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It’s time to rein in Amazon's empire

The pandemic has made Amazon the most powerful company in the world. We need to put a stop to its harmful practices

The world is entering an era of undeniable change that will be defined by our collective response to the human and economic devastation left by the pandemic. As Covid-19 continues to spread across the globe, Amazon´s rise to the top of the winner-take-all economy is a call to action to progressive forces who still believe in the politics of the common good and are willing to fight for the affirmation of the dignity of work.

As a result of the shutdown of non-essential brick and mortar stores, Amazon has nearly doubled its market valuation to over the USD 1.5 trillion and its third-quarter profits are up 200 per cent year-on-year. In the United States alone, Amazon is expected to cash in a whopping 42 cents of every dollar spent over the holiday period. Jeff Bezos, already the richest man in the world, has become even richer and is expanding his Amazon empire at an unprecedented rate.

The pace of work in an Amazon warehouse has for long been brutal and unforgiving, with work-related injuries far surpassing other similar businesses. But once Covid-19 hit and customers turned to e-commerce, the conditions became even worse. As the volume of orders exploded, social distancing and hand hygiene became incompatible with production goals. Union actions prompted changes to Amazon’s behavior in some European countries, while in others, like the US, workers spoke out about safety only to be dismissed, consistent with Amazon’s anti-union playbook. The biggest pandemic profiteer would fire workers or silence critics rather than fix problems and negotiate with social partners.

Amazon’s empire expands

Just this week, the US federal government issued a complaint against Amazon for firing Courtney Bowden, an Amazon warehouse worker

who advocated for better working conditions. In April, the company fired two tech workers after they called on the company to take urgent climate action. The US news site Vice recently uncovered Amazon's extensive scheme using private investigators to spy on workers, environmentalists and other social leaders who dare to criticisethe company.

These efforts to rein in Amazon and other tech corporations in Europe, the US, and India are a sign that workers, progressive elected officials and civil society can find ways to partner to hold corporations accountable.

The tech giant is not only now an e-commerce force but also a leader in cloud computing, video streaming, virtual assistance, media, physical grocery retail, pharmacy and it has shown ambitions to expand into wireless networks, healthcare and internet service provision. Amazon is not just a threat to workers but also to those who believe in privacy, civil liberties and fair markets. And the company's increasing size makes it easier to steamroll opposing, civil society voices.

The good news is that we are waking up to the danger posed by Amazon. Anti-monopoly regulators and progressive politicians are beginning to take notice of Amazon's growing market dominance and the unfair competition that results for both the sellers on the platform and others in retail. Amazon both manages and makes the rules for its platform and sells its products there, giving it an unfair advantage over every other seller and more influence over our pocketbooks and data every day.

Politicians are ready to act

The European Commission has opened an antitrust investigation arguing that the company is misusing the data of sellers on the platform to its own advantage. The US House Judiciary Committee on Competition in Digital Markets confirmed what many had already said: 'Amazon's pattern of exploiting sellers, enabled by its market dominance, raises serious competition concerns.' In India, the Competition Commission has ordered a probe for alleged violations of competition law, while US lawyers have filed complaints against Amazon's dominant position in e-commerce in several states.

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Just last week, UNI Global Union, Progressive International, Oxfam, Greenpeace, and over 50 civil society organizations, environmentalists, and tax watchdogs joined forces on Black Friday to launch #MakeAmazonPay, an electrifying global campaign to hold Amazon accountable for its debts to workers, societies and the planet. Workers and allies from 15 countries demonstrated in a massive day of action, with unified demands, that has been backed by over 400 lawmakers from 34 countries.

Reining in Amazon is the test of our time

We are hopefully approaching an end to the pandemic, but we are at the beginning of making sure that the post-Covid-19 economy is just and sustainable.

We cannot let a digital giant control our commerce, the infrastructure of information and our data. We cannot let Amazon avoid paying its fair share of the costs of a much-needed recovery paid for by all taxpayers. And we cannot let Amazon refuse to negotiate with unions, impose inhumane production quotas on workers and push small businesses to the brink of collapse.

Our economies will increasingly benefit the rich, powerful and connected at the expense of the rest of us unless we make Amazon respect workers' rights and fair markets, contribute its fair share of taxes and erase its enormous carbon footprint.

In the early 20th century, a broad coalition of civil society took on the monopolistic industrialists that controlled the world's economy, and they won. Our society's ability to rein in Amazon and other robber barons of our age will be the test of our time. A fight that will shape the future of work and our economies.



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