THE LONG STRUGGLE
OF THE AMAZON EMPLOYEES

LABORATORY OF RESISTANCE:
INTERIM ASSESSMENT AND PROSPECTS FOR UNION ORGANISING
AT THE GLOBAL E-COMMERCE LEADER IN GERMANY AND EUROPE
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EDITORS’ PREFACE

For more than three years, including well over 100 strike days, the employees at Amazon continue to fight for a collective agreement. Although the labour dispute has still not been won, it exemplifies the struggle of employees in the low-wage sector against a global corporation.

The authors of this study argue that the conflict at Amazon has become a ‘laboratory of resistance’. Important lessons have been learned, not only with respect to resistance against low wages and precarious employment in Germany, but also in terms of the conflict with the corporation at its other sites in Europe. Amazon takes an extremely anti-union stance at those sites too, but trade union resistance is likewise forming there. Transnational networking of the employees – which, as the first step, should be Europe-wide at the minimum – and dialogue about experiences in the various countries are a vital precondition for a successful, cross-border fight.

As the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, we have supported this labour dispute for some time now because of its exemplary significance. Amazon employees from Germany who are actively involved in the industrial action have repeatedly made use of conferences in the ‘Renewal Through Strike’ series to exchange experiences and establish links with one another. The ‘Solidarity Across Borders’ event held by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung in Berlin on 3 October 2015 provided a framework for the exchange of experiences about various forms of resistance. Colleagues from Germany, Poland, France and Spain reflected on their experiences and strategies and, in a workshop on the following day, explored the possibilities of intensifying networking efforts.

However, the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung event is by no means intended to replace European Amazon network, which brings together trade unionists from the French CGT, the British GMB, the Czech OSPO, the German ver.di and the Polish Solidarność under the aegis of the UNI Global Union. On the contrary, it is designed to provide the opportunity for more in-depth dialogue to supplement the existing networking possibilities. The UNI Amazon networking meetings are where Amazon trade union networking in Europe really takes place, and we are delighted that the UNI Secretary General Philip Jennings has contributed a foreword to this publication.
This study is the result of intensive research by the journalists Jörn Boewe and Johannes Schulten on the structures of the Amazon corporate group and about both the experiences of trade union resistance in Germany and the prospects for cross-border industrial action by the Amazon employees. That research is based, among other things, on a series of interviews with Amazon strike activists and participation in a number of trade union meetings as well as the Amazon event held by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung in March 2016.

Since then, more than 6,000 copies of the German-language, first edition of the ‘The Long Struggle of the Amazon Employees’ [‘Der lange Kampf der AmazonBeschäftigten’] pamphlet, which was published in December 2015, have been distributed. The publication has been discussed at various events accompanying the strike action at the Amazon sites in Germany and its findings have been discussed with the employees.

With this revised and updated English-language version, we hope to make these findings accessible to trade unionists in other European countries and to contribute to the development of transnational trade union perspectives.

Corporations like Amazon may be ‘global players’, but the employees and their trade unions are seeking to counter the power of transnational companies through international solidarity movements and by not allowing themselves to be played off against each other. The movement is still young, but it is gaining in strength across Europe. From their concrete experiences, much can be learned about transnational trade union organisation.

Martin Schirdewan and Florian Wilde
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PREFACE

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is on record as saying you win a reputation by doing the hard things well. The reality is that Amazon’s reputation is built upon doing the wrong things well, meaning poor working conditions and poor wages, denying workers the right to union representation and collective bargaining.

Our concern is to prevent the Amazon model, as an industry leader, becoming the blueprint for other companies in the future world of work. We already see companies such as Uber taking a lead from the Amazon book by putting profits ahead of decent jobs. Amazon presents us with a dual challenge: the low pay workers receive and the status of employment, where most workers are on temporary contracts. As unions, we must engage with this workforce and ensure they are aware that they deserve the right to collective bargaining and freedom of association.

Amazon workers in Germany have been demanding a collective agreement since 2013 and have gone on strike several times, showing their courage in the face of a powerful and ruthless organisation that categorically refuses to negotiate. The international labour movement does and must continue to stand with Amazon workers, whether they be in Germany, Poland or elsewhere. The Amazon model is essentially borderless and so must we be, because it’s in all our interests – the interests of employees in the new global world of work – that we challenge this model, which threatens to become the norm. We have seen with the Bangladesh Accord that we can successfully take on big business and force them to reevaluate and change their behaviour. By working with our 20 million strong UNI family, including Ver.di, we have the power to alter the path Amazon is on. To that end, we have created a transnational union network devoted to supporting Amazon workers around the world and exposing the company’s profound shortcomings.

Amazon represents an ultimate challenge in changing corporate behaviour, but one we must meet to ensure that the future world of work is not led by a company where workers are treated as disposable interchangeable robots. Therefore, it is highly important that unions remain active in industrial relations with Amazon and bring them to the negotiating table.

We should never forget, nor allow companies like Amazon to forget, that labour rights are part of human rights.

Philip Jennings
UNI Global Union, General Secretary
On the morning of 9 April 2013, some 1,100 employees of the Amazon fulfillment centers in Bad Hersfeld, a town in central Germany, formed a picket line in front of the gates. They were kitted out with whistles, high-visibility vests bearing the logo of ver.di, the service sector trade union, and posters calling for a collective agreement based on the rules applicable to retail and mail-order companies.

Something had happened that nobody, least of all Amazon itself, had thought possible. For the first time in its almost 20-year history, the US online retailer was faced with a strike, originating not in the USA, but Germany, which is not well-known for its strong strike culture. The walkout became a media event, with TV teams and photographers gathering by the ‘yellow tower’ of the FRA 3 fulfilment centre in Bad Hersfeld every day. This was a modern-day David and Goliath story – a few hundred strikers taking on the global e-commerce leader.

That was more than three years ago. Since then, Amazon employees have laid down their tools on more than 100 days (as of summer 2016), and the strikes have spread to eight of the nine German fulfillment centers. Nevertheless, the strikers have not come tangibly closer to achieving their goal so far. Amazon still refuses to even engage in negotiations about a collective agreement.¹

Outwardly, the online retailer has given every indication of being unimpressed. The stock response to press queries is that the strikes have not ‘had any impact on Amazon’s punctual deliveries to customers’. Amazon boss Jeff Bezos even told the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung daily that his company is an ‘excellent employer in Germany’ and is guided by the collective agreement that applies to the logistics industry as a whole (Lindner 2014). The message is clear, and is not ‘conveyed solely’ by the company management – there are repeated reports about Amazon employees who express their annoyance at the ‘negative portrayal’ of their employer by ver.di and, in some cases, even form expressly anti-union ‘pro-Amazon’ and ‘anti-ver.di’ groups.

There is reason to doubt Amazon’s claims that such activities are spontaneous and ‘self-initiated’ by the employees in question. Nevertheless, irrespective of the role of the management, it is clear how complicated the situation is for the trade union and its supporters. And, as if that were not enough, in autumn 2014, a year and a half after ver.di’s industrial action commenced, Amazon opened three fulfillment centers in Poland, as if to say, ‘If you strike in Germany, we’ll simply deliver from across the border’.

LABORATORY OF RESISTANCE

To observers who feel solidarity with the strikers, the situation is an odd one. On the one hand, the conflict seems to be never-ending, with the risk of the strike movement running out of steam. Has ver.di miscalculated? Has it underestimated its opponent? Did the trade union enter into the conflict over-hastily and without sufficient preparation?

One gets a completely different impression, however, on the ground at many Amazon fulfillment centers. They are a hive of union activity – to an extent that is often not
witnessed even in union strongholds – despite the unfavourable conditions, massive union-busting efforts and intimidation. There are now active shop steward structures at all the sites – something that is virtually non-existent in the rest of the retail industry. Workplace strike committees at Amazon discuss industrial action strategies and try them out, and employees from different sites are in contact with one another, including with colleagues abroad. That is assisted by solidarity groups, which have become established at some sites. They lend an ear in the community to the concerns of the strikers. The trade union blog amazon-verdi.de is also largely taken care of by local editorial teams. The majority of such activities are carried out during leisure time, since most of the fulfillment centers are still far from having established works council structures that would enable members who are relieved of their normal work duties to perform some of the tasks. Although there are now works councils at all the sites, stable ver.di majorities are the exception. Pro-employer (‘yellow’) works councils exist, and some councils are split into union and pro-employer factions. That makes the high-level activities of the workplace union groups even more remarkable.

As so often it is in real life, the picture is mixed. It is not the case that the employees have not made any headway. However, such progress is seldom reported on in the mass media. Their successes are seemingly minor achievements, such as modest wage increases, a low-level Christmas allowance (which is not yet an entitlement), decentralised common rooms and an improvement in the hygiene conditions at the water dispensers.

After more than two and a half years of industrial action and trade union efforts on the shop floor, the situation is ambivalent. Despite all the impressive progress, it remains doubtful whether a transnational company such as Amazon can be brought to heel by strike action alone, in particular by strikes that do not extend beyond Germany. One of the reasons is that the conditions are not conducive to mobilisation, owing chiefly to specific heterogeneous workforce structures and the anti-union pressure exerted by the employer. We will look more closely at that aspect in Chapter 4.

The fulfillment centers are almost all situated in economically underdeveloped regions. Many employees have few alternatives to their job at Amazon. After years of unemployment or precarious employment, many are content with their job overall. The proportion of employees with fixed-term contracts is extremely high, particularly at the newer sites. Amazon has also begun systematically shifting orders from fulfillment centers hit by strikes to other countries, in particular Poland, the Czech Republic and France. That makes clear the urgent need to step up international collaboration between the unions, not only at the level of the executive boards, but also (and most importantly) at the level of direct contact between union activists at the plants.
**RATCHETING UP THE PRESSURE**

However, if ver.di cannot win the dispute about a collective agreement at Amazon in Germany through mobilisation of union members alone, what can and must be done? One obvious idea is to exert pressure by means of a broad-based, high-profile alliance campaign. That undoubtedly has potential. Amazon’s public image has been more than dented after a slew of media reports on poor working conditions, tax avoidance and aggressive market conduct. Amazon’s very size and dominance can be cleverly used to bolster ver.di’s position, given that the company makes enemies wherever it flexes its muscles. Its adversaries include the direct competition, namely other e-commerce companies, urban retailers, the book trade, authors and often local politicians, who are concerned about declining tax revenues owing to increasingly abandoned city centres. Moreover, unlike in the case of some delivery companies or industrial service providers, the public and Amazon’s customers are one and the same.

There is no need to start from scratch or go back to the drawing board to devise strategies to fuel a targeted political movement based on widespread concerns about the company’s practices. There are tried-and-tested ways of increasing the public profile of a labour dispute. One such example is the amazon-verdi.de blog. Certain sections of the mass media at least show openness and sensitivity to the issues associated with precarious employment, surveillance and a lack of data privacy. Solidarity committees in Leipzig, Kassel and elsewhere have performed important and creative work in recent years and have acquired experience that can be learned from. UNI Global Union, the international umbrella association of service employees, has been working intensively for some time on the international coordination of member associations that are present at Amazon, and since 2014 has regularly held working meetings, most recently on the fringes of the ver.di national conference in Leipzig, in September 2015.

All such efforts should be calmly studied and systematically developed. That would enable ver.di to launch such a campaign together with the strikers and partners. *The battle to decide Amazon’s future will be waged in Germany,* a leading secretary of the British trade union GMB (General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union), who is in charge of the Amazon issue, freely concedes (UI3). Germany is by far Amazon’s most important market after the USA. Moreover, Unions have not succeeded to date in establishing as high of a membership rate and active rank-and-file support level at Amazon plants in any other country. If Amazon can be tackled anywhere then it is here in Germany.

Just as Amazon defines the ‘working conditions of the digital era’ in its logistics factories (as ver.di boss Frank Bsirske puts it), the dispute over collective agreements at the company also serves as a kind of ‘laboratory of resistance’ for future trade union responses to the negative implications of the digitalised working world. Here, it can and must be learned what shape union resistance can take in the boom industries of the 21st century and beyond, when it comes to preventing the worsening of conditions to the detriment of wage earners.
At the same time, it is clear that it is not possible to tackle it alone at the national level in an age of cross-border supply chains and the ability to move orders abroad at short notice. Without close networking, (at the very least with colleagues in France, Poland and the Czech Republic), the debate in Germany will not be won. Ver.di has the opportunity as well as the obligation to allow trade unions in other countries with Amazon sites to benefit from the experience acquired here in Germany. Amazon is a global player in every respect, and whether or not a collective agreement is concluded, Germany will have a direct impact on the labour dispute conditions faced by trade unions in other countries.

The aim of this pamphlet is to give an interim evaluation of experiences to date, to provide a realistic assessment of the outlook and to explore options for useful political support. First, we will look at the impact of Amazon’s approach to collective standards in the German retail industry and examine how work is organised at the fulfillment centers (Chapter 2). We will go on to compare the various approaches to union organising at the key Amazon sites (Chapter 3), in order to describe the dynamics of the labour disputes in Germany (Chapter 4). We will focus both on the achievements of the strikers and on the approach of the management. Amazon is a prime example of a company with a ‘divided workforce’. Ver.di and the union activists at the plants are confronted with significant numbers of employees who are susceptible to anti-union mobilisation efforts. Finally, we will give an interim assessment of the conflict to date and outline potential elements of a collective wage campaign extending beyond the shop floor (Chapter 5). This study is based on participatory observation in a number of trade union meetings and 23 interviews that were conducted between August and October 2015 with full-time salaried and volunteer trade union officials in Germany and abroad, as well as with industry experts and members of solidarity groups. All the interviewees were connected to the labour dispute at Amazon in one way or another, whether as participating union members, employees at Amazon or researchers on the subject. We wish to take this opportunity to thank them for their assistance and trust in us.
AMAZON: AN AGGRESSIVE TRENDSSETTER
On 15 December 2013, in the run-up to Christmas in Germany, customers pressed the order button on amazon.de 53 times, not every minute, but every second! A total of 4.6 million customer orders were made via amazon.de by midnight. That set a record, and not just at Amazon in Germany.

The possibility of simply ordering the consumer goods of your choice via your home or office PC, smartphone or other mobile end device in seconds, instead of having to make your way to a specialist retailer or shopping centre, has sparked a retail revolution. The advantages for customers are undeniable. The range is larger, many products are cheaper and, most importantly, the shopping process is quicker. If the customer is not happy with the goods, they can send them back without having to give a reason.

In 2014, e-commerce grew by 17.1 percent in Germany, and generated turnover of € 33 billion. Although e-commerce ‘only’ accounts for 6.8 percent of the retail industry as a whole (according to the official statistics), that figure should be taken with a pinch of salt. One reason (among others) is that the figure does not even include the almost € 6 billion turnover of Amazon, the market leader, since amazon.de is a Luxembourg company in legal terms. Moreover, although almost one in three brick-and-mortar retailers sell some of their goods online, such online sales are not included either. E-commerce’s actual market share is certainly considerably higher than the official figures suggest.

The upward trend is set to continue. An increase in turnover of 11.8 percent is forecast for 2015. In 2014, e-commerce accounted for 16.2 percent of book sales. The following segments have seen particularly strong growth in turnover in the past year: consumer electronics (19.8 percent), clothing/accessories (18.9 percent) and leisure/hobbies (18.4 percent). A number of experts anticipate that e-commerce’s share of the whole non-food retail industry will rise to over 20 percent by the end of the decade. The retail expert Jürgen Glaubitz has aptly compared the impact of e-commerce on the retail industry to the introduction of self-service stores in the 1960s. Alongside the construction of vast shopping centres, the boom in e-commerce is undoubtedly the key trend that defines the structural change in the retail industry at the beginning of the 21st century.

Amazon is the uncrowned king of the rapidly growing e-commerce industry. With estimated goods turnover in Germany of € 5.787 billion in 2013, amazon.de generated more than triple the sales of the runner-up in the German retail industry, Otto.de (whose goods turnover was € 1.880 billion). Its ambitious competitor, Zalando, ‘only’ generated € 702 million.
Amazon’s rise began in 1994 in Seattle, USA. In the early 1990s, its founder, Jeff Bezos, who was born in 1964 and graduated from Princeton University in electrical engineering and computer science, recognised the commercial possibilities presented by the internet, which was still in its infancy. Books struck him as the optimal product for exploiting those possibilities. Not only did they promise constant sales for years, but the major US book chains, Barnes & Noble and the Borders Group, did not yet have their own web stores at that time (Stone 2013: 32ff.). Amazon expanded its product range with increasing success. First CDs and DVDs were added to the range, and then toys and electronic goods. The food delivery service Amazon Fresh is scheduled to start up in Germany in 2016. By now, Amazon has all but become the ‘everything store’ that Bezos once dreamed of. In addition, Amazon is increasingly decentralising the dispatch of goods. The company runs smaller, inner-city distribution centres in some major cities in the USA, UK and Italy, as well as in Berlin and Munich. Customers can order from a limited selection of goods via their smartphone. The goods will then be delivered within a specified time window on the very same day. Amazon works together with external logistics providers to provide its Prime Now service.

All such developments are based on a highly aggressive growth strategy. In order to keep entering new markets and acquire new market shares, Amazon needs to make vast investments, which are financed partly on the capital market and partly from the corporation’s turnover. As a result, Amazon did not make profits for a long time. How early Amazon taps into future business segments is shown by the development of the AWS (Amazon Web Services) cloud service, which provides online storage space. AWS, which was founded in 2006, now boasts over a million customers, making it one of three leading cloud providers worldwide (Wirtschaftswoche, 23.10.2015). Today, Amazon is a mixture of retailer, logistics company, internet platform, technology company, provider of music and video streaming services, film producer, newspaper publisher (The Washington Post) and manufacturer of IT devices. The structural change in retail, which was triggered by e-commerce and is dominated by Amazon, is, however, not just significant in terms of new sales channels (brick-and-mortar shops versus the internet). Like all previous changes to the retail industry, such as the emergence of department stores or the expansion of discount stores, the breakthrough of online shopping has had a major impact on how work is organised as well as the prevailing culture in companies and at their plants. Online retailers do not need any sales assistants, since shopping takes place via the web. The majority of the work is performed at the fulfillment centers and during delivery. Here, too, Amazon has established new trends at its fulfillment centers (FCs), and its competitors are sure to take a page out of its book in the future. For employees, that often means that working conditions and wages fall far short of those set out in the collective agreements applicable to the relevant industries as a whole.
FULFILLMENT CENTERS – THE NEW SERVICE FACTORIES

One of the most striking differences between Amazon and other internet corporations, such as Google and Facebook, is that Amazon employs tens of thousands of workers in the low-wage sector. The company’s fulfillment centers are factory-like halls, the size of several football fields. They are mostly located in areas with good transport connections, near motorways or airports outside of large cities. Here, wares are picked, packed and sent to the customers.

Not only is the business model with which Amazon operates on the market innovative, but the way in which the company organises wage labour is also novel. Technical, organisational and social aspects of the workplace combine to form a sophisticated system of company and workplace organisation that takes the capitalist notion of squeezing as much work out of employees as possible to a new level. We believe that model of factory organisation has three key features:

1) TECHNICAL MEANS AND AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP METHODS ARE SYSTEMATICALLY AND CONSISTENTLY USED FOR THE CONSTANT MONITORING AND OPTIMISATION OF HUMAN LABOUR.

Like many modern logistics centres, the Amazon FCs are also based on a highly Taylorist form of work management. Similarly to that in industrial production, the work process is divided into various steps from the receipt of goods and goods warehousing to picking and dispatch of goods. However, Amazon has taken the degree of division of labour at its ‘distribution factories’ to the extreme. That concerns the standardisation and breaking down of work steps, as well as the timing for performing such steps. In industrial sociological research, the transfer of such principles of work organisation from industry to parts of the service sector is aptly described as ‘service Taylorism’.

At Amazon, the computer-based monitoring of employees while they are working is particularly marked. Every activity is recorded and seamlessly monitored by goods scanners. That means the working speed of every single employee can be measured and compared. Visits to the toilet outside of rest times, chats with colleagues and quick breathers are all registered and can lead to reprimands. The regular performance appraisals, which are called feedback talks, play an important role in monitoring and discipline. Those are based on seemingly objective evaluation figures provided by the digital monitoring systems. ’The evaluation criteria are presented as objective and rigorous, but in reality are opaque’ (Union Secretary 4). With the aid of dynamic benchmarks, the employees and departments are pitted against one another. Employees whose ‘quantities’ are below average are stigmatised as under-performers, with blatant disregard for the fact that it is mathematically impossible for all or even the majority of employees to be above average.
That paradox illustrates the fact that Amazon-style ‘service Taylorism’ does not just involve rationalisation of work processes. Putting individual employees under psychological pressure is just as important, if not more so, according to the Amazon philosophy. It is therefore only logical that extreme technical monitoring is supplemented by a system of social monitoring by line managers (known as ‘leads’) and the area manager. Anyone who is not fast enough or has phases of ‘non-activity’ in their log is summoned for a feedback talk. As an example, the authors have access to an ‘inactivity log’ (!) from 2014, in which it is noted that an employee who was ‘inactive from 07.13 to 07.14 (1 min)’ was reprimanded for having ‘breached her contractual work performance obligation’.

2) THE ‘TEAM’ IDEOLOGY THAT IS PROPAGATED BY AMAZON CONTRASTS SHARPLY WITH THE REALITY OF THE FORCED FRAGMENTATION OF EMPLOYEES AND NON-RECOGNITION OF THE COLLECTIVE ARTICULATION OF INTERESTS.

Amazon places great importance on giving employees the feeling of being part of a successful ‘team’ at the global e-commerce leader. ‘Work hard. Have fun. Make history’ is probably the company’s best known motto. It is designed to encourage employees across the world to ‘outdo themselves’, to become ‘top performers’ and to work ‘quicker than the previous day every single day.’ Not only are the company’s managers receptive to Amazon’s self-constructed narrative, but some lower-level employees also are.

Apicella (2015), who has studied the psychology of Amazon employees in Leipzig, notes the existence of a ‘vertical milieu’ and a ‘horizontal milieu’. According to Apicella, members of the ‘vertical milieu’ identify strongly with their employer. They are ‘proud to be part of Amazon’, consider the monitoring of the employees legitimate, deem the possibilities of co-determination and promotion sufficient and strictly reject trade union activities. In the ‘horizontal milieu’, by contrast, values such as solidarity, democratic co-determination, the collective articulation of interests are favoured and trade union aims enjoy support.

Numerous examples of the ‘vertical milieu’ can be found on Amazon’s own logistics blog: ‘The fastest progress in the world thanks to you. You make everything happen, team work is a religion, and from the stage I’m giving you motivation […]’ raps Dominic, a ‘cart runner’ at Amazon in Pforzheim, for example. There are similar examples of remarkable identification with the company in numerous different forms. To dismiss them as products of professional company PR would not do justice to the phenomenon. Although the sense of identification is undoubtedly encouraged and used as propaganda by the company, it is clear that it arises from a psychological need that is deeply rooted in some employees at various levels of the hierarchy.
That Amazon version of ‘team spirit’ is supplemented by a positive attitude to notions of ‘cultural diversity’, the ‘right to be different’ and ‘barrier-free’ access to the labour market for people with disabilities. Additional breaks for Muslim employees during the Ramadan month of fasting to comply with the prayer times prescribed in the Koran are as much a matter of course at Amazon as exemplary efforts to ensure the vocational integration of the deaf. The company does not spare either the costs of installing optical signals or vibrating wristbands that alert the user to hazards. Naturally, it is ultimately of benefit to the company that it can deploy those deaf employees in particularly loud areas.\(^8\)

Despite all the claims of ‘team spirit’, Amazon in fact deliberately promotes fragmentation and the erosion of solidarity among the workforce. Sites, departments, shifts and ultimately all of the individual employees are pitted and played off against one another. In interviews conducted by us, employees report that their line managers often seek to prevent conversations between employees at the workplace and to nip collegial relations and mutual support in the bud. Or as a shop steward in Leipzig puts it: ‘collegiality is not tolerated here’ (AEN3). Employees report that there is a ‘climate of denunciation’; they stand under blanket suspicion, as is indicated by the presence of metal detectors and security gates. They are only allowed to take transparent drinks to their workstations to ensure that they cannot smuggle stolen items out of the plant in drink bottles.\(^9\)

It comes as little surprise that workplace co-determination, trade union representation of employees and collective rights vis-à-vis the company as are laid down, for example, in collective agreements, form no part of this model. According to UNI Global Union, that amounts to an ‘active anti-union labour policy’ (UI2).

The dimensions of the anti-union strategy manifest themselves in various shades. In the interviews that we conducted, the following came to the fore: A hard-line anti-union discourse at the workplace, support for non-union, often pro-employer lists and candidates in works council elections, disregard for the co-determination rights of the works councils, and pressure on and harassment of employees who are active in the union. Amazon does not shy away from direct attacks on trade unions in order to drive them out of the company entirely, as the example of the UK shows (see Chapter 3.1).

A works council member in southern Germany described what that means for the work of elected works councils. ‘Often we only learn of decisions that are subject to co-determination one or two weeks after the decisions were made. Then they say, ‘Oh, we must have forgotten to notify you.’ Often, certain management measures are only discussed with particular individual works council members. Later they’ll say ‘but the council approved it’’ (AEN6).
At Amazon, there is no general works council for all the plants or a corporate group works council as of yet. The individual FCs, like the customer service centre or the Germany head office in Munich, are organised as independent ‘profit centres’ and subsidiaries of the Luxembourg Amazon EU SARL. The European parent company, as a limited liability company (GmbH), is subject to Luxembourg law, which does not stipulate employee representation at the corporate group level.

Amazon also clearly rejects the German model of co-determination at companies. According to the German Act on Co-Determination (Mitbestimmungsgesetz), companies with more than 2,000 employees have to establish a supervisory board composed equally of representatives of the ‘shareholders and employees’. Some of the Amazon FCs are of the relevant size. Ver.di has filed lawsuits to achieve such equal representation at several sites, but to date has only been successful at Amazon Logistik GmbH in Bad Hersfeld, to which the FRA 1 and FRA 3 FCs belong. Ver.di has two full-time union representatives on the supervisory board there. Elsewhere, Amazon has evidently deliberately reduced employee numbers to avoid the statutory requirement. Graben is an example of that. The site began with 5,000 employees, including many with fixed-term contracts. When ver.di brought up the topic of the supervisory board, Amazon reduced the number of employees to below 2,000 by not extending fixed-term contracts. Some 1,000 employees are brought in for the Christmas rush at each site (US1).

3) A HIGH PROPORTION OF EMPLOYEES WITH FIXED-TERM CONTRACTS IS JUST AS MUCH PART OF AMAZON’S BUSINESS MODEL AS ITS SYSTEMATIC USE OF AN ‘ARMY OF PRECARIOUS RESERVES’.

It is striking that Amazon establishes its fulfillment centers not only in areas with good transport connections, but also in regions with above-average unemployment and a low wage level. There are many indications that the mass availability of cheap manpower is an important criterion for the company when choosing where to establish its sites.

The high proportion of fixed-term employment contracts is key to Amazon’s business model. Ver.di estimates that the roughly 12,000 employees are joined by up to 10,000 seasonal workers in the fourth quarter of each year. They are employed to handle the Christmas trade, which accounts for roughly a third of Amazon’s annual turnover. From the end of September/October, the number of employees doubles at many fulfillment centers.

To meet that need, Amazon needs to be able to fall back on a large reserve of cheap manpower. Structural mass unemployment and underemployment are, to some extent, among the production factors that are indispensable to Amazon’s business model.

At the start of the millennium, the opportunity for repeatedly concluding fixed-term employment contracts with or without substantive grounds for doing so were greatly expanded compared to the previous regulations by the red-green (Social Democratic Party and The Greens) federal government with its Employment Promotion Act (BeFG) of 1985. When the German Part-Time and Fixed-Term Employment Act (TzBfG)
was passed in 2001, the age after which fixed-term employment contracts are possible without restriction was reduced from 60 to 58 and again in 2003 to 52. In addition, the Act was amended to include ‘substantive grounds’, such as the temporary additional need for staff, that even make repeated fixed-term employment contracts without a maximum duration legal. The proportion of fixed-term contracts did in fact increase significantly after each of those stages of deregulation. In 1985, fixed-term employment contracts accounted for 3.6 percent of all employment contracts (not including trainees). By the turn of the century, it had risen to 5.3 percent. By April 2001, three months after the amendment of the red-green governing coalition, it had increased to eight percent. Today, the figure is 9.2 percent.

Amazon has exploited and still fully exploits the legal possibilities available to it. Two-year fixed-term contracts without substantive grounds for limiting the term of the employment are standard. Beyond that, it is unclear to what extent Amazon makes use of fixed-term contracts with substantive grounds to handle the Christmas rush in the fourth quarter of the year. The proportion of fixed-term employment contracts is extremely high, particularly at the more recent fulfillment centers. Generally speaking, it is considerably above average for the labour market as a whole, even at sites where the proportion of fixed-term contracts is now deemed low.
EXCURSUS:
WORK MAKES STAFF SICK

It is hardly surprising that such a working regime has an impact on the health of the employees. There are no official statistics about the sickness rate at Amazon. Surveys conducted by works councils and ver.di across the various sites indicate sickness rates of between 20 and 40 percent in Germany, with the proportion of those with long-term illnesses getting higher and higher (US3; US1). That is well above the typical rates in the retail and logistics industries, for example, and is far higher than the average sickness rate among employees overall – according to the statutory health insurance figures, the rate was 3.81 percent in 2014.

It comes as no surprise that the topic of health plays a very important role for employees and is also regularly addressed at the plants by the trade union. The issues include performance pressure, fast pace of work, overheating in summer owing to lacking or inadequate ventilation, skin conditions caused by dry air, musculoskeletal system problems caused by walking long distances, and high noise pollution.

For some time, there have been increasing reports about Amazon cracking down on sick employees. That is illustrated by a report of a trade union secretary concerning the FC in Koblenz: *‘Colleagues who took time off sick were increasingly required to attend an HR appraisal. They are accused of malingering. Anyone who is absent on Friday or Monday is automatically assumed to be pulling a sickie’* (US3).
A CONFLICT WITH FAR-REACHING IMPLICATIONS

Amazon is not just a capitalist company in an objective sense, like all major companies in the context of a generally capitalist market. It is also capitalist in an ideological sense, and perhaps more than any other company embodies the ‘spirit’ of capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century. That encompasses not only its performance ethos, but also the set of values that Amazon operates by and propagates. The idea of ‘fast shopping’ is not just an indispensable part of the company’s business model, but is also propagated as the ideological core of individual self-fulfilment, which has virtually become the religion of post-modern capitalism. The company has not just jumped on the bandwagon, but is also one of the active generators of that ideology, which does not even seem to be an ideology at first glance.

In other words, Amazon is a driving force in the process that the Spanish journalist Amador Fernández-Savater (2013) trenchantly described as ‘dehumanisation by neoliberalism’. For left-wing, progressive and humanist forces, the conflict concerning the question of who defines the working conditions at Amazon therefore ultimately has an extensive socio-political dimension. However, the question is also a fundamental one. The dispute about collective agreements and union co-determination at Amazon will determine the future of working conditions in retail more generally. If the top dog in the e-commerce sector succeeds in the long term in its refusal to conclude collective agreements, why would competitors like Zalando be willing to enter into collective agreements?

Even now competitors are guided by how work is organised at Amazon: ‘Zalando is at the stage that Amazon was at five years ago, i.e. the conditions are worse,’ says a ver.di secretary (US1). The strike action that began at Amazon in April 2013 is therefore no normal labour dispute. It is a collective bargaining conflict over how to define the working conditions of a whole industry. If ver.di loses, the e-commerce industry threatens to remain outside the collective bargaining system in the long term. The few online retailers that are bound by collective agreements, such as Otto, will not be able to allow themselves that ‘luxury’ for much longer. That will inevitably have an impact on the entire retail industry, which numbers over three million employees, and even beyond that. ‘Amazon is gaining an unfair competitive advantage over companies that comply with collective agreements and offer their employees high social standards,’ says Stefanie Nutzenberger, a member of ver.di’s national executive board and head of its retail section. As a union shop steward pointedly notes: ‘If we don’t blaze a trail at Amazon, union representation in the retail industry as a whole will go to the dogs’ (AEN1).
Experiences of the deregulation of the German labour market in the course of the Hartz laws and the Agenda 2010 policy show that sectors, industries and sub-industries are connected like communicating tubes – if the standards of working conditions and wages decrease in one field, then the other fields will inevitably come under pressure. And Amazon, owing to its specific business model, is undoubtedly a company that has a cross-section with numerous industries. At ver.di, it is not just section 12 (retail) grappling with the issue of Amazon; the following sections are also directly affected by the corporation’s activities: 8 (media, art and industry), 9 (telecommunications, IT and data processing), 10 (postal services, forwarding companies and logistics), 11 (transport) and 13 (special services). That situation poses new challenges for the trade union in terms of internal organisation across its sections. However, it also provides potential for alliances, making it possible to challenge the company on a broader basis. The US researcher David Golumbia is therefore calling for the left wing and the labour movement to step up their efforts to take on Amazon: ‘Amazon’s role in developing disturbing new workplace trends, especially for non-white-collar workers, should be of central concern for labor advocates.’ (Golumbia 2014)
AMAZON IN EUROPE: THE SAME CORPORATION, BUT DIFFERENT CONDITIONS FOR TRADE UNIONS
According to the research of UNI Global Union, some 57,000 full-time permanent employees were working for Amazon worldwide at the turn of 2014/15. In addition, there were some 70,000 seasonal employees, who were hired solely for the Christmas trade. The company itself put the number of permanent full-time and part-time employees in the second quarter of 2015 at 183,100, not including 'contractors and temporary personnel' (Amazon.com, Inc. 2015).

The company, which was founded in 1994 in the US state of Washington, expanded to Europe after just four years. The German and British websites amazon.de and amazon.co.uk went live in 1998. That same year, Amazon opened the first British fulfillment center in Ridgmont/Milton Keynes between London and Birmingham and a customer centre in Regensburg. In 1999, the first German FC opened in Bad Hersfeld in the federal state of Hesse. A year later, amazon.fr was launched and the first French FC opened in Saran/Orléans, 100 kilometres south of Paris.

Further fulfillment centers followed, for example in Italy (in Piacenza) and Spain (in San Fernando de Henares, to the north of Madrid). The expansion of the company to Poland has a particular bearing on the situation in Germany. In the autumn of 2014, the first three Polish FCs opened – two in Wroclaw (one for heavy goods and one for light goods) and a third in Poznań. They went into operation a year and half after the start of the industrial action in Germany, and played an important role in the public debate and the debate on the shop floor at Amazon. Amazon threatened more or less openly to relocate jobs from the strike-prone Germany to the neighbouring country to the east. That interpretation featured as early as in autumn 2013 in press reports about the planned relocation of jobs or expansion to Poland and the Czech Republic.10

According to research conducted by the Canadian consulting agency MWPVL, one of the leading global consulting firms in the field of supply chain, logistics and distribution, as of September 2015 Amazon operated 163 distribution centres worldwide (FCs, returns centres, etc.), 72 of which are outside North America. There are now some 30 such centres in Europe. In Germany, the most important market after the USA, Amazon has distribution centres at nine sites: in Bad Hersfeld (Hesse), Leipzig (Saxony), Rheinberg (North Rhine-Westphalia), Werne (North Rhine-Westphalia), Graben (Bavaria), Pforzheim (Baden-Württemberg), Koblenz (Rhineland-Palatinate), Brieselang (Brandenburg) and, lastly, Elmshorn near Hamburg (Schleswig-Holstein), where it has an Amazon Prime Instant Video centre. According to media reports, the company is currently planning a tenth fulfilment centre in the north German town of Winsen, which is set to have around 1,500 employees.

Although the centres are operated according to similar templates and specifications worldwide, the remuneration and working hours can differ significantly, especially between western and eastern Europe. The differences reflect the context of the given national labour markets and the varying legal systems, as well as the specific situation of the trade unions at Amazon in the respective countries. Generally speaking, Amazon can be said to exploit the leeway permitted by national legislation to the utmost across the
board. That applies to taxes and levies, as well as to labour costs and working conditions. Collective agreements are only used if there a statutory obligation to that effect. So far, trade unions have not been recognised anywhere as negotiating partners as part of a process of collective bargaining. The company is clearly pushing ahead with its expansion into eastern Europe. The aim seems to be use eastern European manpower, which is still far cheaper, to supply to the western European market and to undermine the achievements of the trade unions in Germany and France.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>ENTRY-LEVEL WAGE OF A PICKER$11 IN €/H (ROUNDED)</th>
<th>SPECIAL FEATURES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>10 to 10.30</td>
<td>Relatively high unionisation rate, industrial action since spring 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>Industry-level collective agreement that is mandatory for the non-food retail industry as a whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>9.90</td>
<td>Extremely low unionisation, very high proportion of part-time contracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>High proportion of contract work, 10-hour day, two competing trade unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>9.25</td>
<td>Theoretically, there is an industry-level collective agreement that is mandatory for the logistics industry as a whole; however, the standards laid down in the collective agreement can be undercut with the approval of a pro-employer (work council (derogation at the workplace level is legally admissible))</td>
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(Source: own research)
UK: AMAZON RELIES ON UNION-BUSTING TACTICS
The UK is an early example – and to date, the most emphatic example – of Amazon’s
determination to crush the union presence, if necessary by employing extremely ruthless
methods. With a union-busting campaign that was unprecedented for the corporation,
it managed to force the British Graphical, Paper and Media Union (GPMU) out of the
company in 2001. Its approach was so aggressive that the British unions refrained from
any union organising attempts at Amazon for the next ten years. ‘They have played every
trick in the union-busting book to keep us out of the plant,’ Peter Lockhart, GPMU union
secretary at the time, told The Guardian. (quoted from Maguire 2001)

The GPMU, which today belongs to the Unite the Union (Unite) umbrella union, which
was founded in 2007, launched a union organising drive in 2001 in Ridgmont/Milton
Keynes, around 75 kilometres north west of London. In 1998, Amazon opened the first
of the UK’s current twelve distribution centres there. The village met the location criteria
of the US corporation precisely: good transport links, in the catchment area of at least one
big city (75 kilometres to London, 120 kilometres to Birmingham), economically underde-
veloped and with high unemployment.

The wages were correspondingly low. Amazon paid five pounds an hour, as well as
pension and healthcare benefits and stock units (The Guardian, 07.12.2000). In addition,
many employees complained about the high pace of work and very long working hours.

The aim of the union organising project was to recruit at least ten percent of the employees
as members in order to gain union recognition. According to restrictive British labour law,
that requires an agreement signed by the respective company and the trade union. If the
company does not recognise the trade union voluntarily, the trade union can apply to the
Central Arbitration Committee (CAC), the highest-level labour authority, for statutory recog-
nition. One of the requirements is for the trade union to demonstrate that at least ten
percent of the employees at the company are union members. In addition, the majority of
the employees must support recognition of the trade union, either by means of a petition or
a ballot. Without recognition, the union cannot make any collective demands.

The GPMU did in fact manage to recruit some 200 employees. Amazon declared that
it was willing to engage in negotiations about the conditions of recognition. However,
GPMU had to agree to cease its activities for the duration of the talks. In addition the two
parties agreed to let the employees vote on recognition. ‘The problem was that nothing
happened during the four or five talks,’ recounted a unionist who was involved. ‘After two
months, to our surprise, Amazon launched a massive union-busting campaign. Amazon
took a far harder line against us than we had expected’ (UI2).
The management acted according to the principle of ‘divide and rule’. It gave the workforce a wage increase of fifty pence, promoted some immigrant employees and invested in the dilapidated canteen. At the same time, it cracked down on the GPMU. Several leading union members were sacked, and all employees were required to attend a one-to-one meeting. At monthly department meetings, the management agitated against the union, and anti-union posters and baseball caps were distributed among the workforce (UI2; Gall 2004). The GPMU even received declarations on resigning union membership that were written on Amazon letter paper. Those letters turned out to have been drawn up by the Amazon management. Amazon made no bones about that when it spoke to The Guardian, commenting that support was simply given to those employees with minimal English skills.13

In the ballot, which had a turnout of 90 percent of the workforce, 80 percent voted against the trade union, while 15 percent voted in favour and five percent of ballots were spoilt. The GPMU received fewer votes than it has members (Gall 2004). That was a crushing defeat for the union.

GPMU subsequently ended its Amazon campaign. That was true not only of the centre in Ridgmont/Milton Keynes, but also the other sites that had been established since 2001. It would be more than ten years before the British trade union again attempted to gain a foothold at Amazon. The heavy defeat still weighs on the unions, as a British trade unionist dealing with the issue of Amazon today admits: ‘Of course that plays a role. The defeat still casts a shadow. The fear is massive’ (UI3). In an analysis, the British trade union researcher Gregor Gall came to the conclusion that none of the means used by Amazon were illegal (Gall 2004).

Since then, there has been little change to the poor wages and working conditions, as the TV broadcaster Channel 4 reported in a documentary in 2015. According to trade union data, Amazon pays GBP 7.10 per hour, which is just over the minimum wage of GBP 6.70 per hour (€ 9.10).14

Unlike in Germany, employees and trade unions in the UK have to contend with a high proportion of part-time contracts. ‘One of our biggest problems are the many colleagues who are working 20 hours or fewer a week;’ says a leading GMB union secretary (UI3). Amazon benefits from so-called ‘zero-hour contracts’, which are allowed under British labour law.15 If there is work, the company can make use of the employees, but the staff are not entitled to work a minimum number of hours. Only worked hours are paid.

Pursuant to an agreement within Britain’s Trades Union Congress (TUC), GMB, the UK’s third largest trade union is now in charge of union activities at Amazon, rather than GPMU and Unite. According to GMB, the situation is ‘very difficult’. There is no official contact with Amazon. The development of a union rank-and-file is progressing slowly – across the country GMB currently has ‘several hundred members’ at Amazon. The lack of access to the Amazon FCs is a particular headache for the union. ‘We have great problems getting in touch with colleagues at all, because we can only approach them outside the plants. We have to do everything undercover’ (UI3).
For that reason, GMB has refrained until now from making collective bargaining demands of Amazon. ‘We see little point in making demands for higher wages or full-time jobs, if we can’t push such demands through. We simply lack the members for that’ (UI3). Instead, the trade union is currently concentrating on getting Amazon to grant it access to the company. However, it is not clear how it can lend emphasis to that demand. The GMB is evidently not an organising union like, say, Unite. The Amazon topic seems to have been put on the back burner, as can be seen, for example, by the fact that only a few trade union secretaries are dealing with the subject of Amazon. Workplace organising only occurs to a very limited extent. Instead, the trade union focuses on online campaigns to attack Amazon publicly (Rundle 2015).

POLAND: DISPUTES BETWEEN TRADE UNIONS COMPLICATE THE SITUATION

When employees at the Polish Amazon FC in Poznań (POZ 1) were told that their shifts would be extended by an hour at short notice at the end of June 2015, spontaneous protests broke out, resulting in a go-slow strike. The protests, however, had their origin not in the Polish industrial city, but some 650 kilometres further west, in the town of Bad Hersfeld, in the German federal state of Hesse. The employees had again staged a walkout there. By ordering overtime in Poznań, the workers at that site feared that Amazon was trying to undermine the industrial action in Germany and turn them into strikebreakers.

The fact that the staff in Poznań were so well informed about events in Bad Hersfeld was chiefly due to the anarcho-syndicalist rank-and-file union OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza (IP), which is active there. It has close ties with the group of ver.di activists in Bad Hersfeld. Although IP says that it did not organise the go-slow strike (AEI1), it laid the groundwork for it in a way since it had provided information about the ver.di industrial action in Germany for some time by posting flyers and posters on the noticeboard at the plant. It is therefore plausible that the employees knew that the overtime, which was ordered at short notice, was related to the strikes in Germany.

At the beginning of 2016, the IP launched a ballot on a strike at the three Polish FCs. It was conducted between the end of May and the middle of June. According to the rank-and-file union, over 2,000 employees voted in favour of a strike.16 However, turnout was below the quorum required in Poland of 50 percent of all employees (not just union members). Restrictive Polish labour law requires that unions wishing to call a strike hold a ballot. Over 50 percent of the workforce (at the company, rather than the plant) needs to participate, with a majority supporting the strike. Although the strike ballot was unsuccessful, the high number of those prepared to strike indicates that IP has a certain amount of potential to mobilise staff.

The bottom line is that this small example of brief but impressive international solidarity should not, however, disguise the fact that unionisation at Amazon in Poland is still weak.
That is not surprising, given the short time that the company has been there. It was only in October 2014 that Amazon simultaneously opened two fulfillment centers in Wrocław and a third near Poznań (POZ 1). In Poland, two trade unions, IP and NSZZ Solidarność, are seeking to represent employees. That is problematic, since they not only embody two fundamentally different trade union models, but also have a tense relationship with each other. While Solidarność’s trade union concept is based on social partnership and reconciliation of interests and tends to be less adversarial, the IP pursues a combative and militant approach. Solidarność is a large trade union with around half a million members countrywide (Trappmann 2011), while IP might be able to reach out to and unionise a few hundred or at best a few thousand employees in total.

Solidarność itself reports that it managed to recruit its first members in Wrocław three months after the centres opened. According to Solidarność’s figures, in October 2015 around 90 Amazon employees were members of Solidarność at the three sites, with the focus of the unionisation being clearly in Wrocław (AEI2; AEI3). In Poznań, by contrast, IP has achieved success in unionising staff. According to its own figures, it has around 300 members there, and 200 members have also joined in Wrocław since 2016 (AEI1). The two organisations pursue very different strategies and are far from cooperating with each other. That was clear, for example, from attitudes to the go-slow strike in Poznań. While IP supported the go-slow strike, Solidarność subsequently issued a declaration in which it recognised the legitimacy of many of IP’s demands, but rejected its confrontational methods on the grounds of being counter-productive. IP for its part held that Solidarność’s statements demonstrated a lack of solidarity.

The tensions between Solidarność and IP also have a bearing on the labour disputes in Germany and efforts to create a stronger international network, since the Polish FCs, at least at present, are chiefly used to process orders for the German market. Poland to date has been of little interest to the online retailer as a sales market, as is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that there is still no Polish-language customer website. According to unconfirmed information, it is due to be launched in 2016.

Additionally, Amazon is heavily subsidised by EU funds in Poland. The two fulfillment centers in Wrocław (WRO 1 and WRO 2) are situated in the Tarnobrzeg Special Economic Zone (TSEZ), which is part of the Wałbrzych Special Economic Zone Invest Park. The expanding Special Economic Area, which is located on the border between Germany and the Czech Republic, now extends from the German town of Schwedt/Oder to the Czech city of Ostrava, and comprises around a fifth of Poland’s territory. Investors are attracted by extensive tax exemptions, low-cost real estate and tailor-made infrastructure. Companies are exempted from between 40 and 70 percent of corporate tax.

Furthermore, there are tax exemptions of 25 to 45 percent on rental costs and labour costs for the first two years. What is more, local governments often waive local taxes such as the property tax.
The Wrocław site, which is located just 160 kilometres by motorway from the eastern border of Germany allows Amazon to supply to the majority of the German market. ‘The proximity to Germany was key to the establishment of several Amazon distribution centres in the region in 2014’ states the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research on its website. (VDI Technologiezentrum GmbH (2014).

It is unclear whether POZ 1, the third fulfilment centre, which is situated near Poznań, is also able to benefit from Special Economic Zone privileges. A fourth and a fifth centre to be opened are both planned near Łódź, probably in the Special Economic Zone there, and at the Baltic seaport of Gdynia. All three centres are situated in regions that have received massive EU subsidies, primarily through the EU’s Cohesion Fund, that are aimed at modernising the transport infrastructure (KPMG 2014).

In autumn 2015, there were around 1,500 permanent employees working in each of the three Polish distribution centres, according to the estimates of UNI Global Union. Those employees were supplemented by around 2,500 seasonal staff during the Christmas rush. Wages and working hours differ significantly from those in Germany. The hourly wage until September 2015 was PLN 12 to 12.50 (approx. € 2.82 to 2.94) and was then raised to PLN 14 (approx. € 3.29). The employees work in shifts of 10.5 hours with an unpaid half-hour break, in blocks of four working days. Normally that is followed by three days off. There are no or only minimal premiums for working night shifts or Sunday shifts. Employees also complain about being under massive stress and about video surveillance in the changing rooms (AEI2; AEI3). Unlike in, say, Germany, the workforce in Poland almost solely consists of contract workers. Amazon chiefly uses large agencies such as Manpower, Adecco and Randstad for that purpose.

It is evident that the Polish trade unions at Amazon are still in their infancy. Whether or not they will be successful depends not least on whether some form of cooperation between the unions or coexistence can be achieved. Ver.di and colleagues in Germany could play an important role in that, since both IP and Solidarność now have good contacts with Germany. While employees in Poznań who are members of IP have been in close contact with ver.di shop stewards in Brieselang and Bad Hersfeld since spring 2015, Solidarność in Wrocław has strong ties with fellow unionists in Leipzig. At the start of May 2016, ver.di and Solidarność organised a joint campaign at the shift changeover in Wrocław, in which around 60 Amazon employees in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig participated. In addition, as a regular participant in Amazon networking meetings under the umbrella of UNI Global Union, Solidarność is well integrated into the international dialogue among trade unions.
FRANCE: PRELIMINARY STRIKES AND SUCCESSES, BUT LOW UNIONISATION RATE

Aside from Germany, France is the only country to date where there have been significant strikes against Amazon. In June 2014, influenced in part by the ver.di strike action in Germany, the three unions Confédération générale du travail (CGT), Force ouvrière (FO) and the Union Syndicale Solidaires (SUD) called for industrial action at Amazon for the first time. The aim was to get Amazon to engage in talks about wages, working conditions and respect for union activities. A partial success at least could be achieved, as an Amazon employee who is a member of CGT reports: ‘In June 2014 we went on strike for a day with 250 people, a quarter of the workforce, to demand a 13th month salary. That worked and was of course a major victory for us, especially as our managers had said in advance that our demand couldn’t be met because it’s impossible to explain to the Americans why the year has 13 months in France and only twelve in the US’ (UI5). In December 2014, CGT members again staged a walkout in Saran near Orléans to demand higher wages and improved working conditions.

A major wave of strikes took place during the protests against the planned labour market reform of François Hollande’s government. The FCs in Douai near Lille, Montélimar and Chalon-sur-Saône were affected. The trade unions managed to persuade the management to make Saturday a day off. In addition, they managed to achieve a 0.5 percent increase in wages and the doubling of individual bonuses (cf. Sozialismus.info 2016).

France is Amazon’s third most important market in Europe after Germany and the UK. Amazon entered the market in 2000 when it opened the first FC in France in Boigny-sur-Bionne near Orléans, 140 kilometres south of Paris. In 2007, it was replaced by the current ORY 1 in the nearby Saran. In 2010, another FC was established in Montélimar, 160 kilometres to the north of Marseilles (MRS 1). In 2012, a third centre opened in Chalon-sur-Saône near Dijon (LYS 1), followed a year later by a fourth near Lille (LIL 1).

The unionisation rate at Amazon France is very low, as it is in France in general. UNI Global Union puts it at below five percent. The largest French trade union, CGT, which traditionally has ties with the French Communist Party, has members in Saran, Chalon-sur-Saône and Montélimar (UI5). However, collective labour law in France has some distinctive features. At the workplace level, there is mixed representation consisting of directly elected workplace representatives and representatives appointed by the regional trade union sections. As a result of that system, many employees think that membership in the union is superfluous, since their union is already represented at the workplace. In addition, Amazon is required to comply with the industry-level collective agreement that is mandatory for the non-food retail industry as a whole. However, that only sets out minimum standards that are barely above the statutory minimum wage. At large companies, company-level collective agreements are typically concluded that significantly exceed the general standards in the given industry. However, to date Amazon has firmly refused. According to employees in Saran, the entry-level basic wage for a ‘picker’
(full time) at Amazon in France is currently around € 1,660 gross per month (as at the end of 2015), which gives a net monthly salary of roughly € 1,250 (AEI3).25

Amazon is also actively seeking to obstruct trade union activities in France. Pro-employer, yellow unions are encouraged in order to divide workforces and lower collective bargaining standards. One example is at FC ORY 1 in Saran in 2015 (UI5). Local CGT activists describe the group, which is called ‘CAT’, as ‘fascist’. Conflict may be in the cards, since French collective bargaining law allows companies to conclude company-level collective agreements with a minority union. Such agreements are then applicable to all staff, even if they are opposed by the other unions represented at the plant (workplace). In recent elections for the factory committees and works councils, the largest French umbrella trade union in terms of number of members, the social-democratic Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT), which is geared to co-management, collected the most votes. The CGT was in second place, SUD in third place, Force ouvrière in fourth place and the yellow CAT union in fifth place.

CGT participates in UNI Commerce’s European Amazon working group.26 However, Amazon does not seem to be very high on the CGT’s list of priorities. An agreement has, however, been reached to step up efforts to address the topic in the future.

**SPAIN, ITALY, CZECH REPUBLIC: UNIONS STILL IN THEIR INFANCY**

In 2011, Amazon began commercial activities in Italy by establishing a distribution centre in Piacenza, 70 kilometres south of Milan. According to press reports, some 1,000 employees work there. There is apparently no union representation as yet. In the Czech Republic, the company has run a returns centre near Prague Airport since 2013 (PRG 1). The opening of a distribution centre in the immediate proximity of that site, scheduled for the end of 2015, has been announced (PRG 2). It is rumoured that an additional fulfilment centre will be established near Brno. The Czech unions are not yet represented at Amazon, but the need is at least felt to change that state of affairs.

Trade unions are still in their early stages, but are present at the only Spanish site to date, MAD 4 near Madrid, which opened in 2012. Three union representatives were voted onto the factory committee for the first time in the middle of September 2015 (UI6). The Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) union, which has close ties with Izquierda Unida, won two seats. The moderate anarcho-syndicalist CGT has one delegate, and the remaining ten of the 13 seats on the council are filled from an ‘independent list’. In reality, that list is entirely dependent on the management. Thanks to the approval of that ‘yellow’ majority, Amazon can undermine the industry-level collective agreement that is mandatory for the industry as a whole (in Spain that is the logistics industry) entirely legally. The CCOO representatives emphasise that rank-and-file support first needs to be established at the plant in order to change that situation (UI6).

CCOO and ver.di have been in contact since October 2015. Future participation by the CCOO in UNI Global Union’s Amazon working group has since been agreed upon.
PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT AND PROSPECTS OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN TRADE UNIONS IN EUROPE

The industrial action led by ver.di since spring 2013 has an impact on Europe as a whole. No other European trade union to date has invested anywhere near as many resources in organising the Amazon employees or taken such a strategic, systematic approach to the topic. Those efforts are reflected in partial achievements here in Germany (concessions by Amazon with respect to pay and working conditions), although ver.di is still very far from its goal of a collective agreement. The continuation and stepping up of the exchange of experiences, with the aim of performing jointly coordinated campaigns, is supported by all the unions at the Amazon sites in Europe – that, at least, was the message of each of the interviews that we conducted while doing research for this study.

We consider it important to note that, until now, international dialogue has taken place at various levels that are not always coordinated, all of which have their advantages and disadvantages, as well as fundamental reasons for existing. The Amazon Working Group of UNI Global Union (UNI Commerce sector) is undoubtedly key to the strategic planning of the unions. It has met regularly since July of 2014. Its meetings directly serve to prepare for joint campaigns and are chiefly geared to the full-time political union secretaries who are in charge of the Amazon topic from the involved unions. The activities of the working group have been supported from the start by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has also provided assistance since September 2015.

Trade union transnational networking at Amazon is not, however, limited to the apparatus of full-time, union head-office officials. Since 2014, workplace activists from the ver.di shop stewards at Amazon Bad Hersfeld have been in contact with CGT colleagues at French sites. Since early August 2015, self-organised, regular meetings have taken place between ver.di activists from Bad Hersfeld and Brieselang and colleagues at Amazon Poznań (to date, without direct support from ver.di resources). Owing to the specific Polish situation – the strained relationship between OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza, which is not part of UNI, and the UNI member organisation NSZZ Solidarność – such cooperation poses the risk of ver.di getting caught in the crossfire. It is clear that ver.di feels solidarity with Solidarność, its UNI sister union. At the same time, ver.di would be well advised not to take sides in the conflict between the two unions at Amazon Poland, but rather to offer help in easing relations between the two organisations in order to minimise any negative effects from the different political, strategic, organisational and policy concepts in the dispute with the company (to the extent possible). ‘We need to join forces in the fight against Amazon,’ the relevant ver.di secretary from the national executive board of the commerce section emphasised recently at an October international exchange meeting of Amazon trade unionists in Berlin that was organised by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The message is that, in this dispute, ver.di is backing Amazon employees who are struggling for improved working conditions. Direct, horizontal contacts between union activists at different Amazon sites, both nationally and across borders, are great assets and are indispensable in dealing with a transnational corporation. These do not compete
with or replace cooperation at the level of the UNI umbrella association and the national
trade union organisations. However, it is also the case that cooperation at the UNI level
is no substitute for direct communication between union activists and shop stewards.

The meeting of German, Spanish and Polish colleagues arranged by the Rosa Luxemburg
Foundation in Berlin at the beginning of October 2015 undoubtedly represents a step
forward in terms of international union cooperation. Not only was it very well attended –
there were around 70 participants, including union activists from all the German sites and
from Poland and from Spain for the first time – more importantly, it succeeded in bringing
together full-time trade union secretaries, workplace activists and shop stewards,
and also social solidarity alliances at a single table and engaging them in an intensive,
constructive debate. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation can surely also play a useful role in
the future, in bringing together union activists with very different organisational, political
and cultural traditions.
STRIKE ACTION AT AMAZON: VER.DI’S LONG MARCH
PREPARATIONS

Back in early 2011, the US corporate group’s largest site in Germany, Bad Hersfeld in eastern Hesse, with some 3,000 employees at the FRA 1 and FRA 3 FCs, was a trade union-free zone. Ver.di had just 79 members at the two FCs. Although there was a works council, like large sections of the workforce, it ‘tended to keep its distance’ from the trade union, as a union secretary who was involved at the time puts it.

Within a year, the situation had changed radically. Almost 500 employees had joined ver.di. There were 20 shop stewards and two activist groups. What had happened? Amazon in Bad Hersfeld was the site of a union organising project led by the ver.di executive board in the federal state of Hesse. After the establishment of FRA 1 in 1999, a full-time union secretary, who also attended to the region’s whole retail industry, was in charge of Amazon in Bad Hersfeld almost without interruption. Following the project launch, two union secretaries tended exclusively to the two FCs for 13 months. They both lived in Bad Hersfeld for nine months, giving them enough time to also make contact with employees outside of the company meetings.

The small-scale example of Bad Hersfeld is in a sense illustrative of the trade union situation at Amazon in Europe, since it shows how difficult it is for trade unions to unionise staff at Amazon. It also shows that it is not impossible. The ‘Normal’ union support structures are evidently insufficient.

In Bad Hersfeld, a union organising project targeted specifically at developing rank-and-file support was needed. Ver.di had the political drive and readiness to make staff and other resources available for a certain period. Although there was initially a lack of experience and strategic preparation, the experiment was successful. ‘At first we were seen almost as ghosts who didn’t really belong there at the plant,’ reported one of the organisers concerned. ‘We didn’t even know what the grievances of the employees were.’ However, the small team soon identified the ‘hot-button topics’ at the plant. In addition to the wages being less favourable than under a collective agreement, the employees were particularly upset about the high performance pressure, daily monitoring, the rude way in which they were addressed by their line managers and the high proportion of fixed-term contracts. At least some of the workforce was willing to take action to tackle those issues.

In spring 2013 almost 1,000 of the 3,400 employees were members of ver.di – an extremely high number, given the high proportion of employees with fixed-term contracts and high employee fluctuation rates. Most importantly, the union membership rate was sufficient to engage in industrial action. On 9 April 2013, some 1,100 employees working the early and late shifts in Bad Hersfeld stopped work to demand a collective agreement. It was the first strike at Amazon worldwide.
FROM BAD HERSFELD TO NATIONWIDE INDUSTRIAL ACTION

When the union organising project was launched in Hesse in 2011, there were already fulfillment centers in Leipzig, Graben, Rheinberg and Werne, in addition to the one in Bad Hersfeld. Ver.di did not have significant numbers of members anywhere, the normal support structures were completely overwhelmed and ver.di was evidently not able or willing to devote more resources to organising.

That is hardly surprising. Large, bureaucratic organisations like the service sector trade union have enormous difficulties in changing established practices. Such an approach makes sense in the short term, at least according to the thinking of an organisation with limited resources. It is true that the objective conditions for a quick increase in the number of union members at Amazon are far from good. Many employees are happy to have a job at all, and the company has the reputation of taking a hard line against union organising efforts. Looking back, a union secretary who was involved described the reservations within the union: ‘In Leipzig I distributed the first flyers together with a handful of people. We were worried about even handing them to people. And, of course, there are also concerns within the organisation. People were saying that we wouldn’t achieve anything anyway and that it’s pointless in this sector’ (US6).

In recent years, trade union researchers have increasingly discussed the notion that trade unions have a ‘strategic choice’ under the given circumstances, however unfavourable they may be. If strategies based on concepts of cooperation or social partnership prove to be of limited effectiveness when it comes to making employment conditions acceptable in a given industry or company, it is also possible to select alternative ways of increasing the union’s capacity for mobilisation and its leverage over the employer. What precisely prompted ver.di to make a ‘strategic choice’ in favour of a more offensive policy of organising or to change its previous approach is hard to say. The fact is that ‘business as usual’ would have had significant repercussions for the union. Not only would it have meant that Amazon, the most important company by far in an expanding sub-industry, would have been left without a union, but in the medium term, it would have exacerbated the price war in the whole retail industry with its roughly three million employees – an industry in which wage standards have long come under enormous pressure.

A key role was played by Ver.di chairman Frank Bsirske, who evidently recognised Amazon’s importance with respect to the union as a whole and went to great efforts to get that message across within the organisation. His visit to the Amazon site in Leipzig (LEJ 1), on the fringes of the trade union’s national conference in 2011, was of great symbolic importance. A union member recalls: ‘Afterwards ver.di took the topic of Amazon very seriously and assigned full-time political project secretaries to the facilities in Werne, Koblenz and Pforzheim, using national executive board funds’ (US1).
Thanks to improved staff structures and more resources, ver.di managed to create union structures at almost all Amazon sites in the years that followed. Of course, the numbers of members in the various distribution centres vary widely. While plants at older sites such as Bad Hersfeld, Leipzig and Rheinberg are well-unionised, with membership rates of almost 50 percent, that is far from the case at the new FCs, such as Brieselang and Koblenz. Nevertheless, within just a few years ver.di has become capable of industrial action at all the sites apart from the centre that opened in Brieselang in 2013, as the union has repeatedly proven. Already, there have even been strikes in the small Amazon Prime Instant Video warehouse in Elmshorn. A simultaneous strike was held at several sites in September 2015.

While such progress in terms of union membership rates is impressive, it cannot disguise the fact that ver.di has huge problems in terms of mobilisation and getting its demands heard. Ver.di and the staff have not come significantly closer to the aim of a collective agreement based on that of the mail-order industry.

The obstacles are complex and are not easy to overcome, because Amazon has also shown itself to be a highly adaptive company in recent years. It grasped relatively quickly how to make targeted use of the resistance met by ver.di and to turn it to its own advantage in the conflict.

‘PRO AMAZON’: A LESSON IN COUNTER-ORGANISING

That became clear in December 2013, half a year after the start of the industrial action. During the strikes leading up to Christmas, more than a thousand employees suddenly distanced themselves from the trade union, the strike and the demand for a collective agreement in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig by signing petitions. In a statement that was rapidly sent out to the media they noted that the ‘negative public image’ spread in the media was negatively affecting them in every aspect of their lives. They said that the situation portrayed by ver.di did not reflect ‘reality and our day-to-day working lives’. A quality control employee at the Leipzig site said that she had launched the campaign together with a small group of other employees. Further campaigns followed. T-Shirts were printed with the slogan ‘Pro Amazon’ and ‘Pro Amazon’ and ‘anti-ver.di’ groups were formed on the social networking site Facebook. Amazon proved itself to be a strategically smart opponent. Amazon managed to turn significant numbers of employees against ver.di, while keeping itself in the background.

The trade union evidently had not reckoned with that kind of resistance. Ver.di’s initial reaction was to argue that the campaign was driven by the Amazon management. The union claimed to know that ‘pressure had been exerted’ and said it raised the question of ‘who lies behind this campaign’. The company management had in fact told the press that it was pleased by the anti-union initiatives. However, it was not possible to prove that the company had directly had a hand in the campaign. Reports by employees in Leipzig suggested that the pro-Amazon campaign was encouraged by Amazon. For example,
they said that ‘pro-Amazon’ supporters had been allowed to gather signatures during working hours – an absolutely unusual approach for the efficiency-driven company. However, the employees’ reports of such practices fell flat in the media.

Evidently, ver.di had taken the easy way out in its initial attempts at an explanation, and Amazon exploited that very cleverly. It is ‘[…] disrespectful to claim that the more than 1,000 employees involved have no opinion of their own’, the company noted. ‘We respect the fact that people exercise their right to strike. In turn, such a petition campaign should also be respected by the union.’

The question of whether the ‘pro-Amazon’ phenomenon was the work of the company management or an agency engaged by it is secondary, and draws attention away from a more profound problem. The campaigns clearly went down well with some of the workforce. It was not the propagation of anti-union initiatives by the management that was concerning, but rather the presence of a milieu and social environment at Amazon in which such pro-employer groups strike a chord with employees. Ver.di was given a lesson in successful counter-organising.

DIVIDED WORKFORCES

Amazon is a prime example of a company with a divided workforce. As the management describes it, ver.di is interfering from the outside and disrupting the Amazon community. ‘Every permanent employee in Germany is also a co-owner,’ Amazon’s Vice President Global Operations Dave Clark told the daily newspaper Die Welt in 2013. ‘Ver.di is not part of that relationship.’

That is clearly an ideologically motivated attempt by Amazon to deflect attention away from the reality of the situation and is chiefly designed for public consumption. With union membership rates of between 30 and 50 percent, it can hardly be denied that the union is also a significant part of the workforce. The interesting question is not why employees would like a collective agreement. To our mind that is self-evident and perfectly normal. As Ulrich Dalibor, ver.di’s national retail section head, puts it: ‘It is rare for someone not to want a collective agreement and wage increase (ver.di, not dated). What is instead in need of an explanation is why hundreds of employees of a company expressly speak out against a collective agreement’.

The phenomenon of workforces being split into opposing factions by their attitude to the trade union is not limited to Amazon. In their study ‘Gewerkschaften im Aufwind?’ ['Unions on the rise?'], Goes et al. studied a range of cases from different industries. They note that it is not unusual for there to be anti-union tendencies among sections of any given workforce. However, it is only ‘in extreme cases’ that workforces are ‘polarised to the extent that some employees openly turn against union organising’ (Goes et al. 2015: 78ff.). Such polarisation requires an additional factor, namely the vehemently anti-union stance of the management. The authors identify various levels of ‘employer pressure’ and ‘targeted forms of influence by the management’ ranging from a
policy of disinformation’ and ‘fielding of pro-employer candidates in works council elections’ to ‘terminating the employment of employees actively involved in the trade union’. The frequently recurring pattern of practices is described as follows: ‘In the workforce, they typically fall on fertile ground, because the management’s carrot and stick policy systematically favours some employees and also incites fear of losing their job in the majority of staff’ (ibid. 77).

All of this can be found to occur in various guises at Amazon, too: Agitation against ver.di occurs at team meetings; employees that have been identified as union members or have participated in labour dispute measures are often put under psychological pressure during one-to-one meetings and are often given unpopular tasks, which are meant and also understood as a form of punitive action.

However, the ‘anti-union measures’ vary greatly in intensity and differ from site to site to some extent. We will illustrate that with a number of examples.

A ver.di shop steward from Bad Hersfeld reported: ‘There have been so-called focus groups here for some time. The area manager creates the groups and makes sure that they always include a few isolated, “weak” union members. In those discussion groups, they are indoctrinated by the management with the idea that the union is bad’ (Aen2).

However, the same shop steward also notes that: ‘Known union members who’ve been engaging in union activities for a long time are left in peace. I sometimes have the feeling that they’re especially nice to us’ (Aen2).

A ver.di activist in Leipzig emphasised the drawbacks for union members on a day-to-day basis, for example when passing the security gates: ‘I have the feeling, and I’ve also experienced it personally, that we trade unionists, i.e. the people that they know are union members, are checked particularly rigorously. I myself have been summoned to an HR appraisal numerous times owing to minor failings, such as coming back from the break a minute too late. They let others get away with such infractions ...’ (Aen3).

He also spoke of ‘targeted bullying of unionists, regular HR appraisals and being assigned unpopular tasks. It works like this: If you don’t like cleaning, then you always have to clean, even if it’s not one of your tasks. There are good jobs, for example ones where you can sit a lot; the union members are kept away from those’ (Aen3).

A unique feature of the company, however, is that the principle of ‘divide and rule’ not only comes to bear when Amazon is actively combating the union. It is rather part of the ‘source code’ of Amazon’s staff management concept, irrespective of the labour dispute. The anti-solidarity mechanisms that are integral to the way in which work is organised at Amazon mean that some employees identify with the company’s performance and competition mentality. Those who regard another team, another department, another shift or another FC as the competition are sceptical or even hostile towards collective union organising at the plant.
An example from Koblenz illustrates how the concept of competition works at Amazon: ‘The GM [General Manager–authors] in Koblenz separated the various shifts and departments and played them off against one another from the start. He incited hatred among the various shifts, such as the early shift and the late shift’ (AEN6).

Workplace campaigns and strikes, i.e. anything that lowers the competitiveness of one’s group, is perceived as a ‘disruption and interference’, as Apicella notes (2015: 58). Amazon actively encourages staff to distance themselves from strikers at some FCs by stating that non-striking departments are more productive than those that have gone on strike (AEN2).

**FIXED-TERM CONTRACTS AS A MEANS OF ERODING SOLIDARITY**

The way in which fixed-term employment contracts are handled is indicative of how elements of the company’s ‘normal’ HR policy, which seemingly obeys commercial logic, are also used as a means of ramping up work pressure, creating a general ‘atmosphere of fear’ and intimidation, as well as for targeted union busting.

As already noted, Amazon’s business model relies on employees with fixed-term contracts. The company fully exploits the legal opportunities provided by the legislature. In a general sense, the effect of fixed-term contracts can be an intimidating one for employees. ‘People are simply afraid of losing their jobs,’ said one ver.di secretary (US4). Fixed-term contracts serve as a way of increasing performance pressure, fueling competition and eroding solidarity among the employees, deterring employees from union involvement and creating a conformist atmosphere that matches the employer’s interests.

‘When it comes to fixed-term contracts, the company looks very closely at who is pro-Amazon and who is critical of the company. They wheedle that information out of the employees during the feedback talks. For employees with fixed-term contracts, there are countless feedback talks – as many as three a week’ (AEN3).

In addition, Amazon deliberately exploits the fact that the German Part-Time and Fixed-Term Employment Act (TzBfG) has largely eroded protection against dismissal in order to remove employees who are active in the union from its sites and to influence the composition of the works councils. That was clear in Brieselang, for example. A works council was first elected there in July 2014. Although ver.di, as it says itself, was insufficiently prepared and only had limited rank-and-file support at the plant, the few union members could field a convincing list and win the majority of the seats. However, that situation did not last. When the fixed-term employment contracts of three ver.di works council members expired at the beginning of 2015, they were not renewed. The employees concerned lost their jobs, and the trade union lost its majority on the council.
'For the staff there was definitely a link to their union activities,' said one relevant union secretary. 'Their employment contracts had already been renewed several times, but as soon as they become active on the works council as ver.di supporters, they received evaluations that were so bad that their employment unfortunately couldn’t be continued. Amazon maintains that there is no connection between union activities and the termination of employment contracts. In our view it is clear that anyone who gets involved in union activities and takes a clear stance on the protection of employees and good working conditions has to reckon with being forced out of Amazon.' That is exactly what happened with two union shop stewards who were elected at the beginning of 2015. After they were open about their union activities and spread union views at the plant, their contracts were not renewed at the end of June 2015 (US4). Such cases are typical. They show how effectively Amazon combats union organising, without it being easy to prove that the company is employing such a tactic. Fixed-term contracts end automatically and the employer is not required to give a reason for not renewing the contract. ‘Amazon resists trade union views at the workplace and employees who are active in the union,’ said the same ver.di secretary, describing the situation. ‘Of course, fixed-term contracts are a very easy way for the company to remove people from the plant’ (US4). Nevertheless, working relations at Amazon are not only characterised by pressure and intimidation. For example, the general manager may well turn up at a works assembly with doughnuts and muffins and report how much he or she enjoys working at Amazon. That is designed to demonstrate some kind of ‘appreciation’ and ‘respect’ in a way that resembles a ritual. However, there are clear limits. ‘That only applies if you’re on their side. They address others less respectfully. They’re given a lot of preparation and put under pressure’ (US4).29

NO ALTERNATIVE TO AMAZON
Additionally, the erosion of solidarity among the workforce is also fuelled by external factors. The Amazon sites are primarily located in economically underdeveloped areas. Owing to the lack of alternatives, despite all the drawbacks, many see Amazon as an attractive employer.30 Numerous employees were formerly in long-term unemployment or had other precarious jobs, typically in logistics, retail or construction. In comparison with that, a job at Amazon has its advantages. The wages are usually slightly above the regional average and are paid on time. The jobs are generally full-time, which is not typical in the retail industry, where the proportion of mini-jobs and involuntary part-time employment contracts is around 60 percent and on the rise. It also seems to give many employees a sense of purpose to work for one of the world’s most successful companies (Apicella 2015).
The minimal market power of the Amazon staff acts as a ‘background threat’ (Dribbusch 2013: 126) that makes them particularly vulnerable to the expiry of fixed-term contracts, reprisals if they participate in strikes, and the threat of jobs being relocated elsewhere. In a situation in which a permanent position at Amazon represents social advancement for significant numbers of employees, it is not surprising that some staff at least are receptive to union-busting efforts. A shop steward sums it up: ‘To be honest, many of my colleagues are simply content with their work. They say that they’re doing fine’ (AEN7).

VER.DI’S ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE EFFORT TO PREVENT AMAZON FROM CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE AT THE PLANTS

That makes it all the more important for ver.di to demonstrate that union activities are worthwhile, i.e. that they are associated with greater participation and rights. The fact that Amazon persistently refuses to even negotiate about a collective agreement does not mean that ver.di and the works councils have not been able to fight for any improvements for the staff. On the contrary, since the start of the strike they have had a number of successes, from wage increases and a Christmas allowance that is provided on a ‘voluntary’ basis, to small achievements at the factories that, in some cases, have significantly improved the working conditions.

WAGES:

Until the start of the collective bargaining dispute, Amazon had only minimally increased wages. That changed when the strike got underway. According to ver.di’s calculations, wages in Bad Hersfeld, for example, have risen by eight percent since the start of union activities in 2011 – significantly more steeply and within a shorter time than in the preceding years.31 An employee at level 1 (which encompasses most of the employees at Amazon, the so-called ‘pickers and packers’) now receives an entry-level wage of € 10.31 per hour; after a year he/she receives € 11.98 and after 24 months € 12.52. In addition, the employees receive a one-off payment of € 400 each year. There is still a significant difference between that and the collective agreement applicable to the retail and mail-order industries, where an hourly wage of € 12.96 is paid from the start. Furthermore, there are various one-off payments in those industries, such a Christmas allowance of 62.5 percent of the employee’s monthly salary, amounting to roughly € 1,316, and a holiday allowance of € 1,182. Nevertheless, the improvements achieved by the strike action are considerable.

CHRISTMAS ALLOWANCE:

A Christmas allowance was always a no-go at Amazon. In the view of the boss, Bezos, it constitutes remuneration for work that has not been done, so there should be no such payment. Nevertheless, since 2013, Amazon has paid its FC employees a Christmas allowance of € 400. It is, however, a ‘voluntary payment’ that can be revoked at any time.32 That was also an employee initiative. As recalled by a shop steward from Bad Hersfeld: ‘When we sought to negotiate with the management about the Christmas allowance, we were refused. The management only agreed to talks after the strike action.’
WORKING CONDITIONS:
Other improvements have also been achieved thanks to the dauntless efforts of ver.di activists and works councils, such as:

- Improvements in hygiene conditions (for example at the water dispensers and in the sanitary facilities) after increased incidence of gastrointestinal illnesses.

- Installation of ventilation systems, after several employees who suffered circulatory problems collapsed during the hot summer months in the warehouse halls. However, the employees complain that the systems merely cool the air instead of exchange it, i.e. they do not introduce fresh air.

- Installation of additional security gates to reduce congestion at the start and end of breaks and shifts.

- Decentralised common rooms.

- Establishment of canteens with their own kitchen, instead of the delivery of ready meals.

All those achievements, both bigger and smaller in scale, are clearly concessions that the company has made owing to union pressure and the dissatisfaction of the employees. Nevertheless, the union and works councils often have difficulty explaining to staff that the improvements are a result of the labour dispute. That is due in part to fluctuation, which remains high. ‘Lots of new people come and don’t know how things were before’ (AEN2). Amazon also goes to great efforts to control the narrative for its own purposes. Workplace start meetings are used to propagate the improvements and present them as being generously provided by the company, with no mention of such improvements being related to the union’s demands.

‘We try to draw attention to such efforts by means of our newspaper, flyers and works assemblies,’ says a shop steward, describing ver.di’s efforts to counter Amazon’s narrative. ‘For instance, in the current edition of our newspaper, we have a chart showing wages and the number of union members over time. However, we have to explain it over and over again. A small section of the workforce doesn’t want to listen. The vast majority needs to be convinced’ (AEN2).
BRINGING GRIEVANCES INTO THE PUBLIC EYE

Collective agreement disputes have always been public conflicts. However, public opinion plays a particularly important role in conflicts where trade unions have low membership rates and little market power. For trade unions, influencing the public image of their adversary in the collective agreement dispute is a way of putting it under additional pressure. The emphasis here, however, is on ‘additional’. It is clear that a trade union strategy that is strongly geared to the public also needs to be rooted in support on the shop floor, i.e. is reliant on a certain union membership rate at the plants.

At the start of the conflict in particular, ver.di was highly successful in drawing media attention to the concerns of the union and casting Amazon in a negative role. Even the daily tabloid Bild, which is hardly known to be pro-union, sent reporters to the strikers’ meeting place.

Communication about the industrial action was essential, since without it there would hardly have been broad media interest in the situation of the employees. The strike, which resembled the story of David and Goliath, served as a vehicle to draw attention to the massive problems with the working conditions at the company and to explain the need for a collective agreement. Shortly before the start of the industrial action, in February 2013, the widely acclaimed documentary ‘Ausgeliefert! Leiharbeiter bei Amazon’ [At Amazon’s mercy! Contract workers at Amazon], was aired on ARD. As a result, an audience of millions was shown the dark sides of the retailer’s business model for the first time. Politicians also began to take an interest in the activities of the trade union once the media showed an interest: ‘People approached us once the topic was in the media’, recalls a then union secretary at the Bad Hersfeld site.

Ver.di’s media success, however, is due not least to Amazon itself, or rather to the corporation’s initial refusal to communicate with the public at all. The scant regard that Amazon paid the public at the start is illustrated, for example, by the fact that the questions of journalists were only answered by email; often it took days to get a response.

As the conflict went on, however, Amazon made a U-turn and adopted a more professional approach to its media work. The staff of the press department was increased. ‘Media days’ with workplace visits for journalists were organised and there were even open days for the public. Amazon also learnt from ver.di. Similarly to the amazon-verdi.de union blog, the company established its own blog, with almost daily reports about workplace celebrations, special events such as health days, charitable efforts and technical innovations. Employees also introduce themselves in videos and tell the public about their work, with enthusiasm that comes across as absolutely genuine.

The company’s reaction to a postcard campaign by ver.di is exemplary of the change in its media strategy. The trade union asked customers to send a postcard to Amazon Germany demanding fair wages and a collective agreement. Anyone who had given their address received a signed letter in response from the head of Amazon Germany, Ralf Kleber, in which he addressed ver.di’s arguments.
Amazon also adopted a clever approach in the public debate about ver.di’s demand for a collective agreement. Owing to the constant reference to Amazon wages being ‘geared’ to the collective agreement for the logistics industry, many journalists got the impression that the company does pay according to a collective agreement, but the one that is valid in the logistics industry. As a result, Amazon managed to shift the debate from the problem of Amazon’s fundamental refusal to engage in collective agreement negotiations to the highly complex question of whether Amazon is a mail-order company or a logistics company. The fact that Amazon’s description of itself in Germany as a logistics company is of a purely tactical and demagogic nature is shown, incidentally, by looking to the USA. Amazon classifies itself as a retailer in its advertisements there. Unlike in Germany, in the USA the wage level is higher in the logistics industry than in the retail industry (Jamieson 2014).

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES OF THE STRIKE ACTION

Against that background, it is all the more astonishing that the strike movement at Amazon has grown and has managed to keep on growing. Ver.di uses temporary strikes to underline its demands for a collective agreement based on that of the retail and mail-order industries. Strikes are held at regular intervals, mostly for a period of one to five days, and are coordinated across several sites.

The aim of the industrial action is to disrupt the course of business at the Amazon FCs to such an extent that the dispatch of ordered goods to customers is delayed or even halted. The online retailer takes its commitment to deliver orders on time very seriously. The punctual delivery of orders has been an essential component of the company’s philosophy virtually from day one, and was key to the company’s success early on (Stone 2013: 60ff.). The introduction of the ‘Amazon Prime’ premium customer model to Germany in 2007 has further increased the importance of fast delivery. For an annual fee, which is currently set at € 49, customers can obtain ‘Prime membership’. In addition to free delivery, it guarantees that goods will be delivered within 24 hours.

However, the trade union repertoire of industrial action definitely does not consist solely of strikes. In many cases, walkouts have been combined with a number of campaigns, ranging from isolated blockades of access roads in Leipzig and Bad Hersfeld to camps and various forms of protest on the shop floor. The strikes were regularly supported by solidarity groups at some sites (Leipzig, Bad Hersfeld, Brieselang). On a number of occasions, the Amazon strikes were also coordinated with industrial action in other industries, such as the strike carried out by delivery staff for DHL, a subsidiary of Deutsche Post, over Easter in Bad Hersfeld.
A special feature of strikes at Amazon is that the company is able, at least partly, to absorb the effects of strike action by shifting goods and orders thanks to its network of FCs in Germany. It is hard to say to what extent the company is capable of shifting goods and orders in that way. At any rate, it is not the case that all fulfillment centers have all goods in stock.

In addition, it is repeatedly reported that customer orders are handled abroad during strikes in Germany. Since the beginning of 2015, Amazon has increasingly been delivering to certain parts of the German and French markets from abroad, especially from Poland and the Czech Republic, but has on occasion also delivered to German customers from France (see Chapter 3). By doing so, the company is seeking to make up for strike-related bottlenecks at short notice. However, there is also much to support UNI’s view that Amazon is pursuing a long-term strategy of shifting jobs from countries with strong unions to those with weak unions (UI1, UI2). Although the reasons for such a policy are largely commercial, the implications for union mobilisation and the effectiveness of strikes are plain to see.

It is difficult to assess the level of economic damage that is actually caused by the industrial action. There are no reliable data about possible delivery delays and resulting costs for Amazon. Ver.di repeatedly stresses that the strikes do indeed lead to delivery delays, citing test orders that it has performed. The employees we surveyed during strikes also confirm that there are often operational problems during the strikes. However, Amazon has to date evidently always been able to retain a critical mass of the workforce at the FCs to prevent longer standstills.

Amazon consistently denies that the strikes have any impact on delivery times and even ridicules the industrial actions. Amazon Germany boss Ralf Kleber, for example, told the business weekly Wirtschaftswoche: ‘Black ice causes us far more headaches than the ver.di campaigns.’ In addition, Amazon is at pains to emphasise that the ‘vast majority’ of the employees do not participate in the industrial action.

It is true that, so far, it is only at a number of older sites that ver.di has managed to motivate the majority of employees to participate. However, that is hardly surprising, given that sites like those in Koblenz, Pforzheim and Brieselang have only been around for a few years. However, in implying that the non-participation of sections of the workforce is voluntary, Kleber casts a veil over the fact that Amazon’s in-house policies actively contribute to reducing participation in strike action.
In addition, Amazon is now taking HR planning and personnel allocation and scheduling steps to limit the effectiveness of strikes. For example, employees who are identified as prone to striking and work at strategically important points, such as goods receipt or goods dispatch, are moved as soon as industrial action is in the air: ‘In Leipzig, striking colleagues, who used to load and unload the lorries, were moved before the start of the strike. They were then deployed as pickers and packers. They can’t do as much damage there if they strike’ (AEN3; also AEN2; US1).

In order to have quick replacements available for jobs that are hit by strikes, the management is seeking to train employees that it deems loyal to perform such sensitive tasks. They remain in their old job, but can be moved on an ad hoc basis. ‘People are always moved if the management suspects that there will be a strike’ (AEN3).

The physic allocation of the struggle is also contested. In Koblenz, Amazon twice succeeded in prohibiting strikers from accessing the car park in front of the plant gates by obtaining an injunction through the courts. It is interesting to note that Amazon is neither the owner nor a tenant of the car park. However, instead of accepting the decision, the strike coordinators and ver.di section management at the federal state level took the view that ‘the best way to defend the right to strike is by striking’, as one of the unionists concerned puts it (US3). It did so successfully. The Koblenz labour court ruled in favour of ver.di at the third instance. In Pforzheim too, Amazon repeatedly sought to obtain an injunction against the distribution of strike information in front of the staff entrance at the plant, but likewise failed before the labour court there. 34
ASSESSMENT AND OUTLOOK
STRIKE MORE EFFECTIVELY – BUT HOW?

Has the trade union miscalculated when it comes to the toughness and duration of the labour dispute? Is there a risk that the strike action will ‘run out of steam’, as the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper suggested in December 2014? The ver.di activists at the FCs have no illusions about a quick breakthrough. ‘We anticipate that the conflict will last seven to eight years,’ commented a ver.di shop steward (AEN1). All the obstacles that ver.di faces in trying to step up the conflict have in fact long been the subject of broad discussion among the shop steward structures of the various distribution centres. Moreover, just as Amazon has learnt lessons during the conflict, the labour dispute also, to an even greater extent, involves the staff gaining experience and testing new strategies and tactics. The question of how the effectiveness of the strikes can be increased is not just the topic of union strategy workshops, but also – which is key – the subject of collective debate and hands-on activity at the workplace. The following serve as examples of that:

1) UNANNOUNCED STRIKES DURING OPERATIONS
Ver.di is by now (as at summer 2016) capable of launching effective industrial action during operations at several sites. A trade union member reported:

‘We waited for the start meetings of the part-time employees and then at 8.30 a.m., I rang the bell and announced the strike. The people inside knew that would happen and they were already coming up to me in yellow vests. There was a big ‘hello’, the managers ran around like headless chickens and tried to persuade people to clock out and put the scanners away, but the staff knew just to leave everything as it was and go out. That always makes it very funny’ (AEN8).

It is evident that such strikes are considerably more effective than previously announced strikes, which allow Amazon to react by shifting transport volumes to other centres. The deployment of staff for the day is planned at the start meetings. If the strike only takes place after that and takes the company by surprise, then it is far more difficult for Amazon to take countermeasures and keep operations running.

2) BLOCKADES AND OBSTRUCTIONS TO ACCESS AND EXIT ROUTES
Temporary blockades of the plant gates, various versions of which have been carried out to date, have proven particularly effective. The campaigns can significantly restrict the arrival and departure of goods, as well as general access to the distribution centres. Since the legal situation is difficult, tactical skill is required. Blockades are often ruled illegal by courts on the grounds that they violate the right to exercise of commercial activities, even in the context of legal strikes. However, temporary access obstructions that do not bring traffic completely to a standstill, but significantly impede and delay it, are admissible and virtually unproblematic. Strikers in Bad Hersfeld repeatedly held so-called ‘driver briefings’ for the drivers of delivery vehicles. Such briefings could not be deemed a blockade in legal terms, but nevertheless led to delays. In Leipzig, access to the distribution centre was largely blocked by a demonstration – which was organised in conjunction
with the local solidarity committee – on the public road outside, including by repeatedly pressing the button of the pedestrian traffic lights. Such ‘demonstrations with the character of a blockade’ are also being discussed at the Polish union Solidarność, which already has experience with similar campaigns at the company Lidl.

3) THE TACTIC OF ‘A THOUSAND CUTS’:
Low-threshold collective campaigns that challenge and question the daily factory regime in order to encourage the involvement of those employees who are not yet willing to participate in strikes at many sites – due to fear of reprisals or for other reasons – experiments have increasingly been made with smaller collective campaigns that do not go as far as outright industrial action. Unpredictable measures that may seem banal at first glance have proven successful, such as employees insisting on being addressed by managers with the formal form of ‘you’ (instead of the informal form that is typically used at Amazon), a large group arranging to fill up their drinks bottles at the water dispenser at the same time, or several employees together exercising their right to consultation with the works council or even taking their managers by their word and presenting their problems to them in person. ‘Once we stormed the administration building. The boss had said that he wanted to clarify everything with us in one-to-one meetings, so we all went in at the same time’ reported a ver.di activist from Bad Hersfeld. Such campaigns are about ‘throwing a spanner in the works,’ said one union member. ‘The Amazon managers are control freaks and get nervous if people disrupt operations at the plant.’ The aim, according to the unionist, is to offer forms of participation where the risk of reprisals is low, but demonstrate to the management that they were initiated by the union or are designed to support union aims. ‘It needs to look spontaneous, but they should realise that the campaign was arranged by us. Our bosses need to be afraid of what we’ve got up our sleeves again today’ (AEN2).

4) GREATER INVOLVEMENT OF ACTIVISTS AND STAFF WHEN DEFINING STRIKE AIMS
In spring 2016, ver.di made use of an instrument that had already been used successfully during the union organising phase in Bad Hersfeld in 2011/2012, namely surveys to identify ‘hot-button topics’ among employees. It had already emerged back then that performance pressure and constant monitoring are far more pressing problems for the majority of employees than the wage level. However, those findings were barely included in the collective agreement demands, which focused chiefly on the question of bringing the wages into line with those of the collective wage agreement applicable to the retail industry.
To mark World Health Day on 7 April 2016, ver.di launched an employee survey at all German Amazon sites to accompany the strike action, in which the staff were asked about their priorities. The answers were clear. For the vast majority of those surveyed, work stress, performance pressure, insufficient rest time and lack of respect by line managers topped the list of grievances. Well over 2,000 employees participated in the action. The union acted on the findings of the survey by adding the demand for a collective health agreement to its collective bargaining aims. The strategic change had an immediate impact – on 31 May the company announced the first ‘Amazon health year’.35

5) DEMOCRATISING THE STRUGGLE: SHIFTING DECISION-MAKING POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITY TO THE SHOP STEWARD STRUCTURES

Adjustments were also made to the previous strike strategy. Since the beginning of 2016, the union has emphasised the stronger participation and greater co-determination of its shop stewards at the various sites. Until then, industrial action was planned and coordinated by the union’s sector management at the federal state level and the national union administration. Decisions on when and how long to strike for were chiefly made by the union’s full-time officials, with a strong focus on central coordination in Berlin. The advantage of that is clear; central planning enables coordinated strikes at several sites.

That approach has been made more flexible and more democratic. Since spring 2016, the local ver.di activists have the right to decide autonomously on a certain contingent of strike days. Owing to the lack of effectiveness of the strikes, the change to a more flexible strategy certainly makes sense. The shop stewards know best what the mood is like among the workforce. They can predict most accurately how the management is likely to react to strikes. If particularly high participation is likely at a given FC for specific reasons, it can make sense to launch industrial action independently and on short notice. However, if only a few employees are willing to stage a walkout, it may be more beneficial to not call a strike, even in the case of strikes at other sites. A ver.di secretary comments: ‘We need to involve our shop stewards more. Decisions need to be made where the activist groups are.’ (US6). In addition, ver.di hopes to become less predictable, since by now Amazon is very good at anticipating strikes and minimising the consequences by hiring contract workers.

The new strategy has already proven successful. For example, the far from pro-union daily newspaper Die Welt reported that customers had complained about ‘late or incomplete deliveries’ after industrial action at the Leipzig FC in August 2016 (Gassmann 2016).
‘DON’T DO WORK THAT THE UNION MEMBERS CAN DO THEMSELVES’ – A DISCUSSION ABOUT MEANINGFUL SOLIDARITY WORK\textsuperscript{36}

Local solidarity committees have played a significant role from the start in the industrial action at several Amazon distribution centres. Their members include students, experienced unionists, including some from other Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) organisations, members of the DIE LINKE (The Left) party and members of the Catholic Workers Movement (KAB). On the part of the strikers, they consistently find the work of such groups of supporters helpful (AEN1; AEN2; AEN3 and others). The groups admittedly are small and the scope of their activities is limited. Nevertheless, they exemplify the fact that it is possible in principle to extend the labour dispute beyond the shop floor and turn it into a conflict in which members of the public are not just interested spectators, but actively take a stance.

Anyone wanting to develop a high-profile campaign to support the Amazon labour dispute needs to analyse the joint experiences of the solidarity groups and ver.di activists at the Amazon fulfillment centers. It is possible to study, on a small scale, how workplace activists and external supporters can communicate and cooperate with one another, as well as the questions of where conflicts can arise and what problems should be avoided.

One example of successful collaboration is the blockade of the access road to the Leipzig fulfilment centre in autumn 2014. An Amazon employee and ver.di activist reported:

‘During a strike we organised a joint ‘crossing the traffic lights’ campaign. There are traffic lights right in front of the FC, and all the lorries need to go through them. We, the strikers and the supporters, stood in front of the gate and kept pressing the button. Then we went repeatedly over the crossing, back and forth. Suddenly some of the supporters’ shoelaces came undone in the middle of the road. Of course they had to tie their shoelaces, so a long queue formed very quickly. Within a short time, the lorries were jammed right up to the motorway, and it was announced in the congestion warning on the radio. That was problematic for Amazon because the lorries were registered and needed to be at the loading bay at a certain time. The campaign delayed everything and threw the whole process into chaos. We did that in 2014 in October and then again shortly before Christmas’ (AEN3).

In Leipzig, right before the start of the industrial action in spring 2013, a solidarity committee formed, consisting chiefly of students from the local university, including members of the ver.di university group, Die Linke.SDS (The Left. Social Democratic Student Association), IL (the Interventionist Left), as well as a number of non-affiliated individuals. With an active core of around six to seven people, the group embarked on small-scale activities. It supported pickets and established a blog (streiksoli.blogsport.de), on which it drew attention to the concerns of the Amazon employees and discussed them in the context of the increase in precarious working and living conditions. Under the slogan ‘What can you do?’, the attempt was made to develop various forms of campaign to support the industrial action.\textsuperscript{37}

In the second half of 2014, a debate unfolded that one participant describes as follows:

‘Besides our other solidarity work, supporting the strikers and informing the local public, we thought about how we could put direct economic pressure on Amazon. It was clear
that we needed to hit the company at its most vulnerable point. In Amazon’s case, that is the transport of goods to and from the distribution centres. The traffic light situation in front of the FC allowed us to do that in a very low-threshold way’ (S1).

However, risks and problems became apparent as the situation developed. ’The campaign itself went well. The atmosphere was good, there was a samba band there, and it went down well with the employees initially. Afterwards, however, there was a conflict at the plant, which was triggered by the extremely negative reaction of the management. In fact, that wasn’t surprising, but we weren’t well prepared for it, which meant that we had pressure put on us not to do anything like that again so as not to turn people against us and, most importantly, against the strike action. We should have made better preparations for the campaign and also prepared ourselves for the likely management reaction. In other words, we should have given more thought to what would happen the next day at the plant and how to respond to that’ (S1).38

A ver.di shop steward from Bad Hersfeld emphasised that point: ’You have to first “immunise” the workforce in order to prevent Amazon from controlling the narrative’ (AEN2).

External supporters with a union background can also help in that. ’There are people involved who have experience in labour disputes. For example there are some who were involved in the Neupack strike. The members of the solidarity group helped us a lot in terms of self-reflection, which was important for us. They asked us about the reasons for what we were doing and how things were going at ver.di. They started taking photographs and making videos to document our labour dispute. They’re conducting interviews and editing the material, so that people can later see how the dispute unfolded. Even now it’s interesting to see what people said two years ago and how they view things today’ (AEN2).

Sometimes cooperation with activists from the non-parliamentary left is seen as inspiring: ’One time, some activists from the Blockupy alliance called us during the strike and said: ‘Hey, there are 40 of us here on a bus and we’re on our way to you’. With the strike almost over, 20 of us were still standing by the gates. We said: ‘Okay, if you’re already on the way, we can campaign together.’ They came and blocked the gates in a really radical way and put barrier tape around them. That showed us that it’s possible to do things differently, i.e. that you don’t just have to stand meekly in the corner, but can really take on the bosses and lorries. We then engaged in joint campaigns like ‘walking slowly across the road’ to impede the lorry traffic. That went down pretty well’ (AEN2).

The lines between self-reflection, political education and local public relations work are blurred. That is true, for example, of a series of discussion meetings arranged by the Leipzig solidarity alliance.

’Last summer we started holding regular ‘strike pub meetings’ to discuss topics that we think are related to the conflict at Amazon. For example, we arranged an event at which those of us who had been in Greece prior to that reported on our experiences. We discussed matters such as what EU crisis policy is doing to the collective agreement system and the union landscape there, and the long-term impact that may have on the situation here. Legida (a Leipzig offshoot of Pegida) was also a topic that strongly polarised
the town. That raised the question of how we treat immigrant colleagues at the plant. That’s why we organised a one-day workshop on the topic of racism’ (S1).

For the ver.di activists at the plant, dealing with Legida proved to be a thorny subject. ‘Ultimately, we decided not to take the strike to the counter demos because we realised that opinions were too polarised within the workforce, as well as among our own members’ (AEN3).

All those concerned thought that taking the experiences of others seriously and listening to one another are vital to the success of solidarity work. In addition, ‘external’ activists should make sure that they don’t fall into the trap of ‘deputy politicking’ and taking over the campaign, emphasised one supporter from Kassel:

‘Solidarity alliances shouldn’t do work that the union members can do themselves. We started out by creating video documentation, but the people at the plant are gradually taking care of that and are themselves out and about with a video camera and conducting interviews. That allows us to develop together.’

And, further: ‘It’s important to actually listen to one another and not just do things your own way. Solidarity work needs to be open to the specific circumstances and experiences of the staff. There are people with a lot of union experience here on the committee who are learning new things and realising that a lot of what they thought was self-explanatory is different at Amazon. There’s no doubt in the minds of IG Metall union members that strike-breakers shouldn’t be shown the slightest understanding and should be booed. However, that doesn’t work at Amazon. You have to take a much more sensitive approach’ (S2).

Solidarity groups are able to reach out to employees who are distanced from the union and industrial action, says a shop steward in Leipzig. ‘I think it’s good if staff who aren’t yet at the point of participating in the industrial action learn from your blog and your radio interviews how you see matters as a solidarity group. They not only find out what their colleagues are thinking, but also how the situation is viewed from the outside’ (AEN3).

However, the Amazon staff laughs at political activists trying to tell them how to do things. ‘Yes, sometimes people tell us that we’re striking with too little participation. Well, yes, we know that ourselves. We sometimes hear that from people who have a very particular ideological approach. However, aside from such comments, they don’t get involved in the practical solidarity work’ (AEN2).

In line with those experiences, all those concerned reiterate that it is essential to the success of a large alliance campaign that the ver.di activist groups and shop steward structures at the Amazon distribution centres remain in charge of their own affairs.

‘Our work isn’t focused on a broad-based social campaign as yet. The solidarity groups won’t be the key actors in such a campaign. It’s important that such a campaign is determined by the activists at the plants – they need to be the ones to decide how to proceed. They won’t be keen merely to carry out a campaign that a head office apparatus outside the plant has come up with. But they already have too much to do.’ (S1).
POSSIBLE ELEMENTS OF A BROAD-BASED SOCIAL CAMPAIGN FOR A COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT AT AMAZON

The effectiveness of strike actions at Amazon is limited for a number of reasons. It is unlikely that the demands for a collective agreement can be enforced by exerting operational pressure at the plants alone. The dispute, therefore, needs to be brought into the public eye. It is possible to draw on experiences from past union campaigns in that regard.

The union’s greatest trump cards are the shop stewards at the Amazon distribution centres. They have increased in number since the start of the dispute, and can form the backbone of a broad-based social alliance to campaign for co-determination and employee rights at the online retailer. Elements of a potential public relations campaign are elaborated below.

PROPOSITION 1:
It was only possible to engage in and successfully expand the industrial action at Amazon because ver.di has systematically and aggressively engaged in establishing union organising at the distribution centres since 2011. The rank-and-file support of workplace activists, which has increased both quantitatively and qualitatively in the course of that process, is the union’s greatest trump card and needs to form the focus of a possible future alliance campaign.

Despite unfavourable conditions, ver.di has achieved incredible results at Amazon in recent years in several respects. Nineteen years after the company was founded, it was employees in Germany who first demanded a collective agreement by taking strike action. The strike movement is not a defensive battle (as was the case with many of the major strikes in recent years) but rather an active, offensive attempt to establish the wage and working conditions of the Amazon employees under a collective agreement. Since Amazon persistently refused wage negotiations and firmly rejects the cooperative regulation mechanisms that are standard in Germany (according to the concept of a ‘social partnership’), ver.di was forced to rely on the aggressive organisation of wage earners at the plants. It has managed to establish an active, often creative and combative rank-and-file trade union base at almost all the FCs within two years.

Several factors contributed to that success. First, the union made a relevant ‘strategic choice’ in around 2011 (cf. Chapter 4.2). Additional human resources were limited, but, as illustrated by the case of Bad Hersfeld, the staff were receptive to ver.di’s organising drive. It unleashed the staff’s potential for protest, which fuelled the establishment of workplace union groups. That succeeded because the responsible union secretaries saw their task not just as ‘recruiting membership’, but as reinforcing and supporting the employees’ own commitment (Empowerment).

The situation at Amazon therefore differs from other disputes in the service sector owing to the relatively high degree of ‘independence’ of the union rank-and-file members, at least at some FCs. That manifests itself, for example, in intensive cooperation with local
solidarity groups, as well as a high degree of autonomy concerning decisions on types of strike action, putting mobilisation topics on the agenda at the workplace and efforts to establish relations with other sites, including those abroad. There is a reciprocal relationship between the trade union rank-and-file base and union headquarters officials, which is of mutual benefit. That relationship is far from conflict-free, but nevertheless one of the movement’s most important resources.

PROPOSITION 2:
The trade union work at Amazon, which is geared to the development of politically strong and trustworthy autonomous shop steward and activist structures at the plants, could serve as a model for other sectors that, as of yet, have only a low degree of unionisation.

Union organising at the Amazon workplaces relies on the presence of numerous ver.di shop stewards at the various sites. They are the ones who assist colleagues if they have problems with advice and deeds, demand that the management makes improvements, coordinate with the union, and recruit members at the plants. As an employee put it: ‘If I have ever had any problems, I always approached the shop stewards and they have helped me’ (AEN3).

All those are originally union tasks and are, in fact, not new at all. Shop stewards (Vertrauensleute) or representatives (Obleute, as they were called before the Second World War) historically formed the ‘backbone of the union movement’ in Germany. It was not until social partnerships formed in the Federal Republic of Germany that works councils, which were given a strong legal position, successively took charge of what were originally trade union tasks. In many cases, shop steward structures become appendages to the statutory co-determination councils. That remains the case at large-scale companies with a high degree of unionisation, such as in the metal and chemical industries, where relations based on social partnership are still largely intact. There, the shop steward committees primarily serve to support the works councils. However, in growing sectors where a climate that is hostile to co-determination and unions prevails and where there are no works councils – or, even worse, there are pro-employer works councils – the importance of shop steward structures and workplace activist groups that are capable of taking action is growing.39 In that context, the Amazon system of shop stewards could serve as a model when it comes to promoting the development and expansion of rank-and-file support at the plants.
PROPOSITION 3:
The effectiveness of strike action at Amazon is limited for a number of reasons.
There are serious doubts that the demand for a collective agreement can be attained by means of workplace strikes alone.

After two and a half years of the dispute over the collective agreement, it is clear that it is difficult for ver.di to press Amazon to come to an agreement by causing sufficient economic damage to the company through strike action. Lest there be any misunderstanding, it should be noted the industrial action at Amazon has already been successful.

The wage increases, the Christmas allowance and the numerous non-remuneration-related improvements at the workplace level would not have been achieved, in that form at least, without industrial action. Moreover, for ver.di, strikes are always also a way of recruiting members. Our dialogue partners repeatedly noted how important strikes and other campaigns are in order to make the union visible at the plants. Nevertheless, Amazon stubbornly refuses to even enter into negotiations about the demand for a collective agreement.

Evidently, the possibilities of putting sufficient economic pressure on Amazon through strike action are limited. The trade union’s potential to recruit and mobilise members is limited, owing to the anti-union company climate, as well as the social context in which the company recruits its employees (economically underdeveloped regions, people with gaps in their employment histories, etc.). It should be noted that high union membership rates – 70 or 80 percent, as in some parts of the coal and steel industry or the automotive industry – are, as a rule, only achieved at companies where unions are socially desirable, i.e. where the employer takes a positive attitude towards them (based on the concept of ‘social partnership’).

In addition, the Christmas trade accounts for a good third of Amazon’s annual turnover and its workforce almost doubles during that period. Unsurprisingly, it is extremely difficult for ver.di to motivate seasonal workers with fixed-term contracts to participate in industrial action. Moreover, the network of FCs allows orders to be shifted between the various sites. Most recently, Amazon has begun relocating orders to eastern Europe, and is doing so increasingly frequently. That allows Amazon to at least partially absorb the impact of strikes.

Attempts to increase the effectiveness of the strikes are still in the early stages and will require a stronger interdisciplinary coordination between the various sections of ver.di. The link with the DHL strike in spring 2015 presented an opportunity, but more could certainly have been made of it. Nevertheless, initial experience was acquired, which needs to be built upon. The same applies to blockades and other forms of campaign that are designed to disrupt operations at the FCs.
PROPOSITION 4:
To be successful, the conflict with Amazon must go beyond the shop floor. The circumstances are conducive to that.

The road to success in disputes over collective agreements is not necessarily achieved solely through the conflict at the plants. In fields in which unions are at a disadvantage owing to low membership rates or production power, it is worthwhile to think about alternative ways of putting increased economic pressure on companies or industries. As Wilfried Schwetz, an expert in strategic research in the context of union organising, stresses: ‘A company does not just consist of employees and the management as polar opposites, but is involved with its surroundings in diverse ways. It has relations with owners and investors, banks and insurers, customers and suppliers, the media and the public. That results in numerous variables that determine the functioning and success of a company.’ (Schwetz 2013: 202)

One possibility is to systematically damage the company’s public reputation by drawing attention to scandalous conditions, thereby forcing the company onto the back foot. Such measures are also referred to as ‘shaming’ or pressure campaigns. Retail companies and brand manufactures are more vulnerable to such campaigns than, say, supplier companies or industrial service providers. Amazon can certainly be put under pressure in such a manner, since the company sells to consumers and is at least partially reliant on its image. Damage to its image can result in revenue losses. Ver.di could build on that.

It is not difficult to identify scandalous conditions and scandalous conduct at Amazon, since much of Amazon’s corporate policy is undoubtedly unacceptable in the eyes of large sections of the public. That applies equally to performance pressure, the lacking health protection and data protection, tax evasion, subsidy chasing (‘subsidy tourism’), the ousting of retailers from city centres and the ‘aggressive growth strategy’ by which the company makes publishing houses and authors dependent on it. In short, the company makes enemies wherever it goes. There is therefore no lack of potential alliance partners or network partners.

Ver.di has played a significant part in the fact that Amazon’s role is predominantly perceived as negative in the national media. That seems to be less successful at the local level. That should not be disregarded, since local reporting is key to how the collective agreement collect is viewed on the ground. Activists and trade unionists frequently complain about the local media’s lack of interest in the dispute and that hardly any positive article is reported about ‘their cause’. It is suspected that Amazon, as a key advertising customer, puts pressure on the media. Although that possibility cannot be dismissed, there are numerous examples of successful regional press work, for example, cases where employees or members of the works council, rather than the union secretary, approach the media. It is important to build on that. Journalists value authenticity, and a call from one of the individuals concerned often generates more interest than an official press release. It is important to take the right tone at the right time. The amazon-verdi.de blog is also an effective instrument for communicating with interested members of the
These experiences need to be systematically built upon in accordance with the principle of participation-focused, mobilising union work.

That also involves the question of which topics to communicate and how. In our view, there is potential to raise greater awareness of the fact that certain aspects of the working conditions are scandalous, as is reflected in the extremely high sickness rates. When attempting to damage Amazon’s public image, such an approach is more likely to be successful than referring to the lack of a collective agreement, which comes across as highly legalistic. For the majority of employees in Germany, that has long become normal, rather than being a scandal. Just 47 percent of employees in western Germany and 28 percent of employees in eastern Germany work at companies that are subject to collective agreements. The fact that a global market leader with turnover of billions regularly and systematically violates employee rights, blackmails its employees and treats them disrespectfully could also form part of a shaming campaign. It would be possible to build on the ‘Campaign against precarious jobs and precarious living’, which was initiated by DIE LINKE (The Left), and has been running since 2014.

Regional and supra-regional alliances with other groups and organisations are a way of providing a broader context to the union demands and objectives thus setting and taking control of the public narrative. Considerable experience has been acquired during the labour dispute in that respect, too. In the federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate, for example, ver.di has worked together successfully for years with church organisations as part of the ‘German Sunday Alliance’ (which campaigns for a work-free Sunday and decent working hours). The alliance played an important role in the Schlecker campaign of 1994/95. In southern Germany in particular, the union has already collaborated successfully with the Catholic Workers Movement (KAB). Such formation of alliances should be extended. The territory of the conflict undoubtedly also encompasses sports clubs, volunteer fire brigades and the like. If ver.di lacks a presence there, Amazon will gain ground, for example if class sets of Kindle e-book readers are distributed at regional schools or kindergartens, or Amazon holds reading and history competitions.

There are also numerous potential alliance partners and network partners at the supra-regional level. An example of that is Oxfam, which launched a campaign for ‘fair trade in tropical fruits’ in October 2015. That campaign is directed against the market power of large supermarket chains. Amazon’s food division Amazon Fresh has not yet started up in Germany, but it could come onto the market as early as 2016. The purchasing practices of major retail chains are in any case fiercely criticised by NGOs, for example in the framework of the ‘Supermarket power’ alliance, which ver.di participates in.

An obvious measure would be to foster solidarity within ver.di across the various sections. As noted in Chapter 2, Amazon has business segments that touch on six different sections at ver.di (media, art and industry/telecommunications, IT and data processing/postal services, forwarding companies and logistics/transport/special services). In addition to the international umbrella association UNI Global Union, the International Transport Workers’ Federation in the past year also put the fight for collective agree-
ments at Amazon high on its agenda. Such policy decisions need to be followed up with specific action. Just as important would be to call for specific solidarity from the sister unions in the DGB, for example from IG Metall in Leipzig. IG Metall has a wealth of experience in unionising workers with precarious employment at industrial service providers that supply the largest automobile manufacturers, BMW and Porsche.

The company’s policy of tax avoidance and ‘subsidy tourism’ are also topics that should be addressed as part of a ‘shaming campaign’. Like other global corporations, Amazon exploits loopholes and avoids payment of domestic taxes on profits. It does so by diverting its German company profits to the low-tax country of Luxembourg. The corporation founded Amazon Services Europe SARL, Amazon Europe Holding Technologies SCS and Amazon EU SARL there in 2003 and 2004. Amazon changed its strategy in May 2015, not least owing to massive international criticism of that model. Since then, the company has recorded its German sales in Germany, rather than in Luxembourg. Here strategic research would be required to identify exactly how the new model works and how much tax is paid (and where). It would also be worth thoroughly researching the topic of the subsidies that Amazon receives from national and EU funds, for example when it established plants in the Polish Special Economic Zones. There is too little public awareness of that issue and it undoubtedly has the potential to create a scandal.

PROPOSITION 5:
Experiences to date with union public relations campaigns have shown that they can be effective, but are not without risk. Bearing in mind the different backgrounds of the labour disputes, a lot can be learned from past campaigns at Schlecker and Lidl.

Ver.di has a wealth of both good and bad experiences thanks to the Schlecker campaign of 1994/95 and the campaign launched against the discount food retailer Lidl at the end of 2004. While the Schlecker campaign was seen as an outright success, opinions were divided over the Lidl campaign, in particular because the aim of establishing (ver.di) works councils was only achieved to a limited extent. Of course the conditions at Amazon are different, starting with the fact that ver.di already has union structures at Amazon that are highly active in many cases, whereas that was not true of the two discount chains. Nevertheless, several lessons can be learnt from experiences at Schlecker and Lidl.

A significant problem with pressure campaigns is the struggle to get employees to accept the trade union. In the case of the Lidl campaign, the sharp criticism of the company’s approach by external actors seems to have exacerbated the deterrent effect that the company’s anti-union stance had in any case on a large proportion of the staff. In addition, Bormann refers to the difference between the two campaigns in terms of the formation of alliances: While in the Schlecker campaign all the alliance partners supported the union demands, in the case of Lidl a parallel campaign was conducted by attac and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs). That led, on the one hand, to the company having to contend with more adversaries. On the other hand, it also allowed Lidl to play the various campaigns off against one another.
Both aspects are important with respect to a possible campaign at Amazon. In the case of a broad network, particular care should be taken that clear agreements have been reached between those concerned and that potential sources of tension are identified at an early stage. The topic of surveillance, for example, presents the possibility of working together with data privacy specialists, with whom there might not be much common ground with respect to other core union topics. Here, it is important that one be prepared for the potential fragility of such an alliance if the company makes selective concessions, as was the case with some development policy NGOs at Lidl when the discount chain suddenly included Transfair products in its range.

However, it is necessary to bear in mind the risks that a public pressure campaign holds in terms of the situation on the shop floor. Although there is strong rank-and-file union support at the company, Amazon is still able to turn significant sections of the workforce against the union. It is important to appreciate that, at best, shifts in the balance of power can be achieved. However, while the company maintains its underlying anti-union attitude, its workforces will remain divided. In our view, given that context, it would be important to draw attention to specific, concrete scandalous circumstances and conduct during a shaming campaign, without demonising the company in an abstract sense. If Amazon is stylized as the worst possible employer ever, such a depiction would likely to be rejected by a large proportion of the staff and, in any case, would not reflect their perception of reality. The message, therefore, could be that Amazon employees work well, so they also have earned good working conditions. They should be presented not as the victims of an overpowering multinational corporation, but rather as having proven, at least in part, that they can fight for their rights with confidence, pluck and solidarity.


Gall, Gregor (2004): Union Busting at Amazon.com in Britain, at: www.word-power.co.uk/viewPlatform.php?id=23


Stone, Brad (2013): Der Allesverkäufer. Jeff Bezos und das Imperium Amazon [The everything store. Jeff Bezos and the age of Amazon], Frankfurt/Main.


Since our pamphlet was published in December 2015, 6,200 print copies have been ordered (as at November 2016), and the PDF has been downloaded 450 times. Two editions have since been published. We would never have anticipated such high demand. Meanwhile, the strike action by the Amazon workforce is entering its fourth year. Although the company is still unwilling to enter into talks about a collective agreement, the labour dispute has achieved a great deal. In conjunction with the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, we therefore decided to update the pamphlet to include events through late summer 2016. We wish to thank our dialogue partners, especially Thomas Voss from ver.di, for their constructive approach and assistance.

For a number of years, there has been increasing debate about the weakened role of strike action as a means of putting union pressure on companies. Renneberg argues that ‘the strongest weapon increasingly threatens to become the blunt instrument of the collective agreement dispute’ in fields such as retail, healthcare and nursing care (Renneberg 2014: 216ff.).

The term ‘fulfilment’, which is used not only at Amazon, but also in e-commerce more generally, deliberately means more than just ‘distribution’. The connotation of ‘fulfilment’, i.e. the idea that the wishes of customers are fulfilled, is certainly intentional.

Sabrina Apicella, who studied working conditions and the motivation to strike at Amazon from an ethnological perspective in her Master’s thesis ‘Allen Grund zu streiken? Subjekte im logistischen Einzelhandel am Beispiel von Amazon in Leipzig’ [Every reason to strike? Subjects in the logistical retail industry through the example of Amazon in Leipzig], writes: ‘[…] sales work undergoes a process of real subsumption, characterised by increasing fragmentation into minute components (Taylorism), mechanisation and artificial recombination (outsourcing of customer relations, hierarchies), as well as by complete monitoring and disciplining of the employees. That means that sales work at Amazon differs radically from work in department stores or supermarkets’ (Apicella 2015: 55).

The interview extracts have been given the following codes: ‘AEn’ stands for ‘Amazon employee national’, ‘AEI’ stands for ‘Amazon employee international’, ‘US’ stands for union secretary (ver.di), ‘UI’ stands for union secretary international, ‘EXP’ for expert and ‘S’ for supporter. The figure following that serves the purpose of numbering.

In his book ‘En Amazonie. Infiltré dans le ‹meilleur des mondes›’, which was published in 2013, the French journalist Jean-Baptiste Malet describes his experiences as a contract worker at Amazon in Montélimar, France during the Christmas rush in 2012. Cf. also http://jetzt.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/580610/Die-Roboter-von-Amazonien.

See ‘Presse Info 45’ (Press release no. 45) of the German Federal Employment Agency (2014). We are not aware to what extent the establishment of barrier-free workplaces was subsidised by public funds.

Employees have to go through the security gates even on the way to the common rooms. ‘I work my socks off and am constantly under suspicion’ (AEn3).

The massive expansion of distribution capacity in the UK is also seen by UNI Global Union experts as a response to increasing trade union protests in France and Germany (UI1).
The majority of the Amazon employees are ‘pickers and packers’. The ‘pickers’ collect the goods from the shelves, while the ‘packers’ package them.


‘When they have been specifically requested by anyone, and there has not been many of them, they have written letters and they have put them on headed paper – all the letters were signed by employees.’ (The Guardian, 11.09.2001).

By comparison, at logistics companies bound by collective agreements, hourly wages are around GBP 12. Tesco, the largest retailer, pays between GBP 8 and 10 (UI3).

With its growing proportion of fixed-term contracts, Amazon is far from alone in the UK. As the Financial Times reported, the number of people with part-time jobs in the UK has risen by 20 percent in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis (Financial Times, 8 February 2013).

According to IP’s figures, 1,605 permanent employees and 496 contract workers voted yes, 39 permanent employees and ten contract workers voted no, and nine votes were invalid. Yes votes accounted for 97.3 percent of the total votes. Cf. http://www.www.ozzip.pl/english-news/item/2138-amazon-polen-ueber-2000-beschaeftigte-wollen-streiken

‘We agree with many of the demands, but are dubious about the methods and the confrontational approach. We mustn’t expose our colleagues to job losses or reprisals by the employer. […] The management and the union should cooperate as partners and strive for improved functioning of the plant and strengthening of ties between the workers and the company in a spirit of mutual respect. […] Nevertheless, we consider many of the demands made by OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza to be correct and important […]. We are concerned, however, by the methods of implementation, the overhasty decisions, deliberate confrontation with the employer and campaigns that are verging on illegality.’ Grzegorz Cisoń, Chairman of Solidarność’s Workplace Committee at Amazon in Poland (Cisoń 2015)

Under the heading ‘The true face of Solidarność’, IP argued that Solidarność is ‘doing nothing but stabbing workers in the back, while the Amazon management is taking retaliatory action’ (OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza 2015).

Until now, anyone visiting amazon.pl has been redirected to a European site with the possibility of choosing between the German, British, French, Italian and Spanish sites.

www.paiz.gov.pl/investment_support/sez/tarnobrzeg
http://contact.bpcc.org.pl/Issue19/views/articles/TarnobrzegSEZ.aspx

The network of Polish Special Economic Zones and Sub-Zones is opaque and borders and regulations are constantly being modified. The Kostrzyn–Slubice Special Economic Zone, for example, was extended into the Poznań region in 2014 in order to encourage Volkswagen AG to establish a plant there.

In September 2015, according to the figures of the Solidarność union, there were 1,682 employees at WRO 1; 3,420 employees at WRO 2; and 4,089 employees at POZ 1. According to the figures, the majority of the employees were hired via temp agencies (UL4).

https://www.verdi.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/++co++9dd4695e-0e11-11e6-8545-5254008a33df

The remuneration is barely above the statutory minimum wage of € 9.61 per hour, which corresponds to around € 1,480 per month for a 35-hour week.
UNI Commerce is a sector of UNI Global Union.

See Amazon's own logistics blog at www.amazon-logistikblog.de/2013/12/20/ueber-1-000-unterschriften-mitarbeiter-rufen-zur-aktion-auf/

www.facebook.com/groups/573527646052276/?fref=ts and www.facebook.com/groups/597740920241561/?fref=ts

The fact that the working conditions at an employer like Amazon now seem not only acceptable, but even desirable to significant sections of the working-age population in many regions of Germany is by no means a matter of course or the result of coincidental economic disparities in geographical terms, but rather the logical result of deliberate political decisions, in particular deregulation of the labour market by the Agenda 2010 policy and the Hartz legislation under the Schröder/Fischer government from 1998 to 2005.

In fact, Amazon is not the owner of the FCs. Instead it leases them, often under ten-year contracts. The majority of the Amazon FCs were developed and built by the Australian Goodman Group, which Amazon has worked together with since 2006. Since then, FCs have been established in Germany, France, the UK and Poland. Goodman mostly acts as a property manager and places the properties in investment funds (Logistik-heute.de, 29.10.2014).

The newspaper Argument. Infos für ver.di Mitglieder und Interessierte [Argument. Information for ver.di members and the interested public] is published by ver.di shop stewards at Amazon in Bad Hersfeld.

During the industrial cleaner strike in 2009, for example, IB BAU managed to achieve significant wage increases despite low market power and relatively weak leverage owing to its low membership rate. The former IG-BAU chairman Klaus Wiesehügel believes that was largely due to public opinion. ‘The management likely agreed to the compromise because they wanted to put an end to the negative reporting as soon as possible.’ (quoted from Behruz 2015: 48).

Examples of that are IG BAU’s mobilising approach to union work in the industrial cleaning trade, IG Metall’s successful organising drive in the wind power plant construction industry (Wetzel 2013) and at contractor companies in the Leipzig automotive industry (IG Metall 2015).
The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is an internationally operating, left non-profit organisation for civic education affiliated with Germany’s “Die Linke” (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social and political processes and developments worldwide.

The context in which we work is the growing multiple crisis of our current political and economic system. In cooperation with other progressive organizations around the globe, we work on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development. Our international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programmes, and projects conducted together with partner institutions.

In order to be able to mentor and coordinate these various projects, the foundation has established 17 regional offices around the world. The Brussels Office opened its door in 2008. Its main task is to connect left and progressive movements, activists and scholars from Europe and world regions.

We work in favour of a more just world system based on international solidarity.
Just as Amazon defines the ‘working conditions of the digital era’ (Frank Bsirske, ver. di) in its logistics facilities, the dispute over collective agreements at the company also serves as a kind of ‘laboratory of resistance’ for future trade union responses to the negative implications of the digitalised working world. Here, it can and must be learned what shape union resistance can take in the boom industries of the 21st century and beyond, when it comes to preventing the worsening of conditions to the detriment of wage earners.