and other immigrants of colour in the Northeast (Alimahomed et al., 2020; Reese, 2020).

Along with other high-tech companies, such as Google, Amazon has been on the forefront of a phenomenon that Shoshana Zuboff calls ‘surveillance capitalism’. Surveillance capitalism refers to ‘a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales’ (Zuboff, 2019: 1). While Google is credited with creating surveillance capitalism, Amazon has further advanced its spread in the workplace. In addition to closely monitoring consumer activity through its enormously popular electronic retail platform so that it can outsell rival companies, Amazon has helped to normalise the mass surveillance of workers through its algorithmic management system. Amazon uses electronic technology to surveil its various workers, including warehouse workers, in order to extract valuable information about their workflow that is used to further exploit, discipline and control workers, increase labour efficiency, and inform the development of workplace automation and other business investments (Gutelis and Theodore, 2019). In this article, we explore how warehouse workers of colour experience this mass surveillance, and the challenges this mass surveillance poses for worker activists.
Data and methods: interviews with Amazon workers and BIPOC worker activists

We analyse findings from two sets of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and put them into context through related research and news articles on Amazon warehouse workers and their organising. The first set of interviews were collected from 35 former and current Amazon workers who were employed during the pandemic in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties in Southern California. Interviewees were asked about their social backgrounds, employment history and details about their working conditions. These interviews, which ranged in length between 30 minutes and more than two hours, were collected by a team of undergraduate student research assistants at University of California, Riverside who were trained and supervised by the second author. Students used their personal networks to interview friends, classmates, current or former coworkers and relatives who were employed as an Amazon warehouse worker sometime between March and December 2020. As Table 1 shows, about 77 per cent of those interviewed were Latinx (any race) while all but one of the respondents was a worker of colour. About 60 per cent of those interviewed were women. Given the recruitment method, it is not surprising that most respondents were young with an average age of 25.6 years, with ages ranging from 19 to 46. While college students and other young workers are probably overrepresented within this mostly Latinx sample of Amazon warehouse workers, their first-hand work experiences are nonetheless highly revealing and provide powerful personal testimonies of the everyday pressures of working under the pressures of mass surveillance. The names we use to identify these workers are pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

The second set of interviews were conducted by the first author as an illustrative case study into black-led Amazon worker resistance and organising. These in-depth interviews were conducted with three key, high profile black (current and former) Amazon worker leaders and activists involved in efforts to organise Amazon warehouse workers in the United States during the pandemic; namely, Hibaq Mohamed (affiliated with the Awood Center in Minnesota), Chris Smalls (co-founder of The Congress of Essential Workers), and John Hopkins (co-founder of Bay Area Amazonians). These workers gave their consent to use their names and their roles in worker organising have been already highly publicized by the media. These informants, two men and one woman, had already publicly spoken out over their concerns surrounding Amazon’s unsafe working conditions during the pandemic. Our third set of interviews were conducted with ten members of Amazonians United Chicagoland in April of 2020.

Table 1: Gender and race/ethnicity of the interview sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender/ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
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<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Asian/Filipino</td>
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<td>Black</td>
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<td>5.71%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed race</td>
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<td>11.43%</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>2.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>71.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (any race)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>77.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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(to read the full interview, see Chapter 17 in Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2020).

On average, the interviews with workers were approximately one hour in duration. The interviews focused on their experiences as both warehouse workers and activists, including their organisations’ goals and strategies, experiences with racism and sexism, and the outcomes of their worker activism.

Warehouse work: racially divided, devalued, dehumanizing and dangerous

A key component of racial capitalism is the devaluation and disposability of people of colour. How do warehouse workers, mostly black and Latinx, experience racial capitalism as it manifests in their oppressive working conditions within Amazon warehouses, including the mass surveillance of workers? For Amazon workers of colour, who comprise the vast majority of Amazon’s warehouse workforce in the US, the racialised dimensions of Amazon’s labour process are clear. For example, John Hopkins, a black activist warehouse worker from the San Francisco Bay Area of California, notes the absence of white people at Amazon facilities (with the exception of managers):

‘I’d say my facility is 50–60 percent black and Latino, [with] another significant percentage in Asian and Pacific, there is a percentage of white folks but they are definitely the minority at my facility … once you reach the level outside my warehouse, the HR, the vast majority of HR people I’ve dealt with and the higher ups are white. In our actual warehouse, there are so few white people they are almost non-existent [but] it seems to me they are overrepresented in managers.’

Similarly, Chris Smalls, a former black Amazon management assistant who was targeted and fired for his labour activism during the peak of the pandemic, describes the racial hierarchy present in Amazon’s corporate culture:

‘As a black worker at Amazon you don’t get the opportunity as your white counterparts … My leadership didn’t fit their culture … their culture was to follow the rules and do what you’re told … the majority of the rules didn’t benefit the black community … these corporations don’t stand with us.’

In this case, the devaluation of black workers is linked to ‘the rules’ of the organisation and the dominant white culture in Amazon’s corporate structure, which disproportionately benefited white workers and structurally relegated black warehouse workers to low-wage, low prestige jobs with little opportunity for upward advancement within Amazon, especially if they lacked college degrees (Kantor et al, 2021).

Like other jobs in which BIPOC workers predominate, Amazon warehouse workers’ labour is devalued. In Chicago, where the majority of the workers are black and Latinx, Amazonians United Chicagoland members organised for safer working conditions during the pandemic. As one member reflected: “Currently, the biggest issue is the lack of care for human life [by] the management … via the unclean facility, improper [social] distancing, and withholding of coronavirus cases” within the facility.
Through much of the pandemic, Amazon’s entry-level US blue-collar warehouse workforce, known as ‘warehouse associates’ earned $15 per hour and were given small annual raises. Workers who are promoted to slightly higher-level positions, such as ‘process associates’ who help to supervise other workers, earn a few more dollars an hour. Although this wage is higher than what is offered in many non-unionised warehouses and the minimum wage, it still leaves many workers in poverty, especially in states, such as California or New York, where the cost of living is high. Many workers, especially parents rely on subsidised health insurance, while workers often rely on other family members or roommates to help them to pay their bills (Flaming and Burns, 2019; Reese, 2020). Although Amazon offered hazard pay (a few more dollars per hour) for warehouse workers at the beginning of the pandemic, the corporation quickly retracted it a few months later. By then, so many workers were unemployed in other industries that the corporation no longer saw the need to offer additional pay to recruit workers.

Other research finds that, on average, warehouse industry wages tend to fall in US counties where Amazon opens facilities, more than 6 per cent in the first two years, and only reach their previous levels five years later (Day and Soper, 2020). Moreover, Bezos’ wealth increased by $75.6 billion between March and December 2020, about 42 times what Amazon spent on hazard pay for about one million workers ($1.8 billion). On average, hourly pay increases to Amazon’s frontline workers in this period was about 99 cents, versus Bezos’ hourly wealth increase of $11.5 million. In fact, ‘Amazon … could have more than quadrupled the COVID-19 compensation to frontline workers and still earned more profit than last year’ (Kinder and Stateler, 2020). Not until the spring of 2021, under pressure from worker activists and other critics and a labour shortage, Amazon raised its entry-level wage to $17 per hour (still below a living wage in many parts of the nation).

Warehouse work is also dehumanizing and dangerous and disproportionately impacts workers of colour in the US (see Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019). It is physically gruelling, especially for those workers employed full-time who typically work for at least 10 hours per day and more if working overtime. About 93 per cent of Southern California interviewees agreed that they experienced pain or fatigue by the end of their long work shifts. Depending on their position, workers experience backaches, sore legs and feet, cuts and bruises, and repetitive motion injuries in their arms. Many also complained of the stressful pace of work and its boring and isolating nature.

Hibaq Mohamed, a Somali immigrant woman Amazon warehouse worker and leading worker activist affiliated with the Awood Center, described the toll the work was taking on her mental and physical health in this way:

‘Your body is exhausted because you are working like a machine, bending too much … lifting heavy [objects] and physically, you are exhausted. I’ve been injured three times … mentally, you are exhausted, you don’t know the language, you don’t know what the manager is saying … so [it is both] mentally and physically exhausting.’

The pressure to work fast and hard contributes to stress and churn among Amazon warehouse workers, and a high rate of serious workplace injuries, even higher than the industry average (Athena Coalition, 2019; Evans, 2019; Tung and Berkowitz, 2020).
Amazon pressures its workers to work quickly and consistently through electronic monitoring through equipment such as handheld scanners. Amazon measures a worker's ability to 'make rate', or reach certain productivity goals that vary by task, to minimise errors, and 'time off task' or TOT. If workers failed to make rate, have too many errors, or accrue too much TOT, they face warnings and, if their work performance does not improve, they face termination. Although Amazon managers decided to not terminate workers for failing to meet its productivity standards during part of the 2020 pandemic, they failed to communicate this temporary policy to all warehouse workers (Kantor et al, 2021). Amazon previously provided certain pay bonuses to reward highly productive workers but ended that practice in the United States when they raised their entry level wage to $15 per hour (Weise, 2018). Yet, it still sometimes encourages workers to work harder through competitions and providing small rewards, such as a cookie, a pin, Swagbucks, or the chance to win a gift card in a raffle, for workers or work teams that are highly productive, or meet certain production goals.

The constant electronic monitoring of warehouse workers’ productivity under the threat of disciplining, or termination, puts pressure on them to work quickly in order to meet work rates that many workers find unreasonable and stressful. As Hibaq Mohamed put it, “Workers are afraid … and worried if they didn’t ‘make rate’.” Describing the dehumanizing impacts of this managerial surveillance on workers (most of whom are Somali immigrants at the Amazon facility in the MSP1 facility in Shakopee, Minnesota), Mohamed says, “You don’t feel like a human being, you see the managers moving around and harassing a friend or someone [in order] to make you fear[ful] … you don’t feel you can work freely.” Amazon also monitors workers’ error rates and the amount of time off task, putting pressure on warehouse workers to labour at a steady and relentless pace. As James, a young Filipino male former Amazon warehouse worker in Southern California described,

'It was so bad because literally you’d only have such a limited amount of time to not be doing your task, so you can’t really have a break. Even to use the bathroom literally it takes at least 5 minutes to go to the bathroom on a forklift. It was so bad they’d all be really bitchy and total power complex [sic] … So the person of the day who had the most time off task would be talked to … There’s been people fired for that.'

About 39 per cent of the Southern California warehouse workers interviewed agreed that they were concerned about their inability to use the restroom when needed while at work. They explained that the bathrooms are often located too far away from their work stations to be able to use them without it negatively affecting their work rates. Under such constant surveillance of their productivity, warehouse workers, like delivery drivers, often resort to urinating in bottles or trash cans (Bloodworth, 2019; Reese and Struna, 2020; Gurley, 2021).

Estella, a Latina warehouse worker and college graduate in her twenties, also described the technical problems with the monitoring of time off task and the assumption that worker idleness is always their fault. As she points out, workers’ idleness is sometimes due to mechanical problems:
‘Sometimes our “time off task” is calculated and it’s not our fault, like when there’s a problem with the conveyors, or like a jam or something like that … That’s a problem for us because it’s not our fault, but it still goes on our “time off task”.

Similarly, Maya, another young Latina explained that the COVID-19 health survey that employees are required to complete during their shift “do take time up … It takes time that shows that you aren’t working”. Maya further explained,

‘I had an instance where I stayed on my wall because I am … a pretty fast packer. One of the PAs [personal assistants] come up to me, she tells me that I have seventeen minutes of time off task. Which if I accumulate 30 minutes, I was going to be written up. Which … frustrated me because it didn’t make any sense … How am I supposed to work if I don’t have any work and I finished all my work?!’

Sometimes workers are able to explain these situations to their supervisors so that they are not penalised for them, but this depends on the supervisors’ willingness to be responsive to workers’ concerns, which varies across supervisors and is subject to racial bias. Records from Amazon’s JFK8 facility, for example, finds that black Amazon warehouse associates were 50 per cent more likely to be fired than their white counterparts. Meanwhile, shortages in Human Resource staff make it difficult for workers to contest unfair write-ups, firings, and even COVID-19 related leaves (Kantor et al, 2021), consistent with our own interview findings. The expendability of black warehouse workers remains a significant part of Amazon’s high churn.

Workers also expressed concerns about insufficient protections of workers during the pandemic even though Amazon implemented various measures to protect workers from exposure to COVID-19. These protective measures included thermal testing of workers entering the workplace for fevers, employing workers as a ‘safety team’, and using electronic surveillance to monitor compliance with social distancing rules, providing masks, wipes and hand sanitisers, installing plastic curtains and plexiglass around work stations, creating additional break rooms, and providing workers with additional break time so that they can wash their hands during work breaks. In addition, Amazon provided workers with paid time off to workers diagnosed with COVID-19. Initially, Amazon authorised paid time off only to full-time employees, but later extended it to part-time workers in response to workers’ demands and collective action (Coldewey, 2020). Initially, Amazon provided unlimited time off to employees for COVID-19 related reasons, but later required workers to use their ‘unpaid time or UPT’ or obtain approval for a leave of absence (Selyukh, 2020). There was a lack of Human Resource support for workers navigating these policies however (Kantor et al, 2021). Many workers also remained concerned about possible exposure to COVID-19 during work despite Amazon’s new safety measures. As Hibaq Mohamed put it,

‘We don’t have enough cleaning equipment and time to sanitize and clean our stuff … we are close to each other [not six feet] … We need Amazon to take responsibility for their workers in this pandemic.’
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Southern California workers similarly reported concerns with the lack of sanitation. They also report instances of workers not wearing their masks properly at all times and getting within six feet of each other. For example, a Latino male reported that:

‘Sometimes they [supervisors] come up to you and let you know how you’re doing, or if you performed poorly, and sometimes they get within the six feet. And then I’ll be walking out towards the break area, out through the turnstiles, there’s still people that get within six feet and they don’t have their mask on right.’

Other workers reported that workers get within six feet of each other when they are working quickly and focused on making rate. Estella, a Latina worker, reported that, “If I’m in a rush, I don’t want to wait for the person next to me to have to grab their things before I grab mine so I’ll grab mine anyways. I know I’m breaking the six-foot rule but, I just, I want to hurry.” This same worker describes how safety monitoring, while helping to protect workers’ physical health, can also contribute to mental stress:

‘I feel like the people that are in charge of safety … sometimes they’re really rude … I get frustrated because I’m having a long day at work and then I still have to hear people scream at me when it’s not my fault … They’re screaming at me because there’s people behind me who are too close to me … I get really frustrated because like there’s nothing I can do. It’s not like I can run away from the person behind me, and it’s frustrating that they scream at you.’

Fully 67 per cent of the Southern California workers interviewed agreed that they had concerns about the impact of their jobs on their mental or physical health. Like other essential workers around the world, Amazon warehouse workers endured added stress and health risks as they worked during the pandemic. In this context and amid the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, many US warehouse workers, mostly of colour, viewed the lack of regard that Amazon executives, mostly white, had for their health and safety in racialised terms. Amazon’s lack of regard for workers’ health and safety during the pandemic helped to fuel organising among its warehouse workers, particularly with the emergence of Amazonians United, which had only just begun to emerge a couple years earlier. As one Amazonians United Chicagoland member stated, “Our biggest challenges are capitalism, structural racism, and the resulting poverty that denies our freedom of self-determination including the freedom to control our own lives, bodies, and labour. To overcome these challenges, we have built community and solidarity with our co-workers to organise and build power to transform our workplace and society.”

Black-led worker resistance

How are Amazon warehouse workers resisting their oppressive working conditions in the US and how are black workers leading such efforts? In the US, news stories of efforts to organise Amazon warehouse workers began emerging in 2018. These
were not isolated efforts. By then, Amazon warehouse workers had already been unionised for years in Europe. European labour laws are generally more favourable to workers and unions than in the US where employers tend to be hostile to unions and face only light penalties if they engage in union busting. So far, organising Amazon warehouse workers in the United States has been carried out by a variety of labour and worker organisations, including worker centres (for example, the Awood Center, Warehouse Workers Resource Center), non-profit worker and community advocacy organisations (for example, Athena Coalition and The Congress of Essential Workers), grassroots radical worker-led organisations (for example, Amazonians United), and mainstream unions (for example, Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, Service Employees International Union, and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters). Given space constraints, we focus on three of these organisations: the Awood Center, Amazonians United, and the Congress of Essential Workers and the leading role of BIPOC workers within them.

Hibaq Mohamed is affiliated with The Awood Center, a worker centre serving Somali and East African immigrant workers in Minnesota. Awood, which is Somali for ‘power’, carried out some of the earliest campaigns to organise Amazon workers. Hibaq, a warehouse worker at Amazon Fulfillment MSP1 in Shakopee, who was suspended for her workplace activism, summarised the aim of many Amazon worker activists when she said, “We only have one goal, to make Amazon better and for Jeff Bezos to treat us as human beings.” Further describing the specific and general aims of worker organising she said, “We [the workers] are the ones who are making customers happy but at the same time we want Amazon to treat us as human beings, stop the pressure, the unfair firing, the fear they are creating mentally and physically. They are making profit off human beings and it has to stop … they are treating us like tissue paper.”

In December of 2018, Amazon workers affiliated with Awood and their allies, including local politicians, protested outside an Amazon fulfilment facility (MSP1) in Shakopee, Minnesota. About 250 people participated in the action, which included a march on the building’s main entrance. Participants included many Somali Muslims who claim that productivity rates infringe upon their need for bathroom breaks as well as their religious freedoms, such as their ability to pray as Muslims. Employees face possible termination if they fail to meet the company’s standards. Protesters also advocated for improved working conditions, racial justice and independent review boards for human resources complaints. In response to workers’ protests, a manager was assigned to meet with the workers on a quarterly basis and respond to their complaints (Menegus, 2018; DeManuelle-Hall, 2019). Shakopee workers later organised an impromptu work stoppage in March 2019 in response to a work speed-up. About half of 60 stowers on the night shift walked off the job for three hours. They voted on a list of demands, including more reasonable work rates, to ‘stop counting prayer and bathroom breaks against rate’, ending the use of temporary workers, and to better maintain equipment to prevent injuries. At that time, stowers were expected to carry out up to 250 tasks per hour and to only have one error per 2,200 items (compared to one error per 1,000 items in 2017). Supervisors met with workers the next day but made no formal agreements with them (DeManuelle-Hall, 2019). Three women affiliated with Awood also filed federal complaints against Amazon for discriminating against workers based on race and religion; compared to
white and non-Muslim workers, Muslim Somali and East African warehouse workers were given more physically challenging jobs, such as packing heavy items, and less likely to be given promotions and training opportunities according to the complaint (St Paul Pioneer Press, 2019).

In March 2020, Christian Smalls, a black male management assistant at the JFK8 facility in Staten Island, organised a worker walk out to demand greater protections for workers during the pandemic. Like other activist black workers, Smalls was accused of violating social distancing rules by the company. Smalls was subsequently fired for violating the quarantine rule that was placed upon him by Amazon, after organising his protest at JFK8. “The majority of people I’ve seen that were let go [fired],” Smalls explains, “were predominately black, brown or immigrant [workers] because they didn’t fit the culture of Amazon and that’s why it was easy for me to do what I did for COVID-19.” Following Smalls’ firing, it was reported, via a leaked memo, that a white-male Amazon executive denigrated Smalls with a racist description during an Amazon general council meeting, which was attended by Jeff Bezos. At that meeting, the white-male Amazon executive wrote in his meeting notes: ‘He’s [Smalls] not smart, or articulate and to the extent the press wants to focus on us versus him, we will be in a much stronger PR position than simply explaining for the umpteenth time how we’re trying to protect workers” (Wong, 2020). Following this, Smalls would later start a new organisation, The Congress of Essential Workers (TCOEW), which has organised multiple protests at Jeff Bezos’ mansions around the US and is working to improve working conditions and wages for working-class people.

Black and Latinx workers have also played a prominent role within Amazonians United, which has been led by rank-and-file workers and who formed chapters in various US cities. DCH1 Amazonians United, now known as Amazonians United Chicagoland, formed in 2019 and has been one of the most active chapters. These workers organised and carried out collective actions against management through which they won several improvements in their working conditions, including better access to clean drinking water and greater respect from certain managers. They also pushed for, and won, full-time jobs with healthcare benefits for some of their members who previously worked part-time. In addition, they gained the right to be paid when workers had to leave work because the warehouse was too hot, the lights went off, or the volume of goods was very low. During the pandemic, members of DCH1 Amazonians United also organised a safety strike involving 70 to 80 workers. Despite organisers facing retaliation from management, the strike proved effective and won greater health and safety on the job, including increased access to masks and cleaning supplies (see DCH1 Amazonians United, 2020). Some of the leaders were written up for ‘violating social distancing’ among other charges by management. This prompted workers to file a complaint with the National Labour Relations Board (NLRB) accusing management of violating protected activities. In March of 2021, the NLRB ruled in favour of the workers.

Led by women of colour, and after initial resistance by Amazon, the group also organised and eventually won paid time off (PTO) or vacation time for part-time warehouse workers during the pandemic (Coldewey, 2020). In late January of 2021, workers at delivery station DCH1 were called in by their employer and were told the DCH1 facility would be closing, and most workers would be transferred to a new facility (DIL3). In addition, the workers were told they would all be mandated to
now work Amazon’s new ‘megacycle’ graveyard shift (1:20 am to 11:50 am, four days in a row). Amazon’s megacycle shift was rolled out during the pandemic, and many workers believe this shift is especially onerous and disruptive to their lives, especially for mothers. The announcement of the closure of DCH1 and the mandated megacycle prompted DCH1 Amazonians United to change their name to Amazonians United Chicagoland; prompting a new organising struggle against Amazon’s megacycle. In April of 2021, Amazonians United Chicagoland went on strike once again by walking off the job at the DIL3 facility in Gage Park, Illinois. Amazon worker organising thus continues despite initial setbacks.

Surveillance and retaliation of black worker activists

Workers of colour, especially black, Latinx and immigrant workers, have been disproportionately affected by Amazon’s surveillance-driven management practices. The pandemic amplified many of the pre-existing challenges facing Amazon workers, particularly relating to issues of workplace safety. As racial justice organising peaked in the summer of 2020 following the police murder of George Floyd, Amazon continued its hiring frenzy, hiring thousands of workers, predominately black and Latinx, to meet the surge in demand for e-commerce delivery. For some black Amazon workers, the contradiction between Amazon’s corporate public relations statements affirming ‘Black Lives Matter’ with its actual exploitive treatment, and hyper-surveillance of black workers in Amazon facilities, remained a point of contention throughout the pandemic. As Chris Smalls explains, “[Surveillance] is what separates Amazon from every other competitor. At Amazon, the system that they have in there, everything is run off of metrics. Everything they do is calculated and surveilled … they break their processes down to the second.’

John Hopkins, a black sortation associate working at an Amazon warehouse in Northern California, was suspended for two months during the height of the pandemic in 2020. Hopkins, who was called the ‘n-word’ by a supervisor during the pandemic, underscores the contradictions inherent in Amazon’s pseudo anti-racist public relations campaign:

‘Amazon is putting out all these statements of solidarity with the black community and even worse, they force me, as a person who works at the warehouse, to look at the propaganda all day by putting it up on all these screens in the warehouse but actually don’t give me any say on whether I think it is OK if they make all these statements … this should be under 100% of Amazon’s black workers. To me, that is the real harm … the hurt of them … The hurt of [Amazon] putting out all these solidarity statements is amplified by the fact that we are going through the COVID pandemic, which is disproportionately affecting black and brown folks. Instead of Amazon being transparent and doing whatever they can to prevent deaths from happening, their take instead is to prevent information from coming out and prevent workers from having the information they need to gauge what level of risk they need to take. It is a very paternalistic approach.’

Hopkins was eventually suspended for two months following a confrontation with a supervisor on May Day in the breakroom. As he describes,
‘I was bringing in fliers since late February [2020] encouraging my co-workers to sign a digital [union] card campaign … and the flyers would go missing. So it was very clear there was a concerted effort to make sure that the flyers didn’t go out … I went into work [on 1 May] … and did the first couple hours of my shift and then clocked out … and went and sat in the break room just to hand out my [union] fliers for a while before I went home … toward the end of the lunch period, the manager comes in and asks me to leave based on this new COVID-19 rule, that we can only be in the breakroom for 15 minutes after shift … so eventually I was like write me up, so we would have a record for this interaction … the next time I came in and they suspended me [for two months].’

Hopkins’ disciplining is not an isolated case. Many of the BIPOC workers who have organised in Amazon’s warehouses have faced firings as well as transfers to other worksites. Such responses to worker organising is facilitated by the heavy monitoring of warehouse workers, which has been used to justify the firing of worker activists. As Hopkins, put it, “These technologies are used very selectively to target people who management wants to get out for whatever reason.” Similarly, Chris Smalls also noted how time off task targeted activist workers of colour: “When you are someone like me who speaks up … they [Amazon] use TOT [time off task] against you.”

Indeed, the monitoring of Amazon workers to ensure their compliance with productivity standards and social distancing and other safety measures during the pandemic creates additional barriers to organising at the workplace. As Hibaq Mohamed put it, “We need Amazon to take our health seriously and stop watching us on camera, who is organising, who is talking to who … they are using the camera to target organisers who speak up.” Elaborating this point, she said, “they are watching you all the time, every second, every minute … especially the leaders who are organising, like me and others, if we take a break the manager will come and watch me … it makes you uncomfortable when the camera is watching you, it feels like you are in prison.” Electronic surveillance of Amazon workers thus presents enormous challenges for labour organising at the workplace, which encourages many labour activists to organise workers in the community and after work hours.

Conclusion

Amazon exemplifies contemporary, neoliberal racial capitalism, which interacts with other systems of oppression to produce glaring inequalities across race, gender and nativity across Amazon’s workforce. Combining insights from racial capitalism, intersectional, and critical industrial relations theory (Lee and Tapia, 2021), we highlight the racialised-gendered dynamics behind Amazon’s rise in the global economy and the growing wave of BIPOC-led, Amazon worker organising in the United States. Centring BIPOC Amazon warehouse workers’ experiences in the United States, along with their structural exploitation, and collective and individual resistance illuminates the complex forces behind Amazon’s rise in the global economy. For the US blue-collar BIPOC Amazon workers interviewed for this article, the devaluation of workers of colour is ever present in the labour process. During the pandemic, the power and wealth of Jeff Bezos and other Amazon executives, mostly white men, soared to new heights. It did so as consumers
increasingly took advantage of Amazon’s ‘free shipping’ to purchase more and more of their household goods from the safety of their own homes. Amazon’s ‘free shipping’ is not free but instead creates enormous costs and health risks for Amazon’s underpaid blue-collar workers, mostly workers of colour and many of whom are immigrants and/or women of colour in the United States (Alimahomed et al, 2020). Black workers, along with other workers of colour, have been on the forefront of resisting Amazon in the United States, organising strikes, pickets and protests as well as filing legal complaints against racial discrimination and employer retaliation. They have also been forming and organising new and non-traditional worker organisations, such as the Awood Center, Amazonians United, and the Congress of Excluded Workers, as well as organising through unions. Worker activists have repeatedly faced employer opposition and even retaliation, including unfair firings that were facilitated by the high level of electronic surveillance of Amazon’s workforce. Amazon’s virulent opposition to worker organising and unions was displayed yet again in its response to the union campaign by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) in Bessemer, Alabama, in which black women played leading roles (Windham, 2021). In response to RWDSU’s complaints against Amazon’s violation of Bessemer workers’ rights to collective bargaining, a National Labour Relations Board officer recommended a union reelection, claiming Amazon wrongfully distributed anti-union materials in the presence of managers and installed a special mailbox for receiving union election ballots in its parking lot, which many believed to be surveilled by Amazon (Morrison, 2021).

Despite Amazon’s union busting, organised US Amazon workers, many of whom are immigrants and women of colour, are continuing to build worker power; they have bravely organised and won small but vital improvements in their working conditions, including increased health and safety during the pandemic, and publicly challenged racial and economic injustice within the heart of the world’s most powerful corporation. We hope that our analysis, which focuses on US BIPOC Amazon warehouse workers, helps to inspire other critical analyses of how racial capitalism, and other interlocking relations of domination, operate and engender worker resistance among multiple marginalised workers within other corporations, industries and parts of the world.

Notes


2 It is important to note, that while black, Latinx and immigrant workers are the primary groups of racialised warehouse workers in the United States, there is a growing number of migrant workers overrepresented across Amazon’s global supply chain network throughout the UK and Europe. In Western Europe, including in Germany, Eastern European workers are overrepresented in Amazon’s warehouses. In addition, migrants and refugees of colour from Africa, Asia and the Middle East are also overrepresented in these low wage jobs.
For more details on the gender and racial composition of Amazon warehouse workers in Southern California, see page 34 in Flaming and Burns (2019).

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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