

Secret Amazon Reports Expose the Company's Surveillance of Labor and Environmental Groups

Friday 27 November 2020, by [GURLEY Lauren Kaori](#) (Date first published: 23 November 2020).

Dozens of leaked documents from Amazon's Global Security Operations Center reveal the company's reliance on Pinkerton operatives to spy on warehouse workers and the extensive monitoring of labor unions, environmental activists, and other social movements.

A trove of more than two dozen internal Amazon reports reveal in stark detail the company's obsessive monitoring of organized labor and social and environmental movements in Europe, particularly during Amazon's "peak season" between Black Friday and Christmas. The reports, obtained by Motherboard, were written in 2019 by Amazon intelligence analysts who work for the Global Security Operations Center, the company's security division tasked with protecting Amazon employees, vendors, and assets at Amazon facilities around the world.

The documents show Amazon analysts closely monitor the labor and union-organizing activity of their workers throughout Europe, as well as environmentalist and social justice groups on Facebook and Instagram. They also indicate, and an Amazon spokesperson confirmed, that Amazon has hired Pinkerton operatives—from [the notorious spy agency](#) known for its union-busting activities—to gather intelligence on warehouse workers.

Internal emails sent to Amazon's Global Security Operations Center obtained by Motherboard reveal that all the division's team members around the world receive updates on labor organizing activities at warehouses that include the exact date, time, location, the source who reported the action, the number of participants at an event (and in some cases a turnout rate of those expected to participate in a labor action), and a description of what happened, such as a "strike" or "the distribution of leaflets." Other documents reveal that Amazon intelligence analysts keep close tabs on how many warehouse workers attend union meetings; specific worker dissatisfactions with warehouse conditions, such as excessive workloads; and cases of warehouse-worker theft, from a bottle of tequila to \$15,000 worth of smart watches.

The documents offer an unprecedented look inside the internal security and surveillance apparatus of a company that has vigorously attempted to tamp down employee dissent and has previously been caught [smearing employees](#) who attempted to organize their colleagues. Amazon's approach of dealing with its own workforce, labor unions, and social and environmental movements as a threat has grave implications for its workers' privacy and ability to join labor unions and collectively bargain—and not only in Europe. It should also be concerning to both customers and workers in the United States and Canada, and around the world as the company expands into Turkey, Australia, Mexico, Brazil, and India.

Amazon intelligence analysts appear to gather information on labor organizing and social

movements to prevent any disruptions to order fulfillment operations. The new intelligence reports obtained by Motherboard reveal in detail how Amazon uses social media to track environmental activism and social movements in Europe—including Greenpeace and Fridays For Future, environmental activist [Greta Thunberg's global climate strike movement](#)—and perceives such groups as a threat to its operations. In 2019, Amazon monitored the Yellow Vests movement, also known as the *gilet jaunes*, a grassroots uprising for economic justice that spread across France—and solidarity movements in Vienna and protests against state repression in Iran.

The stated purpose of one of these documents is to “highlight potential risks/hazards that may impact Amazon operations, in order to meet customer expectation.”

“Like any other responsible business, we maintain a level of security within our operations to help keep our employees, buildings, and inventory safe,” Lisa Levandowski, a spokesperson for Amazon told Motherboard. “That includes having an internal investigations team who work with law enforcement agencies as appropriate, and everything we do is in line with local laws and conducted with the full knowledge and support of local authorities. Any attempt to sensationalize these activities or suggest we’re doing something unusual or wrong is irresponsible and incorrect.”

Levandowski denied that Amazon hired on-the-ground operatives, and said that any claim that Amazon performs the described activities across its operations worldwide was “N/A.”

In a report from November 2019, however, an analyst wrote that Amazon hired Pinkerton spies who were “inserted” into a warehouse in Wroclaw, Poland, to investigate an allegation that management coached job candidates on how to complete job interviews and possibly even conducted the process for them.

The Pinkerton spies were posted in a Wroclaw warehouse known as WRO1, operated by the Amazon contractor ADECCO, to investigate the allegation, according to the Amazon report. “PINKERTON operatives were inserted into WRO1 ADECCO between 2019-11-19 and 2019-11-21. No identifiable evidence of coaching on behalf of the agency recruiters was observed,” the document states. “Investigative actions to prove/disprove this hypothesis are ongoing.”

The report refers to the Pinkerton Detective Agency, which in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States [supplied detectives](#) to infiltrate unions and hired violent goon squads to intimidate workers from engaging in union activity in steel mills. Today, Pinkerton is a subsidiary of the Swedish security company Securitas AB, and has [supplied operatives](#) to monitor strikes in West Virginia as recently as 2018.

Levandowski, the Amazon spokesperson, confirmed that Amazon hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency. “We have business partnerships with specialist companies for many different reasons—in the case of Pinkerton, to secure high-value shipments in transit,” she said. “We do not use our partners to gather intelligence on warehouse workers. All activities we undertake are fully in line with local laws and conducted with the full knowledge and support of local authorities.”

Some of the internal reports obtained by Motherboard also suggest that Amazon’s risk analysts use the same tactics to monitor its hundreds of thousands of warehouse and delivery drivers throughout the Americas, the Middle East, Australia, and East Asia.

“It’s not enough for Amazon to abuse its dominant market power and face antitrust charges by the EU; now they are exporting 19th century American union-busting tactics to Europe,” Christy Hoffman, general secretary of UNI Global Union, a global federation of trade unions that represents more than 20 million workers, told Motherboard. “This is a company that is ignoring the law, spying

on workers, and using every page of the U.S. union-busting playbook to silence workers' voices."

"For years people have been comparing Big Tech bosses to 19th century robber barons," she continued. "And now by using the Pinkertons to do his dirty work, [Amazon CEO Jeff] Bezos is making that connection even clearer."

In October, Leïla Chaibi, a member of European Parliament from France, [wrote a letter to Bezos](#) co-signed by 37 members of European Parliament, condemning recent reports about Amazon's interference with worker organizing in Europe.

"With Jeff Bezos, we're confronted with someone who doesn't simply run a business and sell products but with someone who is threatening our democracy," Chaibi told Motherboard in response to the new reports about Amazon's surveillance of workers and social movements throughout Europe. "This is a big danger to Europe."

"These reports suggest that corporations like Amazon stand in the way of democracies and economies that work for everyone, and that we have every reason to be concerned," said Dania Rajendra, the director of Athena, a coalition of dozens of grassroots organizations in the United States aligned against Amazon. "We have every right to expect that our elected officials will take this information and protect communities who are harmed by Amazon."

Until recently, little had been made public about Amazon's anti-worker initiatives and strategies—despite years of reports on [Amazon's opposition to union activity](#) and [alleged retaliation against workers](#) who organize in the United States. In September, after public outcry, Amazon [removed two job postings](#) for intelligence analysts for its Global Security Operations Center who could track "labor organizing threats" to the company. "Fluency (written and spoken) of a second language such as Hindi, Tagalog, Spanish, Arabic, French, Mandarin, Korean, Japanese or Brazilian Portuguese highly desired," the posting read, suggesting the company is tracking labor organizing activity around the world.

UNI Europa, a branch of UNI Global Union, which represents 2 million workers in the European Union, [responded](#) to news of the job posts by demanding that the European Commission investigate Amazon's effort to spy on workers in Europe, calling it "potentially illegal."

A source with knowledge of the company's intelligence activities told Motherboard that in order to track protests and other labor organizing activity, Amazon intelligence agents create social media accounts without photos and track the online activity of workers leading organizing efforts. Motherboard granted the source anonymity because they feared retaliation from Amazon.

"When that team stalked people, they'd use fake accounts on social media," they said. "They'd use a fake name and a profile with no photo. The worst part is that they read tons of conversations and messages, and knew everything about the private lives of these people. They knew if they had a bad day with their family."

Levandowski, the spokesperson for Amazon, said it is against company policy to create social media accounts with fake names and photo-less profiles.

A team within Amazon's Global Security Operation Center, which includes former military intelligence analysts, according to LinkedIn, closely tracks organized labor and union activity in France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Germany, Poland, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—noting where organized labor groups are strongest and could influence Amazon workers.

In one set of documents, known as "security risk assessments," analysts gather data on and evaluate

potential risks to Amazon operations at the sites of future and currently operating Amazon warehouses, sorting centers, and delivery stations. These documents break down their analyses into at least four categories: crime, cargo crime, extremism and terrorism, and operational environment. For example, as part of its tracking of crime, analysts monitor the drug trade, noting how it could impact its warehouses but also specifically whether its workers are likely to be drug users. Requests for risk assessments of Amazon warehouse sites are sent to the team by email, according to an email viewed by Motherboard.

The “operational environment” category of Amazon’s risk assessments covers labor activities, such as the presence of unions as well as protests and demonstrations and civil disobedience and unrest in areas where Amazon has warehouses or plans to build them, according to the documents. Each category is assigned one of five color-coded “risk ratings” “negligible,” “low,” “moderate,” “high,” or “critical.” The chart defines “critical” risk as “a strong possibility that the threat source will engage in an action that has potential to impact Amazon associates, business continuity, or assets.”

In one report from October 2019, an Amazon warehouse in the exurbs of Paris, known as DIF4, was deemed a “moderate” risk in the operational environment category. Although no unions had presence in Amazon logistics warehouses in France, so-called “anarcho-syndicalist groups,” including the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU), one of France’s most powerful trade unions, “had attempted to garner the support Paris-based [Amazon Logistics] associates in the past.” The report noted that “such campaigns remain rare, limited in scope, and ultimately unsuccessful.”

Two months later, in December 2019, warehouse workers at DIF4, in conjunction with CGTU, [shut off power to the warehouse](#) for eight hours in protest of the hiring of temporary workers, forcing a line of unfilled Amazon trucks to sit on the side of the highway for hours, according to a [report in Le Parisien](#).

In two reports, the future site of Amazon warehouses on the outskirts of Milan and on the island of Sardinia in Italy were deemed a “moderate” risk in the operational environment category partly because trade unions, including CFGIL and Uiltrasporti, held protests on the sites of other Italian warehouses on behalf of their workers.

“Until now, these labor actions are not of a large enough scale to significantly compromise Amazon operations or to create extensive delivery delays,” the reports said. “However, strike actions often take place unannounced or at very short notice.”

Two other reports from late 2019 on future warehouse sites in Lower Saxony and Bavaria in Germany highlighted the presence of the labor union Verdi (the union has led many multi-city strikes in Germany, including [one on Prime Day in October](#) of this year) and the increasing presence of environmentalist groups, including Greenpeace, Extinction Rebellion, and Greta Thunberg’s youth-led environmentalist group Friday For Future, as a threat, noting that Fridays For Future was “increasing their influence especially on young people and students” and “growing and attracting more and more people rapidly.”

While Thunberg’s movement hasn’t specifically targeted Amazon, her call for a Global Climate Strike in 2019 [inspired hundreds of corporate Amazon employees](#) to stage [their own walkout](#) in protest of Amazon’s climate policies.

“We are flattered that Amazon considers us a threat great enough to justify employing questionable practices like this,” Fridays For Future told Motherboard in a statement, responding to the news. “The fact that the youth protesting around the world is something that a multinational corporation

feels the need to be surveilling—that means what we’re doing is working.”

Since Amazon posted job listings for two intelligence agents who could track “labor organizing threats,” journalists have obtained more documents that reveal some of the sophisticated technology and strategies the company has used to surveil its workforce and gain intelligence on worker organizing. In September, Motherboard [obtained evidence](#) that Amazon had been using a social media monitoring tool to spy on dozens of private Facebook groups for Amazon Flex drivers in the United States and Europe. Last month, a [report in Recode](#) revealed that Amazon has made significant investments in a new geospatial tool that tracks threats to the company. Out of 40 or so data points Amazon that tracks at least half are labor or employee-related, including “Whole Foods Market Activism/Unionization Efforts,” “union grant money flow patterns,” and “Presence of Local Union Chapters and Alt Labor Groups.”

In October, four U.S. senators, including Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, responded to these reports in a letter to Jeff Bezos [demanding Amazon stop](#) “actively interfering with workers’ rights by tracking and monitoring employees who might exercise their rights to freedom of association.”

“Amazon needs to stop with the empty words, tell the truth about its failures to keep workers safe, and stop undermining its workers’ legal right to organize,” Warren said of the new reports obtained by Motherboard. “Until then, I won’t stop fighting for these workers, their rights, and their safety.”

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden and Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown, [who also recently wrote a letter to Bezos](#) requesting information about Amazon’s interference with workers’ right to organize, sent statements to Motherboard condemning Amazon’s interference with workers’ right to organize and the findings in the new reports.

“Amazon’s spying on its own employees is especially odious,” Wyden said. “It’s exhibit A for the need to pass new laws that would beef up federal protections for labor organizing and hold bad actors accountable.”

“The magnitude of this surveillance, the lengths to which Amazon has gone to keep it hidden from its own workers, and its admitted purpose are extremely disturbing,” said Sen. Brown.

“The fact that Amazon has decided to heavily invest in systems and efforts to avoid unionization rather than improve the wages, hours, and working conditions of its employees demonstrates its reckless disregard for the welfare of its workforce,” Brown continued.

A second type of report written by Amazon intelligence analysts, called the Monthly Business Review, is broken down into sections by region detailing “highlights” and “lowlights” from each month, and how Amazon handled various threats to its operations spotted by the intelligence team that month. Amazon described its use of Pinkerton spies in this type of report.

In the same report that mentioned the Pinkertons, an analyst explained that after receiving intelligence that then-UK Labour Party leader [Jeremy Corbyn had plans to visit an Amazon warehouse](#), known as DXS1, in Sheffield, Yorkshire in late November 2019, Amazon sent in security officers and members of its Security & Loss Prevention team to monitor the site. In a speech, Corbyn [promised workers](#) outside the Amazon warehouse that he would “tackle wage and cheat culture” at multinational corporations in the United Kingdom.

“No unauthorized access was granted to anyone during the visit and one member of the public was prevented from entering the building by onsite security,” the report said of Corbyn’s visit to the site.

In 2019, the same report states, Amazon warehouse workers redeemed \$37,900 worth of customer

gift cards in the United Kingdom, and that six of those employees were identified and fired. In Poland, Amazon “off-boarded” two employees suspected of writing threats “on inventory packaging and in bin locations” that “implied that the author would make a deliberate and malicious attempt to ignite” the warehouse.

For each region, data is also provided on Amazon’s loss of inventory in dollars, the total amount of inventory recovered in dollars, the number of arrests and persons of interest fired and investigated, and the number of stolen vehicles. In October 2019, for example, the report states that Amazon lost \$173,339.80 worth of inventory in the United Kingdom but regained \$131,592.05 of those losses. In the span of that month, four UK employees were arrested, 35 employees “of interest” were “offboarded,” and 31 delivery vehicles were stolen.

Employees of Amazon’s Global Security Operations also appear to receive regular email updates about the labor organizing activity of workers.

One email obtained by Motherboard included a description of an hourlong incident on March 10, 2020. “Two members of CGT Union [one of France’s most powerful unions]” who were also Amazon warehouse workers “distributed leaflets in front of turnstiles” at an Amazon fulfillment center in Amiens, France. The email includes both the exact time of the leaflet distribution as well as the time it was reported to Amazon, and the name of a cluster loss prevention manager who initially reported the incident. “The distribution of leaflets ended and the activists left the site with no impact to operations,” the email said.

Another email obtained by Motherboard included a description of a warehouse strike in Leipzig, Germany, on February 28, 2020. According to the email, 339 Amazon associates were assumed on strike, which included no workers in lead positions and was “46.37% of expected” turnout.

Another set of reports, known as “peak-risk assessments,” document threats to Amazon between Black Friday and the end of the year. It has become [typical for workers across Europe](#) to stage mass strikes against Amazon between Black Friday and Christmas, when Amazon workers experience [the highest injury rates](#) and the workload becomes especially grueling.

‘Peak season’ documents obtained by Motherboard list all potential events that could impact Amazon operations. During this time, Amazon creates lists of dates, times, and the number of participants for protests planned in each country in Europe where Amazon operates, data seemingly gathered from events pages on social media.

The source with knowledge of Amazon’s Global Security Operations surveillance practices told Motherboard that in 2019 analysts were sent to France to monitor the activity of the Yellow Vests social movement in an attempt to gain information about where they would stage their protests.

A report on the 2019 peak season that mentioned Amazon believed there were ties between Amazon warehouse workers and Yellow Vests in Paris said, “Protests in Paris are planned, both by striking union members and [Yellow Vests], on 7 December. A march is planned by Yellow Vest activists [sic] from Bercy at 1130 CET to porte de Versailles via Austerlitz, Denfert, Place de la Catalogne and porte de Vanves. It is unclear whether striking unions will participate in the same march organized by [Yellow Vests] but it is expected of them to join starting at Montparnasse.”

A report on peak season risks to Amazon in Italy, deeming the risk level “moderate,” chronicles in detail ongoing union activities of its warehouse workers and delivery drivers, noting specific complaints made by delivery drivers and warehouse workers in union negotiations, such as Sunday shifts and excessive workloads, as well as the number of delivery drivers who joined unions and

attended union meetings.

“It was reported that in October at DLO1, 10 DAs [delivery associates] out of 51 became members of the [Italian General Confederation of Labour] and an assembly was organized with 14 green badge DAs attending,” the report reads.

“Potential labor initiatives at Amazon by traditional unions may constitute an attractive opportunity for SiCobas to attend and gain visibility,” it continues, referencing an Italian labor union that has organized Amazon warehouse strikes on Black Friday. “The group is known for more disruptive and subversive protest MOs, although history of previous blockages and disruptive actions showed law enforcement generally react in a timely manner.”

Another one of these reports from 2019 describes the activity of environmental groups in Germany, highlighting information gathered from social media.

“Greenpeace Germany also posted another video featuring Amazon on their social media on [December 5] in a similar style as previous campaigns. The video features a woman asking ‘Alexa’ about the best bargains for Christmas presents, to which ‘Alexa’ responds that they should make their own presents and spend time with family to protect the environment instead of indulging in consumerism,” a report from December 2019 says.

“As of writing, the video has received over 100 likes and has been shared 28 times to date. The video does not call for any direct action or indicate any upcoming protest activity, but future action such as boycott cannot be ruled out. It should be noted that increased social media activity by Greenpeace regarding a company or organization has, on occasions, preceded direct action against that company—this is the 3rd Amazon related post in 2 weeks.”

The international environmental organization [Greenpeace has called out Amazon](#) for its contracts with oil and gas companies, and criticized Bezos’s “climate pledge” in 2019 to reduce net zero carbon emissions by 2040 for failing to account for the carbon footprint of its supply chain. In 2019, Greenpeace protesters [staged a demonstration](#) on the roof of an Amazon warehouse in Germany.

Rolf Skar, campaigns director at Greenpeace USA, told Motherboard, in response to news that Amazon was tracking the activity of the organization, that the company is mistaken in its assessment that Greenpeace is a threat to Amazon.

“We’re not violent. We don’t destroy property,” he said. “Their problem is a lack of climate leadership. I’m not surprised but I’m disappointed that they’re putting energy in the wrong place. We have done a lot of work holding the tech giants accountable for their growing footprint. There’s a lot to suggest progress. But Amazon is an outlier. Amazon has refused to stop using powerful AI technologies to help fossil fuel companies drill around the world and they have a problem with morale internally on this.”

In September 2019, more than one thousand Amazon employees staged a walkout in protest of Amazon’s failure to reduce its carbon emissions and its contracts with oil and gas companies.

The report also shared intelligence on [a December 6, 2019 protest in Vienna](#) in solidarity with protests in Iran over the rising cost of fuel. The report includes an image of the route for the protest obtained from Google maps. “Clear participation rates are not known,” the report reads. “However, no disruption to operations has yet been reported on 6 December.”

In response to allegations that Amazon’s Global Security Operations Centers tracked environmentalist and social justice movements, Levandowski, the spokesperson for Amazon said,

“Like most companies, we have a team of analysts that help prepare for external events such as weather, power outages, or large community gatherings like concerts or demonstrations that could disrupt traffic or affect the safety and security of our buildings and the people who work at them.”

Stefan Clauwaert, a legal and human rights advisor at the European Trade Union Confederation, told Motherboard that Amazon’s intelligence activities could potentially violate EU data collection laws and [labor conventions and standards](#) outlined by the UN’s International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Council of Europe’s European Social Charter, both of which guarantee workers the freedom to associate with unions as well as the right to organize and collectively bargain. The European Union’s 2018 [data privacy law](#), known as the General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR, requires companies to disclose their collection and usage of personal data—and explain why the data is being collected.

“In the EU, we have regulations which protect workers and trade unions,” said Clauwaert. “I can envision many legal avenues for actions against Amazon for these activities, many more than exist in the United States. But what we need to do now is make noise to our bodies about the violations and what Amazon is doing.”

In addition to Chaibi, five other members of the European Parliament, including Emmanuel Maurel of France, Marie Toussaint of France, Younous Omarjee of France, Brando Benifei of Italy, and Manon Aubry of France who signed onto the October letter to Bezos criticizing Amazon’s surveillance of workers, responded to the documents obtained by Motherboard with strong disapproval.

“Amazon’s systemic use of military surveillance methods against unionists and activists is deeply alarming,” said Aubry, who is also a senior member of France’s France Insoumise, France’s main radical left party. “Amazon and Jeff Bezos act as if they were above the law because they have accumulated unprecedented levels of wealth and power. This has to stop.”

“We already knew that the world within Bezos’ [empire] is a world of social suffering and environmental destruction,” Toussaint, another member of European Parliament, said. “Now, it becomes clear that this is also a world with no democracy.”

Hoffman, president of UNI Global Union, which represents more than 20 million trade union workers around the world, says that Amazon’s use of anti-union tactics common in the United States in Europe and around the world is creating a global human rights crisis.

“Most American companies that try to succeed in Europe have adapted to the fact that there are strong unions here. Those that haven’t, such as Walmart and Toy R’ Us have left. But Amazon is an outlier,” she said. “This isn’t the way companies operate in Europe—ignoring the law, spying on workers, using every page of the US union busting playbook, as if they don’t have enough power and money on their own. They need to know they’re not going to get away with that in Europe.”

Lauren Kaori Gurley

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Vice, November 23, 2020, 6:16pm

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dp3yn/amazon-leaked-reports-expose-spying-warehouse-workers-labor-union-environmental-groups-social-movements>