
Human Rights Issues at Amazon Corporation

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Received 22 June 2022; Revised 13 September 2022; Accepted 16 September 2022

Abstract: Multinational corporations like Amazon play important role in socio-economic development of the capitalist countries like the United States. The study aims to identify and analyze the problems and issues faced by the Amazon employees. It is found that the Amazon's work environment consists of harsh working conditions, excessive productivity quotas, and screening methods that put its employees at risk with serious consequences for their safety and well-being. Guided by media testimonies and published reports, the work presents one of the first detailed and balanced reports of human rights issues at the Amazon. It is suggested that to protect workers' rights the legislators and government agencies must develop and enforce robust workplace safety regulations. Also, by facilitating the Amazon workers form unions, a right granted by the International Labour Organization and the US Constitution, and guaranteeing the role of humans (and not machines) in employee terminations several human right issues can be resolved before reaching courts.

Keywords: Safety culture; difficult working conditions; worker rights; capitalism; Amazon corp

1. Introduction

The Amazon was founded by Jeff Bezos in 1994 as a website for selling books. Today, the Amazon is renowned as the "everything store" since it allows customers to buy a wide selection of products with just a click of a button. While the Amazon facilitates cheaper and faster transactions between buyers and sellers of books, electronics, household items, music, and movies, it also facilitates transactions between consumers and manufacturers/sellers of both high and low quality products.

The Amazon has been the subject of numerous allegations alleging safety and health dangers for its employees at its warehouses and distribution centers over the last decade. Various criticisms have been raised in the reports, including workplace cultures that urge employees to work harder and quicker. Some of the reports have a different opinion about it they say that Amazon has been an interesting place to work and managers make sure their employees feel valued and respected (Antin & Shaw, 2012). And others indicate that Amazon has been troubled by grueling working conditions in its warehouses, particularly during peak seasons. Long hours, timed toilet breaks, work productivity/speed surveillance, acute isolation from others, physically demanding quotas, and other harsh working circumstances have been reported by employees (Boewe & Schulten, 2019). Workers suffer a physical and mental toll as a result of these working conditions, as they are frequently treated more like a data set or a robot than as humans (Green America, 2022). Some reports had a different perspective on the incident. Logically, problems arise when one has to

manage a multibillion-dollar worldwide corporation with over a million employees. When you notice a pattern, it's time to wonder if the errors are being neglected on purpose or if something else is going on (Kelly, 2021).

If one looks at the literature, most studies have limited themselves to the production, distribution, financing, and selling related issues and only a few have dared to study human rights/workers' rights issues. For instance, Paul (2019) studied Microsoft's grueling working conditions and the "996" standard in the industry. Schiffer and Clark (2021) studied Google violating labor laws by surveilling and terminating workers who organized employee protests. Shen and Zhang (2021) studied Alibaba, Tencent, and other major internet firms that need to protect gig workers' basic rights. Their rights include being provided a basic income, work safety, food safety, a decent working environment, and access to insurance coverage. The key issues concerning the rights of Amazon workers is presented in the succeeding section. One can see from these studies that even though several studies have explored Amazon or other MNCs' human rights/workers' rights issues, there is hardly a study that has yet presented a comprehensive overview of Amazon workers' rights and issues on different dimensions. That was the research gap that prompted this study.

The paper studies the human rights issues and work conditions in the Amazon workforce. Considering the fact that Jeff Bezos is both the owner of Amazon and the Washington Post newspaper, one can argue that the Amazon bosses enjoy significant influence on the media and it's not easy for the mainstream media to report the human rights abuses and worker rights violations directly resulting from their policies or oversight. Also, the Amazon is a big corporation, and the livelihood of almost 1.2 million people around the world depends on it, studying the Amazon work culture is a topic of great socio-economic significance. The current study presents one of the first comprehensive overviews of the key issues and challenges the Amazon is facing in terms of human rights issues and work conditions issues based on secondary data. The rest of the study is organized as followed: After the introduction, a review of literature has been done where important workers' human rights issues have been identified. In the succeeding section, these factors/issues are discussed and their implications for the health of workers and the company itself. In the end, the study is concluded with important insights and policy recommendations.

2. Human rights issues at Amazon

The Amazon began as an online book retailer in 1994 and is now considered to be a "company where people can find and discover anything they want to buy online," from books to groceries, to automotive, industrial equipment, etc. Amazon is the second largest private employers in the world having a total number of employees 1,608,000 full- and part-time employees (Statista, 2022), as shown in Figure 1. Despite the constructive role it plays in the economy and the lives of its customers there is another side of it that is hardly a secret. The human right issues at Amazon are no small concern considering its size and influence (Rager Law Firm, 2022; Naizghi, 2015). In this section, guided by the literature (research papers, news, reports, etc.), some of the factors have been identified and are listed in Table 1, and are discussed in the succeeding sub-sections.

2.1 Inadequate safety culture

The Amazon's organizational culture is described as "breakneck-paced and notoriously cost-conscious, as befits a company that has run only a small profit, or a loss" (Dudovskiy, 2022). The Amazon was named among the "Dirty Dozen" list of the most dangerous U.S. employers through the National Council on Occupational Safety and Health (Wasserman, 2021). According to surveys, the Amazon warehouse employees are three times more likely to be injured than the national rate (Sainato, 2020a; 2020b). The explanation is attributed to Amazon's unrealistic overall performance goals, a fear-based work atmosphere, and a lack of appreciation of employee contributions (BBC, 2021). Pressure to complete difficult duties quickly can have a substantial impact on workers' safety

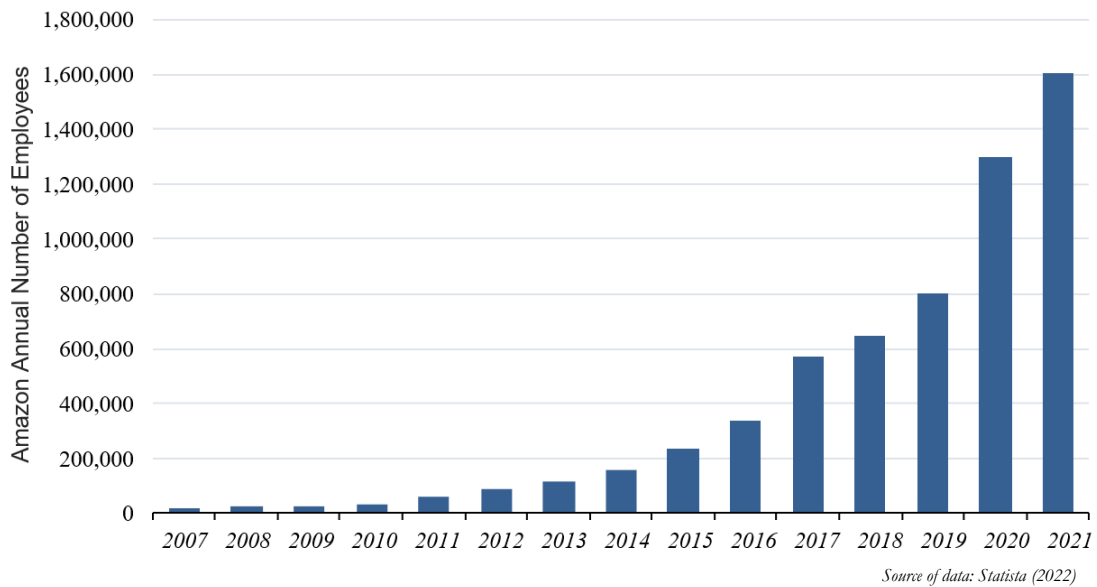


Figure 1. Number of Amazon employees from 2007 to 2021

and health (WHO, 2020). Physical strain and postural stress can have a significant impact on muscles, joints, and bones. Employees who perform manual handling duties are more prone to develop musculoskeletal disorders (NYCOSH, 2019). The Amazon warehouse workers are suffering from injuries that can stay with them for the rest of their lives (NELP, 2020). The most serious injuries require workers to be moved to light duty or miss work (Yahoo News, 2021). Also, unsafe work conditions make the Amazon work environment stressful. Work-related stress at one of the Amazon fulfilment centers is illustrated in Figure 2.

2.2 Difficult working conditions

The working conditions of the Amazon have drawn widespread criticism (Yohn, 2020). Over the previous few years, the media has been overwhelmed with reports from local and international journalists. Working conditions in Amazon's warehouses, delivery centers, and even corporate headquarters have been criticized as unsafe and hazardous (Kelly, 2021). A union-backed assessment of safety statistics found that Amazon workers sustained 5.9 major injuries per 100 workers, which was more than 80 percent higher than the rest of the industry (BBC, 2021). Mind you that the Amazon workers only make up a third of US warehouse employees (SOC, 2022), as shown in Figure 3. According to a survey done by HIP (2021) shows that the Amazon employees suffer not only physical injuries but also psychological distress, as shown in Figure 4.

2.3 Fear of employment termination

Job security is an important factor that improves employees' belongingness with the organization and improved their urge for thriving (Nawaz *et al.*, 2021). Fear of losing job can affect their relationship with the organization. Technology should be used to overcome these fears and not to infuse these fears. The Amazon has attempted to replace its middle management and human resources workers with artificial intelligence (LaMagna, 2017). The Amazon's algorithms and tracking systems constantly monitor workers' productivity throughout the workday (Joita, 2019). So, when workers failed to meet the rate, they get fired without the involvement of a human manager (Sainato, 2020a; 2020b). This has caused a lot of difficulty for the Amazon workers; more than 60% of UK warehouse workers have avoided going to the toilet because they were scared of missing their performance targets (Liao, 2018). Some even went as far as to relieve themselves in a bottle (Ghosh, 2018). The Amazon fired two employees who were outspoken critics of the company's labor practices, including how it treated warehouse workers during the COVID-19 outbreak (Palmer, 2020a; 2020b). The company also offers up to \$10,000 for employees to quit

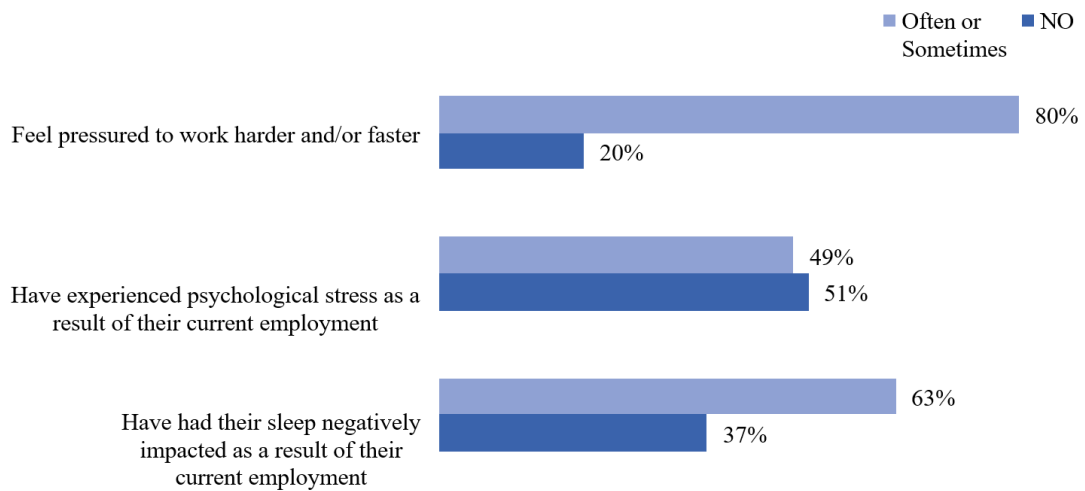
Table 1. Key human right issues allegedly being faced by the Amazon workers

Issues	Description	Reference
Inadequate Safety Culture	Absence of sense of safety at workplace	Sainato (2020a; 2020b); Gurley (2022); Wasserman (2021); Evans (2020); Zhang (2022); Selyukh (2020)
Difficult working conditions	Grueling work conditions in warehouses and pressure to work faster	Green America (2022); Palmer (2021); Gruenberg (2022); August & Rock (2021); Blackwell (2020); Taddonio (2020)
Fear of termination	Job insecurity and fear of getting fired for missing the performance targets	LaMagna (2017) Liao (2018); O'Brien (2020); Crispin (2021); Pigram (2019); Tung and Berkowitz (2020)
Disregard for workers' needs	Workers are not robots and so they have individualized needs that are not always taken care of	Kelly (2021); Tung and Berkowitz (2020)
Payroll system malfunctions and underpayment	A long list of issues with the Amazon's system for handling paid and unpaid leaves resulting in underpayment	Kantor et al. (2021); Brancaccio et al. (2021); Hamilton (2021); O'Connell (2021); Enderle (2022)
Toxic workplace culture	High job performance quotas, as well as other poor working conditions such as timed toilet breaks and working in social isolation, all contribute to work stress	Virzi (2019); Carmichael (2022); Jackson (2022); Hinchliffe (2021); NBC (2020)
Lack of transparency	The treatment of workers throughout the Amazon's global supply chain is neither consistent nor transparent	Green America (2022); Glaser et al. (2020); Yohn (2020); O'Donnell (2019)
Race and gender discrimination	The Amazon has come under criticism for alleged discrimination against female employees as well as individuals of diverse skin colors	Greene (2021); Lewis (2021); Stempel (2021); Wilkinson (2021); Keck (2021); Long (2021); Larson and Bloomberg (2021); Charlotte (2021)
Disability discriminations	The Amazon has come under criticism for allegedly discriminating against pregnant employees and employees with disabilities	Young (2022); Engelson (2020); Hadero (2022); Kramer (2022); Fickenscher (2022)
Religion discrimination	Religious discrimination against the Amazon's Muslim and Christian employees has been reported.	GeekWire (2016); Esq. (2019); O'Kane (2019); Farooq (2019); Shellnutt (2022)
Opposition to unionization	The Amazon is well-known for its historic opposition to the unionization of its workforce	Sherman (2022); Palmer (2020a; 2020b); Nickelsburg (2020); Apicella and Hildebrandt (2019)

their job (Berkowitz *et al.* 2020). Kantor and Streitfeld (2015) reported that sometimes ideas in meetings are so harshly criticized that some employees are afraid to voice their opinions.

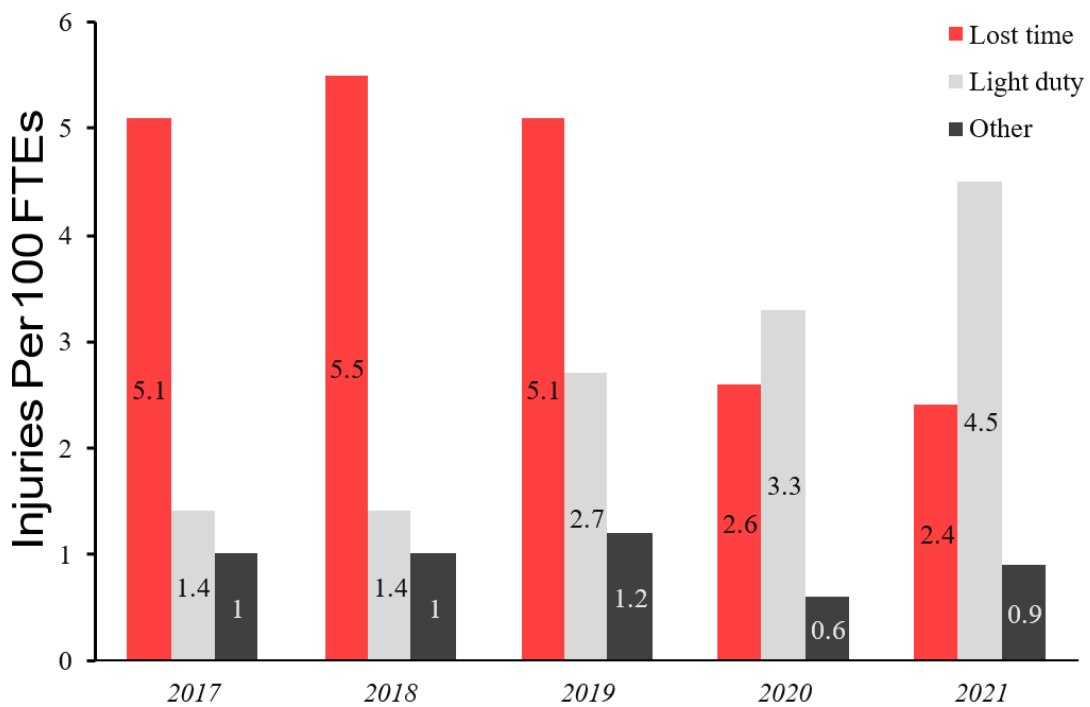
2.4 Disregard for workers' needs

The Amazon workers are being neglected because the company places more focus on satisfying the customers and overlooks about the needs of their employees (Naizghi, 2015). There were heart-breaking stories of blocked disability payments, cars repossessed, the need to sell a wedding ring, and mistaken firings due to supposedly faulty programs (Kelly, 2021). Amazon workers urged the company to improve its public transit services (Sainato, 2020a; 2020b) and improve the role of human managers. Nevertheless, Amazon claims that the robots make the job safer and easier (Evans, 2020). The company forces its workers to skip lunch breaks and work through their lunches in order to meet its targets (HIP, 2021). Amazon has also been reported for not providing proper training for workers. Sometimes workers at Amazon are not given proper training and situations arise where injuries or deaths happen (Rubio, 2021).



Source of data: NYCOSH (2020)

Figure 2. Work-related stress at the Amazon fulfillment center Staten Island

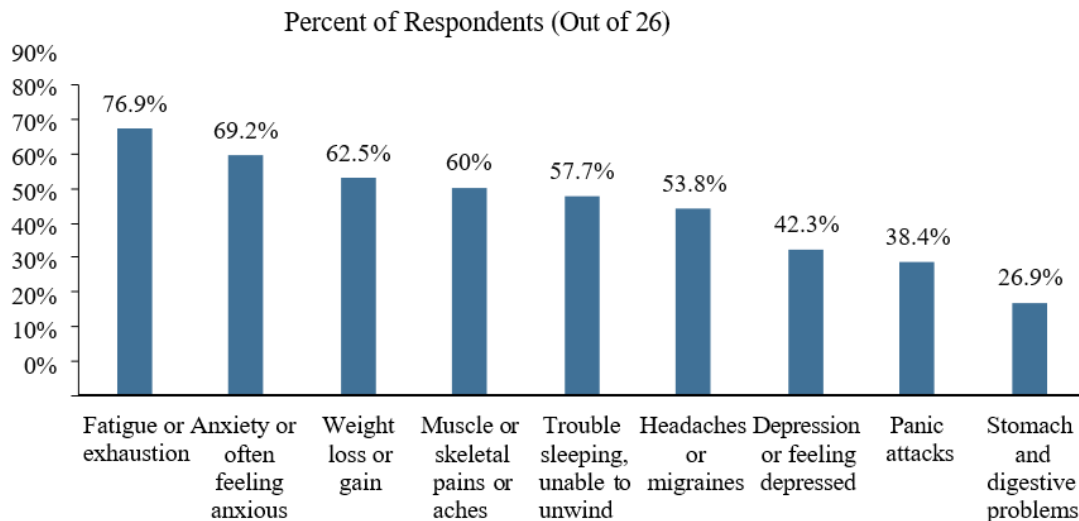


Source of data: SOC (2022)

Figure 3. Annual injury rates by type at the amazon facilities, 2001-2021

2.5 Payroll system malfunctions and underpayment

Although the Amazon is known for its fast and accurate package delivery, a new report details the top issues the company has in managing paid and unpaid time off for its employees, leading to mistakes (Kantor *et al.* 2021). As the Amazon leave management system involves several electronic automated systems, this appears to be one of the biggest causes of confusions (Brooker, 2022). The Amazon workers are suffering from Amazon's system for handling paid and unpaid leaves where workers were accidentally fired because they were being marked as abandoning their job when in fact they were on approved leave (Kantor *et al.* 2021). Human resource difficulties have caused problems for both blue-collar and white-collar employees. According to a New York Times study, there has been a slew of regulatory errors that have harmed employees (Daniels, 2020).



Source of data: HIP (2021)

Figure 4. Health concerns developed or worsened since beginning work at Amazon

Another New York Times investigation found that the company's leave process jammed during the pandemic (Weber, 2021). As a result of these problems, people like James Watts, 54, who worked for Amazon in Chattanooga, Tennessee (USA), lost benefits while on disability leave. Watts was on leave after suffering multiple heart attacks and strokes, and his automobile was repossessed due to the loss of his disability benefits. Watts and his wife eventually had to sell their wedding bands in order to buy food and pay medical costs. After a few months, the Amazon advantages reappeared with no explanation (Cave, 2021).

2.6 Toxic workplace culture

If the workplace environment is uncivil or toxic, it causes emotional exhaustion among employees and negatively influence their desires to thrive within organization (Nawaz *et al.*, 2022; 2020). It has been reported that Amazon's offices valued productivity above all else, pushing their employees to their physical, mental, and emotional limits (Green America, 2022; Hill & Hill, 2021). The journalist Brad Stone in his best-selling book revealed few incidents where Jeff Bezos insulted or mocked his employees (Stone, 2014). In another investigative report, reporters from the Daily Beast found that over a period of five years, 189 emergency calls were made from 46 Amazon warehouse sites for employee mental health episodes — many of which were suicide-related (Virzi, 2019). Not only that workers at the Amazon are encouraged to criticize each other's ideas in meetings. The internal phone directory explains how to send confidential feedback to their employers. It is routinely used to sabotage others, according to employees who have seen the directories' text-to-speech software for use by managers (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). Amazon's various platforms and services are used by hate groups to promote their ideas and generate revenue. The company's weak and inadequately enforced policies provide several channels through which hate groups can generate revenue, propagate their ideas, and grow their movement (RWDSU, 2018; Boewe & Schulten, 2019). Furthermore, Amazon warehouse workers are under pressure from supervisors to keep up with a rate of 240 to 400 boxes per hour or face being fined if they fall behind (Ranger Law Firm, 2018).

2.7 Lack of transparency

The treatment of workers throughout the Amazon's global supply chain is not transparent. The Amazon stated “Our point is to guarantee business choices and activities depend just on business-related contemplations — zeroed in exclusively on a singular's capacity to play out the work, not their qualities. As framed in our Code of Business Conduct and Ethics, we don't endure

segregation, savage and compromising way of behaving, or provocation” (Amazon, 2019). Given the claims against it, Amazon needs to put a greater emphasis on workplace safety and security, as well as the well-being of its employees. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, because of Amazon's lack of transparency and the lack of federal protections for the U.S. workers who got infectious diseases at work, tracking the spread of COVID-19 at one of America's largest employers during a coronavirus-driven boom in online retail is nearly difficult. Some of the company's 500,000 warehouse workers at its 110 fulfilment centers in the United States which were designated critical during the lockdown are now attempting to fill the information void (Glaser *et al.*, 2020).

2.8 Race and gender discrimination

Amazon has been criticized for not doing enough to address racial inequality in its own workforce. Shareholders have asked the company to report on median pay gaps across race and gender. Median gaps are an indicator of access to high-paying roles. Their disclosure would provide investors with insight into Amazon's performance on pay inequality (CWC, 2021). An investigation shows that 550 employees signed a petition saying Amazon Web Services (AWS) has "an underlying culture of systemic discrimination, harassment, bullying, and bias against women and under-represented groups” (Rodack, 2021). The women range in age from early 20s to mid-60s, and all allege that they were retaliated against by white managers for complaining internally about race, gender, or sexual harassment or discrimination that they experienced (Rey, 2021). A former Amazon employee, Cuervo, has sued the company for gender and racial discrimination. "It's a systemic problem, and they know it," says attorney Lawrence Pearson. Cuervo moved across the country for what she hoped was an entry-level job that turned out to be a nightmare (Wilkinson, 2021). An organizational psychologist who worked for Amazon on the management team at a distribution center in Spokane, Washington, alleges she was sacked for speaking out against bullying and unethical behavior by a key leader at the vast, robotized warehouse (Pulkkinen, 2022).

2.9 Disability discrimination

Amazon, the online retailer, has repeatedly been named in lawsuits alleging workplace discrimination. The family of Ronald Ashley, 53, alleged that their relative died as a result of Amazon's inability to give disability compensation and other contractually mandated benefits. It was filed by a discrimination attorney in Los Angeles (Ranger Law Firm, 2018). Another employee of Amazon that has also faced disability discrimination told the media that she has impaired vision and is required by law to receive disability accommodations for her job. But she said new managers consistently try to place her in other departments she is unable to do the work in. The entire time you're there, you're being tracked by a computer. Managers do not report you or write you up. "You're written up by an algorithm," Geller explained. "You're quite aware that an algorithm is keeping track of you, ensuring that you keep moving as quickly as possible because if there is too much delay between items, the computer will notice, write you up, and dismiss you" (Sainato, 2020a; 2020b).

2.10 Religious discrimination

Discrimination in the employment process at Amazon is not limited to racial and disability discrimination. Muslim workers protested against the Amazon over quotas that prevent them from praying due to strict packing hours. Amazon employees have the right to use PTO, unpaid time off, or vacation for religious holidays. Muslims have been impacted more than others due to prayer obligations. Muslim employees also have less time than non-Muslim co-workers to take off when their kids are sick (O'Kane, 2019). In 2019, the Amazon delivery service provider terminated the contract of a Christian delivery worker for refusing to work on Sundays to attend church. Later, the company agreed to pay \$50,000 to settle the religious discrimination law suit (Clarey, 2022).

2.11 Opposition to unionization

The right of employees and employers to form and join organizations of their choice is an important part of a free and open society (ILO, 2022). Amazon has consistently opposed unionization among its 1.1 million employees in the US alone (Sainato, 2022). While it is illegal to restrict employees from joining unions, Amazon, like many other retailers, holds sessions to discourage them. The use of mostly temporary labor further weakens union organizing efforts because the workforce is constantly changing and few workers have been there long enough to participate in or lead organizing efforts (Naizghi, 2015).

It is widely believed that Amazon employees face discrimination or unfair treatment on the job as a result of their union membership or participation in strikes (Miah, 2021; Hill & Hill, 2021). The most common forms of discrimination faced by strikers or union members include being assigned unpopular tasks or being passed over for promotions. "Union members are kept away from specific tasks," one shop steward said. They won't be able to get better employment because they will be rejected. They'll never be able to make a living." They receive their former jobs back if they quit striking (Boewe & Schulten, 2017). The most obvious and crucial answer to many of these labor issues is to ensure that workers have the power to negotiate with management about poor working conditions or any other concerns they have without the fear of retaliation and the discrimination that comes with it (Naizghi, 2015).

Employees of Amazon's largest New York City warehouse have voted to unionize, overcoming the trillion-dollar company's ferocious opposition, to become its first American workers to successfully organize (RT, 2022). This is the first win for the Amazon workers' union but the battle is not over yet since Amazon has other branches across the globe. However, it sets a positive precedent for others.

3. Discussion

In this article, eleven factors that have been affecting the Amazon workers' rights and the working environment have been identified. In literature, nobody has identified these many factors. While looking at the factors one can see that the factors are connected. As we know that Amazon's main goal is satisfying its customer but at what cost?

The high standards and unreasonable expectations have caused the Amazon workers to have the highest and most severe injuries in the industry and caused a huge mental burden on the Amazon employees the way the Amazon's management treats its employees seems to be unforgiving and insensitive (IvyPanda, 2021) supports this hypothesis. If the approach of the managers when comes to employees' issues, for example, health, disability, employees with different skin color, etc.... were different than what it is the working environment will be much better than what it is now. MNCs like the Amazon have much-diversified employees than any other company they should use it to their advantage, and it should not be their weakness. The Amazon leadership has been solely focused on their customer pleasure, and that's one of the main causes of the issues listed in Table 1. These factors are important for the Amazon company's health and wealth because they will help them understand the effects that have been brought into the overall Amazon employees' safety and health issues so, they should take this as a hint and care more about the safety and the wellbeing of its employees. A safe and healthy workplace not only protects employees from injury and sickness, but can also lower injury and illness expenses, reduce absenteeism and turnover, boost productivity and quality, and boost employee morale (IOSH, 2022).

4. Conclusion

The true values of an organization can be seen in the way it treats its employees and customers. The testimonies of the employees, if allowed to speak, are of greater value than the content of their employers' websites and reports. Keeping all this in view, the study was performed where reports and publications across the internet were read and summarized. The study identified eleven key factors /issues that the Amazon employees face during work. The Amazon's working environment,

including deteriorating working conditions, high productivity objectives, labor quotas, and continuous monitoring and surveillance, is harming Amazon workers' health, safety, and well-being. It should take this as a sign and work on their safety and healthy working environment. In addition to the negative impact on employee health and safety, the Amazon's rapid system creates additional costs that the company cannot afford which could overshadow public services such as unemployment insurance and public health insurance programs and create instability for families' employees and society. Policymakers need to act quickly to ensure fair and consistent workload expectations for warehouse workers who are largely composed of people of color/race. Taking action on this issue is an important step in providing healthy and safe working conditions for workers in this important and growing industry. The paper's limitations include limited access to information (Amazon operates in 13 countries, but this paper does not cover all of them) and a lack of previous studies in this field, particularly around the topics of race and gender (most of the literature focuses on a few cases with similar evidence), which should be considered in future studies. The silence of some media outlets like the Washington Post on the exploitation faced by the Amazon workers is another issue of concern and requires deeper and more objective analysis. Evaluation of these factors based on primary data from the Amazon workplace is a daunting but much-needed endeavor in the future. In future, issues such as dictatorships within high tech multinational corporations should also be studied. Also, what issues the Amazon employees are facing in different countries can be studied. The relationship between the Amazon organizational structure and its work culture can also be explored. The current study is preliminary in nature with a very limited scope. It can guide the potential Amazon employees from the issues they may face when they join this influential organization however it cannot serve as the 'character certificate' of Amazon. Objective quantification and measurement of the issues being faced by the workers is the area future researchers should focus on.

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