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contemporary monopoly capitalism: a comparative
study of the labour process and industrial relations in
Amazon's logistics network**

Francesco Sabato Massimo

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Institut d'études politiques de Paris
ECOLE DOCTORALE DE SCIENCES PO
Programme doctoral de Sociologie
Centre de sociologie des organisations

Doctorat en Sociologie

Mobilising work and demobilising labour under contemporary monopoly capitalism

*A comparative study of the labour process and industrial relations in
Amazon's logistics network*

Francesco S. Massimo

Thesis supervised by Jérôme Péliasse, Professeur des universités at Sciences Po Paris

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That gum you like is going to come back in style

Twin Peaks, Episode 16 "Arbitrary Law"

1990

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List of Abbreviations

Amazon

AFL	Amazon France Logistique
AFT	Amazon France Transport
AIL	Amazon Italia Logistica
AIT	Amazon Italia Transport
ETP	<i>Equivalent Temps Plein</i> (Full-Time Equivalent)
FC	Fulfillment Center
ICQA	Inventory Control and Quality Assurance
ToT	Time-off-Task

France

CARSAT	<i>Caisse d'assurance retraite et de la santé au travail</i> (Workplace health and pension insurance fund)
CAT	<i>Confédération Autonome du Travail</i> (Autonomous Labour Confederation)
CE	<i>Comité d'Établissement/Comité d'Entreprise</i> (Plant-level/firm-level works council)
CFDT	<i>Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail</i> (French Democratic Confederation of Labour)
CFE-CGC	<i>Confédération Française de l'Encadrement-Confédération Générale des Cadres</i> (French Confederation of Management-General Confederation of Supervisors)
CFTC	<i>Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens</i> (French Confederation of Christian Workers)
CGPME	<i>Confédération Générale des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises</i> (General Confederation of Small and Medium-sized Business)
CGT	<i>Confédération Générale du Travail</i> (General Confederation of Labour)
CGT-FO (or FO)	<i>Confédération Générale du Travail-Force Ouvrière</i> (General Confederation of Labour-Workers' Force)
CHSCT	<i>Comité d'Hygiène, de Sécurité et des Conditions de Travail</i> (Health, safety and working conditions committee)
CNIL	<i>Commission nationale de l'informatique et des libertés</i> (National authority for data protection)
CSE	<i>Comité Social et Économique</i> (Plant-/firm-level works council)
DARES	<i>Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques</i>

	(Research office of the French Minister of Labour)
DP	<i>Délégué du Personnel</i> (Personnel Delegate)
DS	<i>Délégué Syndical</i> (Union Delegate)
DSC	<i>Délégué Syndical Central</i> (Central Union Delegate)
INSEE	<i>Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques</i> (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies)
MEDEF	<i>Mouvement des Entreprises de France</i> (French Business Movement)
NAO	<i>Négociations Annuelles Obligatoires</i> (Annual compulsory firm-level collective bargaining round)
PCF	<i>Parti Communiste Français</i> (French Communist Party)
PS	<i>Parti Socialiste</i> (Socialist Party)
SUD/USS	<i>Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques/Union Syndicale Solidaires</i> (<i>Solidaires</i> , Unitarian, Democratic/ <i>Solidaires</i> Trade Union)
UMP	<i>Union pour un Mouvement Populaire</i> (Union for a Popular Movement)
UNSA	<i>Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes</i> (National Union of Independent Trade Unions)
<i>Italy</i>	
ADL-COBAS	<i>Associazione Diritti Lavoratori-COBAS</i> (Workers' Rights Association-COBAS)
AGCOM	<i>Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni</i> (Italian Communications Regulatory Authority)
AN	<i>Alleanza Nazionale</i> (National Alliance)
CCIA	<i>Contratto Collettivo Integrativo Aziendale</i> (Firm-level Supplementary Collective Agreement)
CCNL/NCLA	<i>Contratto Collettivo Nazionale di Lavoro</i> (National Collective Labour Agreement)
CGIL	<i>Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro</i> (Italian General Confederation of Labour)
CISL	<i>Confederazione Italiana Sindacato Lavoratori</i> (Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions)
FdI	<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i> (Brothers of Italy)

INL	<i>Ispettorato Nazionale del Lavoro</i> (National Labour Inspectorate)
ISTAT	<i>Istituto Nazionale di Statistica</i> (National Institute of Statistics)
MSI	<i>Movimento Sociale Italiano</i> (Italian Social Movement)
PD	<i>Partito Democratico</i> (Democratic Party)
PRC	<i>Partito della Rifondazione Comunista</i> (Communist Refoundation Party)
RLS	<i>Rappresentante dei Lavoratori per la Sicurezza</i> (Union-appointed/worker-elected delegate for safety)
RSA	<i>Rappresentanza Sindacale Aziendale</i> (Union-appointed delegate)
RSU	<i>Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria</i> (Worker-elected delegate)
SI-COBAS	<i>Sindacato Intercategoriale-COBAS</i> (Inter-Sectoral Union-COBAS)
UGL	<i>Unione Generale del Lavoro</i> (General Union of Labour)
UIL	<i>Unione Italiana del Lavoro</i> (Italian Union of Labour)
USB	<i>Unione Sindacale di Base</i> (Base Syndicalist Union)

International

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organizations
AWI	Amazon Workers International
CWA	Communication Workers of America
EWC	European Works Council
POF	Prewitt Organisation Fund
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers
UNI	Uni Global Union
VERDI	<i>Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft</i> (United Services Trade Union)

Introduction

This thesis contributes to the study of one of the largest contemporary companies and perhaps the most representative of contemporary capitalism: Amazon. The main contribution of this thesis is to place labour at the heart of the analysis, showing its centrality in the production of value, even in those giant corporations that are “digital monopolies” (Pagano 2014; C. Durand 2020; 2022; C. Durand and Milberg 2020; Coveri, Cozza, and Guarascio 2022; Rikap 2022; 2023).

With its enormous logistics network and millions of employees scattered across dozens of countries, Amazon is an ideal case study for understanding (1) why these monopolies, despite their “digital” nature, rely on massive physical infrastructures and how this infrastructure depends on wage work, in the case of Amazon, of millions of workers, particularly in logistics warehouses; (2) how Amazon manages this workforce in order to obtain the effort of employees and counter their resistance, but above all how the strategies for mobilising the workforce changes at the same time as the evolution of its profit strategy (3) how the “disruptive” power of digital monopolies unfolds in historical and institutional contexts other than those of the United States, particularly in terms of labour regulations.

Labour and monopoly capital: from consent to (de)mobilisation

Although it has been side-lined in most contemporary political and societal debates, the question of extracting value from labour is not new to the analysis of capitalism.

The most influential attempt is to be found in the work of Michael Burawoy, an American neo-Marxist sociologist inspired by the work of Harry Braverman on the one hand and Antonio Gramsci on the other. Burawoy wrote in the second half of the 1970s, during a period of fertile debate but also of strong contestation of the capitalist system. While the majority of researchers and intellectuals – liberal, conservative or left-wing – were questioning the crisis of capitalism, Burawoy read things against the grain. He saw the stability of capitalism precisely where we might expect the origin of its crisis to be: in the labour process.

The problem of workers’ resistance to capitalist command was one of the questions that experts had been examining at least since the times of Taylor, the theorist of *scientific management*, and then from the 1930s onwards, with the first psychologists and sociologists of work who were wondering why workers were not working hard enough. Although from a different perspective, revolutionary thinkers agreed, theorising the gradual proletarianisation of the masses and the inevitable reversal of class relations at work.

Burawoy, instead, turned the question on its head. By observing daily work and social relations in a Chicago factory that was part of a large monopolistic US-based enterprise, Burawoy emphasised the stability of capitalism. By taking part in production games, competing in the company's internal labour market and joining an institutionalised trade union, workers became "accomplices" in their own exploitation as part of a "political regime of production". In this regime, capital was "hegemonic", a term taken from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, i.e. capable of ensuring the "consent" of wage-earners to their exploitation, without resorting in the first instance to coercion. The hegemonic regime surpassed the "despotic" regime, based on coercion, which had dominated competitive capitalism until the 1930s. The conceptual pairing of consent and coercion had a major influence on subsequent work in the sociology of work, particularly *labour process theory*, in the USA, but also in Europe and the Global South. In the background, the same question resounds: do employees consent to their exploitation? Or are they being forced into it?

Since the publication of his book, *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), American and global capitalism has undergone a profound transformation. Burawoy acknowledged that his emphasis on the stability of monopoly capitalism was quickly contradicted by the global restructuring that has taken place since the 1970s. As early as the mid-1980s, Burawoy was theorising about a new "hegemonic despotism", a regime of production which retained the institutional carcass of Fordist class compromise – the unions, *the collective bargaining*, and all the mechanisms for constructing and reproducing consent – but in a context where the politico-material foundations of social compromise had been undermined by neo-liberalism: free circulation of capital, withdrawal of the state from the economy, free trade and international competition, with the consequent reduction of social protection.

However, while the observation was correct, Burawoy's theoretical response, which consisted in developing new typologies to account for the transformations of capitalism and the labour process, did not solve the problem of understanding contemporary labour regimes. On the contrary, it fuelled a conceptual inflation in the sociology of work and in *labour process theory*, with the continuous development of "new" forms of control: "despotic hegemony" (Sallaz 2004), "hegemonic relational control" (Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova 2022), "flexible despotism" (Wood 2020), "hegemonic flexibility" (Dörflinger, Pulignano, and Vallas 2021). This conceptual explosion fragments the debate and ultimately renders the empirically valuable contributions of this research inaudible. It is also interesting to note that this trend has become more pronounced over the last five years, and that it often concerns sectors such as logistics, including Amazon, or the service economy more generally. It is also important to consider that most research on labour control and production regimes tend to

emphasise more than before the importance of coercion and the decline of consent in class relations at work.

The question raised by this body of research remains that of the conditions of the reproduction of exploitation. And yet, by remaining trapped in the consent-coercion dichotomy, two very abstract notions, scholars are forced to adapt them to social reality, with the result of producing singular descriptions of the labour process which lack the necessary generality.

The research presented here seeks to break the deadlock by going beyond the conceptual couple of consent and coercion as a matrix from which to analyse class relations at work. First, because research on relations of domination, particularly the work of James Scott, has shown the ambiguity of the notions of consent and hegemony. Scott has shown that the absence of open conflict cannot be reduced to a proof of the consent of the dominated to their domination. On the other hand, in Burawoy's work, the same idea of coercion and despotism seems to be reduced to the use of force and physical constraint. This is why they remain confined to "other", implicitly backward configurations, such as the competitive capitalism of the nineteenth century, the various forms of indentured labour or the contemporary sweatshops. These configurations are considered underdeveloped compared to fordist modernity, with its formalised regulatory mechanisms. In fact, Scott's research showed the existence of sophisticated systems of domination also in "backward" contexts, while more recent sociology of work shows a re-emergence of mechanisms of coercion precisely in advanced capitalism.

This thesis seeks to extend this thinking. I propose to replace the conceptual coupling of coercion and consent with that of mobilisation and demobilisation. The two concepts make it possible to explain why, in class relations at work – which are intrinsically antagonist according to political economy and the sociology of work – latent or hidden struggles can coexist with an appearance of social peace.

On the one hand, capitalists have a permanent need to ensure the extraction of value or, according to economists of different traditions, to obtain the effort of workers. In other words, they seek to *mobilise* work, and to do so they use various forms of control, which are all based on coercion. Precisely because the wage relationship in a capitalist mode of production is inherently a relationship of subordination in which coercion ultimately plays a decisive role (Braverman 1974, 57; Burawoy 1978, 259–60).

At the same time, workers resist employers' pressure, because work is not a commodity like any other, and effort must be secured in the very practice of work. This resistance takes different forms depending on the different historical and institutional contexts. They can be collectively organised within (or outside) unions, or "atomised" and individual, like absenteeism or theft. In

Scott's terms, they are part of the "hidden transcript", i.e. strategies of resistance that the dominated and the dominant, for different reasons, have an interest in keeping unnoticed.

Faced with this constant turbulence, capitalists give themselves another priority, which is to repress but also to prevent or inhibit open forms of resistance that might threaten its control over the production process. In other words, capitalists' objective is not to organise consent, which is something elusive in theoretical terms, questionable from a normative point of view, and unstable from a social perspective, but rather to demobilise resistance, particularly in its structured and collective form. In short, it is a matter of, on the one hand, *mobilising work*, while, on the other, *demobilising labour*. This is an imperative of capital in all historic and geographical configurations. From the vantage point of the mobilisation-demobilisation conceptual couple we can avoid the contradictions and reductionisms that would make (1) of despotism a regime based on force, when in fact each labour regime shows elements of consent; (2) of hegemony a regime based on consent, but eventually having to admit that this hegemony is in fact based on a structure of coercion. On the contrary, mobilisation and demobilisation are elements that coexist in theory as well as in practice, and which do not essentialise regimes of production as being based on either one or the other.

Amazon and the plat-fordist paradigm

The post-war crisis of capitalism marked profound changes in the international political system, in national models of capitalism and in the labour process. As a result, the debate about work has also shifted.

The new post-fordist paradigms, which the sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (1999) have analysed critically and summarised as the "new spirit of capitalism", have tried to overcome resistances – these authors call them "critiques" – partly by incorporating them, notably the "critique artiste", claiming freedom, autonomy and authenticity against the bureaucratic elements of post-war capitalism; partly by displacing them, notably the "social critique" based on solidarity, security and equality.

The new "justification regime" of capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s inspired the new production paradigms of lean management, while at the same time consigning the institutions of collective labour regulation, particularly the trade unions, to a bygone era. As communism collapsed, capitalist firms redeployed into global value chains and trade unions weakened, labour as a social activity faded from the public debate and remained as an economic variable of adjustment. The crisis of 2008 and the great recession dampened this enthusiasm, but the new spirit of capitalism has continued its trajectory with the emergence of platform capitalism and *big tech*.

Amazon epitomises these transformations. Founded in 1994 by a former Wall Street executive who converted to the digital economy, Amazon is steeped in the political and economic culture of American capitalism of the 1990s and is the most successful platform model, whether in terms of market capitalisation or revenue.

At the same time, Amazon is the bearer of an economic and employment relations model that are by no means unprecedented. On the contrary, the success of Amazon's business model is based on the revitalisation of certain key elements of Fordism. First and foremost, monopoly. Amazon is a company which, through its platform model (two-sided market), internalises the market within the organisation, thereby creating the conditions for a monopoly. Second, Amazon is a digital monopoly, but it is also a monopoly based on a huge vertically integrated logistics network, from website to distribution. The adoption of digital technologies and algorithms makes it possible not only to plan flows (thanks to the huge volumes processed, uncertainties are reduced, and just-in-time can be managed in a planned way) but also to manage those links in the distribution chain that are still formally outsourced (the "last mile"). Thirdly, Amazon's logistics network is run by millions of employees, most of whom work in a production organisation that has become increasingly taylorised and fordist, with a high degree of standardisation and fragmentation of tasks, ensured by the introduction of digital technology and, more recently, automation.

In this context of hybridisation of the platform and fordist models, which I refer to as "platformism", the problem in front of Amazon is how to mobilise its employees while at the same time demobilising collective action, at a time when the work process is becoming increasingly taylorised, in parallel with the consolidation of the monopoly.

Comparing and playing with scales: research protocol

This problem is becoming increasingly urgent as Amazon has expanded considerably in Europe. In the USA, Amazon has managed to grow and move into mass production without having to face up to the collective organisation of workers – only recently have employees managed to organise themselves collectively, first in a small warehouse in Chicago and then in a large plant in New York. In Europe, instead, Amazon has had to face up to a stronger trade union presence and pressure, to strikes and above all to institutions for the regulation of work which are more restrictive at first sight. This shows the impact that these institutions can have on the way the workforce is mobilised and demobilised.

In France and Italy, in particular, despite its radical anti-union policy, Amazon has had to recognise the existence of trade unions and the organisation of collective employee representation, going so far as to sign collective agreements at company or even group level. Today, these are the

only countries where Amazon has signed collective agreements. This has been made possible by labour regulation institutions and trade union strategies that have enabled them to operate under more favourable and protective conditions for employees. Faced with this situation, Amazon is forced to depart from its fundamental anti-union stance and to adapt. I therefore decided to study Amazon's *production politics* in these two countries. These are not the largest European e-commerce markets, which are Germany and the UK, but Amazon has invested heavily in them and has become the central player.

At the same time, these institutions of labour regulation are not static (Streeck and Thelen 2005a; Baccaro and Howell 2017). Firstly, they vary from one country to another. Secondly, they vary over time under the pressure of transnational economic dynamics (Meardi 2018). For example, France and Italy have followed trajectories of liberalisation and gradual erosion of the regulation inherited from Fordism and an increase in employers' margins for manoeuvre and discretion (Baccaro and Howell 2017). At the same time, these common trajectories do not lead to homogenisation.

In this context of transformation, Amazon's room for manoeuvre is also greater than the shape of the institutions would suggest. The restructuring of industrial relations in France and Italy since the 1980s provides Amazon with comfortable margins of discretion, especially for what concerns the control over the organisation of work.

Amazon has demonstrated a certain capacity to adapt and navigate in the face of institutions, in order to impose its model above institutional regulations. As the literature on the transfer of managerial practices by multinationals (Almond and Ferner 2006; Ferner, Quintanilla, and Sánchez-Runde 2006), particularly those from the United States, shows, these companies are capable of shaping their environment and exporting some of their key practices to countries other than those of origin.

Faced with the challenge of local constraints, we shall see what *ad hoc* strategies Amazon adopts to maintain the coherence of its model and impose its practices. In particular, we will see what variations in strategies Amazon adopts to mobilise employee effort and demobilise collective action.

In order to collect and analyse this evidence, I adopted a research approach that is both comparative and multi-level. Comparative case studies highlight the salient features of one case by comparing it with others. It is a method of increasing generality and is particularly well suited, in the sociology of labour and political economy, to understanding the particular historical manifestations of the more general dynamics of capitalism and institutional change (Burawoy 1976; Locke and Thelen 1995).

Comparison, of course, is not the only way to achieve generality. Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent*, for example, is a simple case study, even if the successful integration of fieldwork and

Marxist theory makes it possible to generalise the results. At the same time, Burawoy's singular case study has its blind spots. For example, it is very difficult to extend certain results, particularly on the role of unions and industrial relations, from the American context to others such as the European context. This is why Burawoy subsequently pursued his research with a more comparative approach (Burawoy 1985; Burawoy and Lukács 1985; 1992).

More recently still, Burawoy has developed his methodological thinking, with the extended case study method (Burawoy 1998; 2009), whereby he proposes to consolidate the marriage between Marxism and ethnography. Starting with an ethnography, it is possible to go up in generality and connect the micro- to the macro-level: (1) by including the observer in the participants; (2) by extending the observation in space and time; (3) by opening up the analysis of situations to external structural forces. I relied on this method to study mobilisation and demobilisation in Amazon's platformism.

The main body of this research consists of a comparative ethnography of production policy at Amazon based on a France-Italy comparison. This ethnography is supported by three pillars. In this introduction I will present a brief description of them. For a reflexive discussion and a detailed presentation of my research protocol, which is essential to assess the value as well as the limits of this work, I refer the reader to Appendix 1. **Fieldwork methodology and data sources** In a nutshell, the three pillars are the following:

(1) *Participant observation of the work process in Amazon's main warehouses in France and Italy respectively.*

Participatory observation has a long tradition in the social sciences, including sociology of work, even if today it is by no means the most widely used method. In the logistics sector, however, it has enjoyed a renaissance, particularly in France, with ethnographies working and observing work for months in logistics warehouses (Gaborieau 2012; 2016b; Benvegnù 2018; 2023; Tranchant 2018; 2019). Some works have also included an international comparative dimension, notably those by Benvegnù. As far as Amazon is concerned, the incognito survey was first used by journalists in the 2010s (Malet 2013a; Bloodworth 2018). Then, given the difficulty of accessing the field and the interest in observing work in practice, participant observation was taken up by sociologists in Germany (Vgontzas 2020; Goldmann 2023), the USA (S. Cox 2022; Lotz 2022) and myself in France and Italy (for first uses and presentations in published articles, see Massimo 2020a; 2020b). These are participant observation studies and not mere journalistic reports, so they have a theoretically and empirically grounded contribution and are based on several months' presence in the workplace. At present, my participant

observation is the only one with an international comparative dimension. It includes participant observation as a temporary worker in the Orleans/ORY1 warehouse (July-August 2018 and October 2019) and in the Piacenza/MXP5 warehouse (May-August 2019). This comparison therefore allows an initial increase in generality.

(2) *Direct observation of trade union politics*

This observation was mainly carried out through over one hundred interviews with employees, employee representatives (delegates), union officials and experts associated with the unions. The interviews were supplemented by observations of trade union meetings at local, national and transnational level. However, part of this observation was also participant, insofar as I supported the action of certain delegates at local and transnational level. Union action was also followed through online sources. All the unions in France and some of the unions in Italy (not the MXP5 sections but the other sites) regularly post on blogs or social networks (Facebook in particular). These posts were used as a source of written material (leaflets, union agreements, reports, etc.) and as a complement to the interviews to reconstruct union strategies.

(3) *Interviews with management*

On the management side, this material was supplemented by interviews with current and former managers in France, Italy and Europe. As I will explain in the Appendix 1, involving Amazon's management in this research turned out to be particularly hard. Nonetheless, at the very end of my fieldwork I seized a variety of opportunities to get in touch with former and in office managers, in France, Italy and at the transnational level. The inclusion of this material helped me to "saturate" my fieldwork and complete findings on the workers' and unions' side with important insights from the management's point of view. An assessment of the value and shortcomings of these sources is illustrated in Appendix 1.

Then, following Burawoy I "extended" from the ethnography to social structures.

(1) First, I extended the study in space and time. By analysing interviews with older employees and managers, I was able to reconstruct the evolution of the work process and production policy at Amazon in France and Italy from the opening of its activities in 2000 and 2011 respectively. This made it possible to identify moments of transition and turning points in the development of the work process and its consequences for production policy and labour mobilisation and demobilisation regimes. I also broadened the scope of my research by interviewing employees, trade unionists and managers from other sites, and by consulting written sources, in particular internal reports. In this way, I was able to reconstruct a wider framework that goes beyond the single warehouse and places it within a broader trajectory of the company in each country.

(2) Secondly, I have extended the analysis beyond the local level to include the global economic dynamics of the company and the transformations of its business model (or profit strategy), based on secondary sources, the analysis of the public balance sheets of Amazon.com Inc. and the exploitation of specialised databases, in particular the *Orbis* database. Amazon's development trajectory spans 30 years, during which its business model is built and transformed in several phases. It is the sequence of these phases that makes it possible to explain the evolution of the work process and its consequences on production policy, mobilisation and demobilisation. On the other hand, the Amazon model is confronted with the specificities of modes of regulation that vary at local and national levels, as the comparative analysis shows. I have therefore included the wider dimension of modes of regulation and political economy in France and Italy.

(3) Finally, this approach is fruitful because the comparative dimension also includes the transnational nature of Amazon, as well as forms of collective action by employees and trade unions. In practice, this means that my research always takes this element into account in two ways: firstly, by studying the relationship between "corporate" and "subsidiary" management, particularly when the company has to adapt its "American" organisational models in Europe; secondly, by showing how unions and employees manage, or not, to develop connections between their strategies. This means looking at local action in the light of the possibilities for transnational connections.

Thesis plan

This thesis is divided into three parts, each of which articulates my argument and corresponds to the three questions raised at the beginning of this introduction.

Part I looks at the relationship between digital monopolies and labour processes, based on the case of Amazon. In Chapter 1, I present a global history of Amazon and its profit strategy. While important journalistic works have already appeared over the last two decades (Stone 2013; 2021), they have remained anecdotal and sometimes celebratory. At the same time, social science research, and also the now sizeable literature on Amazon, has so far not dealt exhaustively with the history of Amazon and its business model (with one forthcoming exception, see Thelen 2025). The chapter situates the birth and development of the Amazon model in the post-Fordist context, characterised by the emergence of new paradigms designed to revive capitalist accumulation and its legitimisation. Amazon participates in this context in an original way. On the one hand, by combining the key elements of the fordist enterprise with the new paradigms of the internet economy, platform capitalism and digital monopolies, and on the other, from a more organisational point of view, with

lean production. However, this singular hybridisation reveals the more general continuities between “fordist” and “post-fordist” organisational paradigms. Hence, the introduction of the term “platformism” describes the Amazon model, emphasising the organisational continuities across the different economic cycles.

Chapter 2 focuses on a key aspect of Amazon’s profit strategy: the logistics work process. In an economy that increasingly values movement, logistics is central. This is also the case for Amazon, which has managed to impose its economic domination thanks to a logistics model suiting online sales business. Yet, this model was not designed as a coherent whole from the outset. It was the result of trial and error, as well as conflicts within the company’s management, which first had to decide whether to have its own logistics infrastructure or outsource it, as advocated by the “shareholder value” or consultants (Lazonick 2018). Secondly, whether to adopt a model similar to Walmart’s dominant one or to look for other possibilities. However, once a suitable organisation had been found, the Amazon logistics model enabled the company to establish itself in the market and throughout the value chain, by initiating complementary mechanisms between Amazon’s different business segments, which reinforced each other. At the root of this success, however, is a rapidly evolving organisation of work. An initial phase in which the organisation of work was uncertain and left a certain amount of autonomy to employees, was followed by a central phase characterised by the digitalisation and extensive taylorisation of the work process, with a consequent deskilling of jobs and centralisation of knowledge and command. A third, more recent phase has extended this trajectory, with a marked shift toward automation which, far from replacing work, has made it even more intense. These first two chapters have shown how work, particularly logistics work, has supported Amazon’s monopolistic development. However, the other two questions remain open. How to mobilise worker effort within this labour process? How does the disruptive power of Amazon affect and how it is affected by institutions of labour regulation and by labour actors?

Part II of this thesis answers these questions on the basis of ethnographic analysis of work and participant observation in two Amazon warehouses in France and Italy. It is introduced by a discussion of the notions of labour regime, the conceptual couple of consent/hegemony and its limits, and the relevance of the notion of mobilisation and demobilisation to explain the production of politics in contemporary capitalism. The ethnographic and historical analysis of work and the social relations that develop around it show a discontinuity between two regimes of labour mobilisation in the two countries. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the first regime, chapters 5 and 6 on the second, in France and Italy respectively.

Chapters 3 and 4 identify an initial “start-up” labour regime in both countries, albeit with different time frames. It is older in France; later but more rapidly developing in Italy. In these regimes,

the organisation of work is still unstable, activities have just started up and need to be tested. National markets are still in their early stages. As a result, there are few employees, the division of labour is relatively flexible and relations between employees and managers are direct and based on personal ties. Employee effort is pursued through the active mobilisation of workers, similar to the model of responsible autonomy defined by the sociologist Andrew Friedman. The comparison between the French and Italian cases therefore shows strong similarities, although there are also variations which will become even more apparent in the subsequent labour regime.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the next labour regime, defined as “algorithmic bureaucracy”. Once again, the temporalities are different, and show a diversification of market growth and its impact on the organisation of work. However, these two phases stem from the same mechanisms in both countries. Market growth and the development of Amazon’s monopolistic strategy are changing the work process, which is becoming completely taylorised with the help of new digital technologies and, later, automation. In this new context, the political system of production is no longer viable. Employee autonomy is significantly reduced, the number of workers soars, and the internal labour market becomes segmented between permanent and seasonal temporary workers. Personal relations between employees and managers are no longer possible at such a scale. Worker effort is therefore no longer based on the active mobilisation (*responsible autonomy*) of employees, but on coercion, both technical, in the work process, and economic, in the internal and external labour markets. Yet these forms of coercion are also bound to produce frictions and conflict. Participant observation in Amazon’s warehouses shows forms of resistance in both cases. However, managerial reactions are different. More aggressive in France and more tolerant in Italy. I understand the greater managerial repression in France, by comparing it with the greater technical and economic coercion in the Italian case, which reinforces managerial authority and makes pressure from management less necessary. However, this divergence between France and Italy also raises the question of trade unions and industrial relations, a question which I approach in the following section.

Part III consists of two chapters, 7 and 8, and addresses the third question mentioned at the beginning of this introduction: how does a transnational company, considered to be one of the most “disruptive” from the point of view of the social regulation of the economy, interact with the institutional contexts of the countries where it transplants its operations? The evidence accumulated in the previous section shows variations and suggests that Amazon is not acting like a steamroller. Of particular interest is the case of industrial relations and, more generally, the regulation of work. Chapters 7 and 8 compare industrial relations in the two phases respectively, focusing on the ways in which Amazon set up in France and Italy, but also focusing on trade union strategies. Using the “power resource” approach, the analysis answers the question: how does an anti-union company like

Amazon cope with institutional contexts that are much more restrictive of employer discretion (at least on paper)? How do trade unions react to the arrival of this company? While in the first phase Amazon manages to keep the unions at bay, it does so by adopting different strategies depending on the different resources of power, which are more favourable to the French unions than to the Italian ones: co-optation in France, exclusion in Italy. Similarly, in the phase of algorithmic bureaucracy, the presence of independent unions can no longer be avoided. The mobilisation worker effort no longer depends on their commitment and responsible autonomy, but on coercion. The priority for management becomes that of demobilising the collective action that the unions, with different resources and strategies, manage to build. Chapter 8 therefore pays close attention to the mechanisms and strategies of managerial demobilisation, which are key to dealing with acute crises in the production of politics, particularly the pandemic.

In conclusion, Amazon emerges as a player that is by no means indifferent to institutions. On the contrary, it is a player that encounters resistance and constraints and which, thanks to the dialectic between its central and local management, is able to cope and adapt. The unions also show a capacity to adapt to Amazon. This produces variations in production politics which only emerge with the comparative analysis. However, the study also shows that these variations do not call into question the intrinsically coercive basis of the wage relations, which manifests itself, above all, in the struggle for control over the organisation of work.

Part I. Digital monopolies and the labour process

Twenty years ago, I was driving the packages to the post office myself and hoping we might one day afford a forklift. This year, we pass \$100 billion in annual sales and serve 300 million customers.¹

This nostalgic and proud memory was recalled by Jeff Bezos in its 2015 annual letter to shareholders. During that year, in April, the company had registered its highest share increase. Now that record has just been broken while I am writing these lines, in January 2022, as the company released its 2021 fourth quarter results (*Bloomberg* 2022). Whether Bezos in 1995 was *really* dreaming about purchasing forklifts one day we cannot know. Anyone could guess he had higher ambitions already at that time. Whatever the dreams of this today Amazon owns so many forklifts in its warehouses that their number could only be estimated. Amazon has grown so much that it does sell on its website pallet jacks, forklifts accessories and even toy forklift truck toys. In its hundreds of warehouses, the so-called “Fulfillment Centers” (FCs) where I carried on my ethnography of work, anyone with a badge can get gloves or cutters from automatic dispensers for free: you just need to scan your personal barcode, print on your badge.

Since the old days of Amazon – when the company was called Cadabra and Bezos himself, together with his handful of “associates”, used to pack items and his wife MacKenzie drove the boxes to UPS or the Post Office² – technological investments and economies of scale grew so much that in new generation FCs, carts, forklifts and pallet jacks are replaced by KIVA automatic guided vehicles which ceaseless move shelves toward and away from pickers and stowers, which in turn have to follow the rhythm of the machines. Today Amazon pays a monthly regular wage to more than one

¹ Amazon.com, (2015). *Q4 2015 Financial Results*. Available at: <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1018724/000101872416000170/amzn-20151231xex991.htm>

² MacKenzie Scott – a graduate in English from Princeton and former colleague of Bezos at the financial investment D. E. Shaw & Co. in New York – played a crucial role in the launch of the company and in the personal life of Bezos. Brad Stone, former NYT journalist and author of two books on Amazon (Stone 2013; 2021), reports that Scott regularly took care of shipping orders into mailboxes; Spector, another journalist, author of the earliest journalistic book on Amazon’s rise, reports Amazon founding-members saying: “We wouldn’t have been operating without Mackenzie. She was vitally important”. An official employee of the company, Mackenzie did a little bit of everything, from accounting to supply management, but Mackenzie’s other role was also, Spector reports using the formula of a former employee, to keep Jeff “grounded”, in other words to support him emotionally (Spector 2002, 48). The couple had three children. Bezos and Scott would eventually divorce in 2019, with the couple’s net worth of over \$130 billion (including 16 percent of Amazon’s capital); at the end of the divorce, Scott received \$38 billion in shares (without voting right, which were retained by Bezos), plus their Seattle and L.A. homes (Stone 2021). As stressed by Bessièrè and Gollac in their book on gender inequality in the distribution of family wealth, MacKenzie Scott “was fully involved in the business’s beginnings”. In addition, Scott was “on the front line for child-rearing and running the hum”, she “sacrificed some of [her] professional dreams, putting off or giving up on cherished plans”. Scott, “who legitimately owned half of a colossal fortune at the time of her divorce, [...] eventually settled for a much smaller share, and left the majority in the hands of her ex-husband” (Bessièrè and Gollac 2023, 3–6; 2019). In his 2021 second book on Amazon, Stone writes about the divorce, he does not spend a word on the gender disproportion even at the top of the wealth scale.

million direct employees; we must add to them hundreds of seasonal agency workers, hired through agencies for the winter peak, and bright website is only the interface of a world-wide logistics network, an industrialised world which is so far and, at the same time, so essential for the existence of this “platform”. But what is a platform? And why is Amazon a platform? What do platforms tell us about Amazon and what does Amazon tell us about platforms? A platform is a two-sided market with powerful network effect (Rochet and Tirole 2003). Platforms are brokers whose goal is to court each side so as that the growth of users on one side attracts users on the other in a virtuous cycle (network effect). Revenues are extracted by charging users on both sides for the intermediation service provided. To understand in what terms Amazon is a platform, let’s look at another public statement of Bezos dating to 2018:

To our shareowners. Something strange and remarkable has happened over the last 20 years. [...] Third-party sales have grown from 3% of the total to 58%. To put it bluntly: Third-party sellers are kicking our first party butt. Badly.³

Why such result deserves, for Bezos, to be celebrated? Because these data show the becoming-platform of Amazon. Over 50% of Amazon.com sales are third-party exchanges *on* Amazon’s marketplace (Table 3). Sellers list their goods on Amazon’s platform and the company collects fees ranging from 6% to 40% of their sales from them (*The Wall Street Journal* 2015). “Over the last twenty years”, Amazon has been able to launch a self-reproducing mechanism. Amazon provides a new service to customers: a vast catalogue for online shopping with convenient and reliable shipping; at the beginning, products are negotiated with suppliers and producers: book publishers in the case of Amazon, which negotiates conventional supply contracts); more customers buy on Amazon, attracted by a new loyalty program Amazon Prime; more sellers – not only publishers and manufacturers, but also small (“third-party”) independent sellers – are attracted by the increasing mass of consumers; at the end of the cycle, Amazon becomes an unavoidable market for online sellers. It is the textbook for a successful platform business. The story does not end here. Independent sellers are offered another service: entrust Amazon with the task of stocking, handling, and shipping their products to the customers. There is finally a third possibility: online sellers can use another website to make their transactions, but they can then resort to Amazons logistics services to deliver their customers. Thus, Amazon provides three types of e-commerce services: pure marketplace, marketplace with logistics (the FBA program), pure logistics (the MCF program). Amazon’s possibilities to increase its revenue multiply, thanks to the central positions that the company holds in the e-commerce, i.e. about 50% of

³ Amazon.com, (2018). *Letter to shareholders*. Available at: <https://www.aboutamazon.eu/news/company-news/2018-letter-to-shareholders>.

the market in the US. In addition, it is true that in each of these services Amazon has competitors, from online and brick-and-mortar retailers to large logistics companies, but it has a vantage point: Amazon is at the same time a client and a competitor for logistics companies such as UPS and Fedex, Amazon is at the same time a service provider and a competitor for sellers. The company can leverage on its centrality to put competitors under pressure. This means that Amazon operates as a platform, i.e. as a two-sided market with powerful network effects.

* * *

Amazon operates as a platform, but we look at it with historical lens something very familiar emerges. The first element is monopoly. Successful platforms such as Amazon are business actors that have been able to internalise the market *within* their boundaries. This is indeed the essence of platforms: the integration of markets into an organisation, which become a central actor of mass distribution. It is from this centrality that a structural market domination emerges, as illustrated by the legal scholar Lina Khan in a landmark paper that earned her the chair of the US Federal Trade Commission in 2021. According to Khan:

“[Amazon] has positioned itself at the center of Internet commerce and serves as essential infrastructure for a host of other businesses that now depend on it. [...] Amazon’s business strategies and current market dominance pose anticompetitive concerns that the consumer welfare framework in antitrust fails to recognize”. (Khan 2016, 803)

Such a monopolistic pattern is not new to American capitalism. In the 1970s, the business historian Alfred Chandler has recounted the saga of the middlemen in the making of the US consumer market at the end of the XIX century (Chandler 1977, 209–35). First the “jobbers” – i.e. merchants that instead of selling on commission, took title to the goods and distributed them through their network – then the department stores – i.e. mass retailers which displaced the former by establishing a direct connection not only with producers but also with final consumers – participated to the construction of large networks of mass distribution through the domestic and international market.

In the post-war period, new retail giant such as Walmart emerged (Brunn 2006; Lichtenstein 2006a; 2009), but they prolonged the same model: assuring profits by maintaining a high velocity of stock-return, selling at low prices and low margins (profits were to be made on volume, not on markup), leveraging on their dominant position of “middlemen” to squeeze margins from suppliers. Walmart buttressed this centrality through the construction of a massive logistics capacity. This was a new step in the consolidation of mass retailers’ hold on the economy (Bonacich and Hardie 2006;

Bonacich and Wilson 2008). Additionally, Walmart underwent an unprecedented international expansion at the global scale (R. Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2006; C. Durand and Wrigley 2009; Bank Munoz, Kenny, and Stecher 2018). Today, retail is one of the sectors which has concentrated the most in the US economy (L. Davis and Orhangazi 2021). Amazon replicated this scheme on online retail, being the first in retail to harness the power of the internet. It combined a powerful logistics and digital infrastructure to establish a dominant position.

The second element, alongside monopoly, is vertical integration. Again, Chandler has already illustrated the historical importance of vertical integration in the construction of the American economy. Vertical integration was a key element of the Fordist firm (Aglietta 1976; Coriat and Weinstein 1995). Khan has recently emphasised the intertwinement between market dominance and vertical integration in the case of Amazon. The construction of Amazon logistics capacity, which is in continuity with Walmart's logistics revolution (we will see this continuity, but also the break from this trajectory in Chapter 1), consisted in the gradual expansion from FCs to "sortation centers" (SCs), and from SCs to Delivery stations (DSs), and finally to last mile delivery. This makes Amazon a world-wide giant with 1,4 million direct employees, 578 logistics facilities (mid 2020), \$1.691 market capitalisation (at the end of 2021), and \$469.8 billion revenue (end 2021).

To run its warehouses, Amazon employs directly-hired wageworkers, but it also resorts to agency workers during seasonal peaks. In the last mile, the company does not employ drivers directly, but either large vertically integrated third-party logistics providers (such as UPS etc.) or the national postal services (the so-called "postal injection"). An increasing part of last-mile delivery is being entrusted to small "independent" parcel delivery subcontractors, with approximately 20-40 directly employed drivers (the so-called "Delivery Service Partner" program, DSP), or to individual gig workers legally classified as self-employed (the "Amazon Flex" program)⁴. This allows Amazon to diversify its delivery channels and to externalise the risks, a classic outsourcing movement. However, especially in the last two channels, Amazon is capable to directly govern the logistics flows, thanks to its algorithms. In other words, algorithms prolongate the vertical integrations by means of digitalisation.

In sum, Amazon appears today as a successful platform, a two-sided market internalised within a firm, which leverages on its central position to extract value from transactions. It is on this base that some scholars conceptualised Amazon's and other digital monopolies as part of a new "techno-feudalist" phase of capitalism (Durand 2020; 2022; Rikap 2023; for a critique of this approach see Morozov 2022). Despite divergencies on whether digital monopolies constitute a distinct form of

⁴ The Amazon Flex program is available in the US and Canada, UK, Germany, Japan, India, Spain, and Australia, but not in France and Italy. The share of parcel delivered through this channel is not known, but it is likely to be residual compared to the others.

capital accumulation, a conventional wisdom has been coalescing around the idea, and the evidence, that Amazon – as well as the other dominant actors of platform capitalism and the big tech, from Uber to Apple, from Google to Facebook – constitutes the avant-garde of “intellectual monopoly capitalism”, i.e. the appropriation of information rents arising from scale economies and network externalities associated with the production of intangible assets (Pagano 2014; C. Durand and Milberg 2020).

What these analysis lacks, however, is an appropriate emphasis on the role of work, namely logistics work, in the construction of digital monopolies. After all, the rent-seeking behaviour of digital monopolies is based on the extraction of value produced across supply chains and in the workplace. Is it not thanks to vertical integration and to a predominantly blue-collar wage-workforce that Amazon unfolded its platform economic model? Even Amazon’s most profitable segment, AWS with its cloud and computing services, is a spin-off of Amazon logistics operation.

* * *

The first two chapters of this thesis bring work, and especially of logistic work, at the core of Amazon’s plat-fordist economic model. Most analysis on Amazon’s economic model focus on Amazon’s capacity to manipulate data and leverage its intellectual monopoly in order to enhance its market power (C. Durand 2020; 2022; Rikap 2022; 2023; C. Durand and Baud 2023). However, such analyses leave in the background the role that logistics plays in supporting Amazon’s market power. As we will see in Chapter 2, since the beginning Amazon has bet on logistics and vertical integration as a vector of market dominance – even if for a short parenthesis, as we will see, such a choice was seriously questioned. Further, both e-commerce and cloud services depend on the company’s logistics capacity. The first, because vertical integration of logistics allows the company to control operation and to leverage its double position of customer/competitor of third-party logistics providers and contractor/competitor of independent sellers. The second, because Amazon’s cloud technology were incubated into its logistics infrastructure. In sum, Amazon’s capacity to extract rent from its platform architecture depends on its logistics operations and the workers that carried them out. The goal of this work is to enter the logistics “inner abode” of platform digital monopolies.

Since the early 2000s, an important stream of research on the transformation of work in the burgeoning logistics industry has arisen; yet no exhaustive attempt has been done to bridge the analysis of the workplace with a broader theorisation of Amazon’s business model⁵. In North

⁵ An interesting comparative research on work in Amazon’s warehouses and crowdwork platform has been published (Kassem 2023), even if it does not provide an account of the evolution of the work process. Another work to which I

America, economic sociologists specialised on migrant work and labour market segmentation and based in areas at high density of logistics activities such as Southern California (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Bonacich and De Lara 2009; De Lara 2009; 2018; De Lara, Reese, and Struna 2016; Allison et al. 2018) and New Jersey (H. Freeman and Gonos 2006; Gonos and Martino 2011) were among the first to inquire on the “logistics revolution” in the business sector (Allen 1997). Edna Bonacich and Jake Alimahomed-Wilson (2008) produced pioneering research on the logistics sector in the US, followed by numerous studies on agency work, employment insecurity, migrant labour and organising attempts in the US logistics industry agglomerated around the major urban areas of the country and in the inland of trans-continental ports. Another important stream concerned Walmart, with a series of important collective (A. Brenner, Eidlin, and Candaele 2006; Brunn 2006; Lichtenstein 2006a) and individual works on the different aspects of the company, from its history to its corporate culture (Moreton 2006; Strasser 2006; Lichtenstein 2009), from its economic model (Bonacich and Hardie 2006; Vidal 2012; Lichtenstein 2017) to the challenges it represented for trade unions (Lichtenstein 2006b; 2008; Hocquelet 2014; 2016), and finally, on its global expansion (Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2006; Petrovic and Hamilton 2006; Tilly 2006; Christopherson 2007). Unfortunately, no specific research has been carried out specifically on Walmart warehouse labour process.

In Europe, the absence of such a dominant actor as Walmart did not prevent labour and organisation scholars from engaging with an industry that was growing at high speed. In France, the pioneering research of Mark Raffenne (2009) developed from the long tradition of the French sociology of work of Georges Friedman (1946; 1950; 1964) and Pierre Naville (1961; 1963), Danièle Linhart (1981; 2015; 2024) and the young Alain Touraine (1955). Raffenne’s doctoral thesis unpacked the managerial concept of “logistic rationalisation” and explored the impact of supply chain management on working conditions and on employment. This endeavour was prolonged and significantly improved by the research of David Gaborieau (2012; 2016b) and Lucas Tranchant (2018; 2019), who moved within the same tradition, while adding a special attention to the relations between the workplace and the local labour markets and to the transformation of the French working class. With her comparative study of logistics labour in the courier sector between France and Italy, Carlotta Benvegnù (2018; 2023) bridged the French tradition with the Italian labour sociology, especially its autonomist-Marxist vein (Bologna 1972; Alquati 1975; 2022; Panzieri 1976; Sacchetto and Sbrogiò 2009), but also opening to the international literature on labour and migrations (De Genova 2005; Milkman 2006; Jounin 2008; Chauvin 2010; Alberti and Sacchetto 2024). More

contributed tries to bridge Amazon’s workplace analysis with the theory of intellectual monopoly (Cirillo et al. 2023), but it remains a very circumscribed attempt.

recently, the French sociologist Haude Rivoal (2019; 2021) opened a new stream of research on the production of gender identities at work, drawing precisely on the observation of logistics work. In Italy the studies on logistics have also been particularly rich, encouraged and influenced by an unprecedented cycle of labour struggles in the logistics sector between 2010 and 2015 (Mento and Violante 2015; Benvegnù and Cuppini 2018; Bottalico 2018; Bologna and Curi 2019; Massimo 2020c; Cioce 2021). In the rest of Europe, studies on labour in logistics have been more scattered and do not form a consolidated stream. Yet, important works have been carried on in the UK (C. Smith and Zheng 2022), Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands (Jaehrling et al. 2018; Barbier, Cuny, and Gaborieau 2020; Gautié, Jaehrling, and Perez 2020; Dörflinger, Pulignano, and Vallas 2021), focusing on the transformations of the labour process, labour market segmentation and the various configurations of the dialectic between coercion and consent, with certain researches (Barbier and co-authors; Dörflinger and co-authors) insisting on national-institutional variations, and others (Gautié and co-authors) emphasising the underlying patterns of neo-taylorist convergence.

In the field of logistics labour studies, Amazon has become a central object. However, academic research was preceded by journalistic inquiries in the US and in Europe, with reporters on the ground publishing stories on deteriorating working conditions (e.g. *The Morning Call* 2012; ARD 2013; Malet 2013a; *The New York Times* 2015; Bloodworth 2018).

Scholars came later, starting from 2015, after that a first cycle of strikes had hit Amazon's warehouses in Germany and France. In Germany, a first wave of studies focused on the factors that led Amazon workers to mobilise with the unions (Apicella 2016; Apicella and Hildebrandt 2019). Then, from 2018 onwards, research developed simultaneously: in Italy with a variety of focuses on the organisation of work and, secondarily, on the spaces for union action (Cattero and D'Onofrio 2018a; 2018b; Delfanti 2021a; 2021b; Massimo 2019); France, in comparison to Italy (Massimo 2020b; 2020a); the US, with a special attention to the forms of control exerted by management on the workers (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2021; T. L. Lee et al. 2022; Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova 2022; Tapia, Lee, and Aranzaes 2024), and on the opportunities for union action in such a difficult context (Jaffe 2021; Reese and Alimahomed-Wilson 2022; Potiker et al. 2024); and in Germany, with studies on the forms of managerial control and worker resistance in the workplace (Barthel and Rottenbach 2017; Barthel, Gnisa, and Stephan 2023), as well as on the limits of union action (Vgontzas 2020; Goldmann 2023). In the UK, fieldwork research on an Amazon's FC emphasised the weakness of Amazon agency workers in the local "job-starved" labour market as a decisive factor of "compulsion" in the workplace (Briken and Taylor 2018). Finally, comparative and transnational analysis have tried to account for the international development of workers' and unions' action (Boewe and Schulten 2017; 2019; Goldmann 2023).

These bodies of research have contributed to shed light on Amazon labour process in the main countries where Amazon operates, reflecting especially on the different forms of managerial control and the possible space for resistances, ranging from everyday informal resistances to unionised collective action. Collective (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2020) and individual works (Kassem 2023) have tried respectively to propose a global overview of the different studies of Amazon and to propose a unitary framework. However, these excellent contributions do not pay a fair deal of attention to the specificity of Amazon economic model, i.e. the hybridisation of the platform, the fordist paradigm and the relationship between the labour process and Amazon's economic model.

1. Amazon's plat-fordist paradox or, the return of fordism in a new (plat)form

In this chapter, I will describe the trajectory of Amazon's business model (or "profit strategy"), in connection with the transformation of the labour process. The scale of the analysis is historical and global. In the first part of the chapter, I will discuss Amazon's organisational paradigm through the prism of the debate on post-fordism. The analysis is developed in the wake of those scholars who emphasis the aspects of continuity between "fordism" and "post-fordism". In the second part of the chapter, I present a history of Amazon's business model, identifying three main phases and turning points.

1.1. From fordism to platforms

Amazon was founded and moved its first steps in American market at a time when the crisis of fordism had definitively concluded its cycle. Since the 1980s, different waves of paradigms were coined to fill the void left by the demise of fordism as a concept capable to account for capitalist accumulation.

The first wave can be situated between the end of the 80s and the end of the 2000s, and it announced a shift in capitalist socioeconomic relations to a "post-fordist" configuration. During those two decades the conceptual couple fordism/post-fordism was at the centre of the debate on capitalism. The term "fordism" had been used to account for the post-war period of growth that characterised Western capitalist economies until the 1970s. The word had been circulating since the 1930s, but it was used for the first time in a systematic way by the so-called Regulationist School. "Regulationists" were French economists (Aglietta 1976; 2000; Palloix 1976a; 1976b; Coriat 1976; 1979), which adopted a neo-Marxist approach to political economy inspired to the seminal reflections on "Americanism and Fordism" contained in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971). Regulationists developed an institutionalist and macro-economic framework which embraced different levels and dimensions of analysis, from the labour process to cultural habits, from norms of consumption to the profit-wage distributions. In this framework, fordism represented an "accumulation regime" with a stable and coherent "mode of regulation", resulting in a period (1940s-1960s) of steady growth. This regime was based on mass production, mass consumption, wide state intervention in the economy and coordination of class interests, especially though collective

bargaining institutions (Boyer 2004; Jessop and Sum 2006). A similar “cyclical” and “systemic” approach, although less ambitious in breadth, was developed by UK-based economists which revamped the analysis of Kondratiev and Schumpeter (C. Freeman, Clarke, and Soete 1982; Dosi et al. 1988; C. Freeman and Perez 1988). These “neo-Schumpeterians” agreed with regulationists on the idea of the succession of paradigms according to an underlying logic of capitalist development. Yet, they put gave more salience to technology in initiating, sustaining, and separating long waves of capitalist development. In this respect, the post-war cycle of growth had been underpinned, according to them, by electro-mechanical technologies, standardised mass production, oil, and petrochemicals as basic sources of cheap energy. The socio-institutional dimension, especially state policies on education, welfare, industrial development and innovation, completed the pattern.

With the systemic crisis of the 1970s, the fordist accumulation regime (or the fourth Kondratiev cycle of growth) was largely considered to be over. However, it was not clear what kind of new paradigm would emerge. Systemic and cyclical approaches, especially the regulationist one, were seriously challenged in their capacity to find the salient aspects of a new accumulation regime with the same clarity of the previous one. They reacted to the crisis by complexifying their framework in order to account for the variety of paradigms that seemed to emerge from the decomposition of fordism. The result of this new research program was a set of “productive models” emerging from the optimal interaction between firms’ profit strategies (especially in the auto industry) and their macro-economic and institutional environment (Boyer et al. 1998; Boyer and Freyssenet 2000). Looking closer to the transformation in the organisation of production, neo-regulationist authors refuted the widespread idea of a “rupture”. Instead, a variety of profit strategies embedded in diversified specific socio-institutionalist contexts was the new norm. However, no such a unique post-fordist “form of production” emerged from the reflection of Regulationists (Boyer and Durand 1993; 1997, 143–44), a position that would match with the emerging “pluralist” paradigms in the field of comparative political economy (Berger and Dore 1996; Hollingsworth and Boyer 1997; Hall and Soskice 2001) and economic sociology (A. J. Scott and Storper 1992; Salais and Storper 1993; Storper and Salais 1997). In fact, the new theory of the productive models reproduced the limits of the original regulationist approach, i.e. a certain functionalism and a *post hoc* rationalisation of history (Gartman 1983; Clarke 1988; Foster 1988; R. Brenner and Glick 1991; Gambino 1996). The difference was that if the earliest regulationist theorisations were criticised for over-emphasising unity (Tolliday and Zeitlin 1987; Hirst and Zeitlin 1989; 1990; 1991), the following theorisations have been accused of exasperating functionalism and multiplying the models without proposing a clear hierarchisation between them (Salvati 1988; 1989; Cours-Salies 1994; Husson 2001; 2008; Bouquin 2006).

Scholars who insisted mostly on the idea of a “post-fordist” break were the theorists of “industrial divides” and “flexible specialisation” (Sabel 1982; Piore and Sabel 1984; Sabel and Zeitlin 1982; 1985; 1997). The theoretical core of this approach was simple: it aimed at distancing itself from structuralist and deterministic accounts and was circumscribed to the historical study of the arena of production. In this view, the break (the “industrial divide”) that occurred in the 1980s was between “mass production” – involving vertical integration, hierarchical relations, the use of special purpose machines and of semi-skilled workers to produce standardised goods – and the re-emergence of a “flexible-specialisation”, or craft-production, model based on horizontal cooperation between productive units, skilled work and the production of a variety of customised goods. While the first had dominated during most of the XX century, it is argued, this does not mean that such a model represented *the* best way. The crisis of mass production provided the opportunity for a new shift, which was not dictated by the intrinsic efficiency of one model, or by an underlying logic of economic development, but from the conjunctural alignment of multiple factors such as local and international power relations, social conflicts, and policy choices.

It is not my purpose to provide here a complete overview of the critiques of the industrial divide thesis (see, Minsky 1985; Landes 1987; Clarke 1990). Yet, it is worth to mention that empirical research questioned the over-optimistic expectations raised by the thesis of flexible specialisation (Amin and Thrift 1992; Harrison 1994a; 1994b; 1997; Whitford 2005). In fact, large firms did not disappear. They continued the processes of restructuring that they had undergone since the late 1970s, but this did not result in the prevalence of cooperation as a form of inter-firm coordination. The capitalist labour process did not turn into a craft workshop. A relatively “new” organisational paradigm, lean management (Womack 1990; for a critical examination, see Pardi 2011; 2015; Jullien and Pardi 2015), inspired by the “Toyotist” experience, emerged as the new “best way”. Yet, its outcome in terms of workers’ involvement – one of the failures that was frequently attributed to the taylorist and fordist paradigms – was more than debatable (Fantasia, Clawson, and Graham 1988; D. Linhart 1993; Vallas 1999).

In fact, the most authoritative contributions to the post-fordist debate had political orientations that were easy to recognise. As summarised by Clarke (1990, 151):

There are as many versions of the theories of “Post-Fordism” and “flexible specialisation” as there are proponents, covering the whole political spectrum from Christian Democracy (Hirst and Zeitlin), through Proudhonian Socialism (Sabel and Piore), Social democracy (Marxism Today) and Municipal Socialism (Robin Murray), to Revolutionary Socialism (Bob Jessop). While the details of the various models differ, primarily in the regions chosen as their favoured examples, and in the elements of the experience of those regions which they choose to emphasise, these are variants on a common theme.

The common theme, however, was the crisis of the so-called “class compromise”, the “legitimation crisis” (Habermas 1973; Offe 1984)⁶, underpinning the “golden age” of post-war Western capitalism (Marglin and Schor 1990), and the quest for a new legitimation for either a re-legitimated capitalism or a revolutionary strategy. It is for this reason that they all contained a normative project.

The need for a re-legitimation of capitalism was particularly urgent for the capitalist class (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 [1999]). Boltanski and Chiapello argued that in order to relaunch capitalist accumulation, new “motives” were to be provided to its agents, whether capitalist, managers, and workers. The “new spirit of capitalism” incorporated the critiques moved to the “old” spirit (the spirit of fordism) – namely, bureaucratisation, rigidity, authoritarianism etc. – into the new one. The new spirit of capitalism predicated the emancipation of the individual rather than obedience, mobilised effort in the name of self-realisation, dismissed the old “social” critique as anachronistic. The motives of the social movements that had launched a harmful attack to the core of Twentieth century capitalism, found themselves appropriated and distorted by the new discourse of management. This was particularly evident in certain theorisations of post-fordist production, contending that “the project of liberated, fulfilling work, originally interpreted as an anticapitalist project”, was now “likely to be staged by capitalist management itself” (Kern and Schumann 1992, 111; 1984). Apologists of lean from the most different political orientations (Womack 1990; Reich 1991; Bluestone and Bluestone 1992; AFL-CIO 1994; *Business Week* 1994; Tapscott 1995), and more broadly all the flag-bearers of the “post-fordist” model, emphasised the empowerment of the worker in the organisation of work, through the introduction of “employment involvement” practices such as teamwork, *kaizen*, and groupware. In fact, these practices did not imply per se an increase in workers’ autonomy or skills. In sectors such as car manufacturing, no evidence of professional upgrading of production work was found (Jürgens, Malsch, and Dohse 1993). Lean management (or *flux tendu*) led to the “constrained implication” of the workers, where the operator was under the constant pressure of the flows and responsible for the continuity of production (J.-P. Durand, Stewart, and Castillo 1999; J.-P. Durand and Hatzfeld 2002; 2003; J.-P. Durand 2004; 2007).

In the logistics sector, the principles of lean management were widely adopted, resulting in the “ceremonial” (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Edelman, Uggem, and Erlanger 1999) adoption of employment involvement practices combined with an actual increasing managerial power over the organisation of control (Raffenne 2009; Gaborieau 2012; Cirillo et al. 2022; 2023; Benvegnù 2023).

⁶ See also, in different veins, US-based Marxist theorisations of the “fiscal crisis” of the State (O’Connor 1974), and, on the other hand of the political spectrum, neo-conservative analysis on the “crisis of governability” of Western democracies (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975).

First in United States, and later in Europe, the lean paradigm drove out the utopias of flexible specialization from what remained of the manufacturing sector (Schumann 1998). It also led the “industrialisation” – intended as capitalist concentration and increased division of labour – of the service sector (Sayer and Walker 1992), especially in logistics (see above), call centres (Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Taylor and Bain 2003; 2005; Sallaz 2015), or fast food industry (Leidner 1993; Cartron 2003).

The debate on the post-fordist transition, however, never concluded and eventually lost traction. Gradually, the term fell out of use and was definitively abandoned with the Great Recession, when new crisis and new problems – from financialisation to the debt crisis – emerged. However, it was precisely in this context that Amazon’s organisation of work developed. As we will see (Chapter 2), Amazon management was trained to the principles of lean and the entire organisational process were infused with the doctrine of lean. The difference, we will see, is that Amazon is characterised not only by a ceremonial adoption of lean principles but also by the revitalisation of vertical integration, taylorisation and mass production. In other words, the return of the fordist corporation, although in social and economic context that was no longer fordist. There is, however, another element that we must introduce and whose role in Amazon’s business model needs to be explained: the platform paradigm.

* * *

The platform model was brought by the second wave of “post-fordist” paradigms. This wave accumulated during the 2010s decade, in a context of accelerated expansion of the internet, on the one hand, and of the logistics industry, on the other hand. The initial post-fordist paradigm resurrected under the notion of “platform”, a new, decentralised way of organising exchanges, thanks to the diffusion of digital and internet technologies. According to many authors, platforms represented a new business model and profit strategy, data extraction, and large-scale digitalisation of social and productive relations (Srnicsek 2017; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). In the meantime, socio-economic specialists pointed at the “vanishing” of the classic American corporation (Davis 2016). Other writers went further and depicted a post-capitalist scenario, made possible by these technological transformations (Mason 2015; concerning the apologetic accounts of new technologies and automation see Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2017)⁷.

⁷ For a critical review of McAfee and Brynjolfsson’s *The Second Machine Age* (2014), see the intervention of Spencer (2017).

Above all, platform capitalism carried with itself a broader societal project, or at least a narrative of emancipation rooted in the past. The counterculture of the 1960s undermined the legitimation of the social order, but eventually nourished a new wave of capitalist accumulation, the “New Economy” business model (Lazonick 2007), whose epicentre was in the Silicon Valley (Castells 1996). The computer industry first, and the internet economy later, not only launched a wave of technological (hardware and software) and business innovation (namely, the networked organisation, a central paradigm in the “New spirit of capitalism”), but brought about a new discourse, the so-called “Californian Ideology”, which “promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies” (Barbrook and Cameron 1996, 44). The Californian ideology innervated the optimistic season of the Internet boom during the 1990s, a wave of financial accumulation that Amazon surfed skilfully and recklessly, as we will see in this chapter. All the start-ups of the internet predicated a new gospel based on a series of ideas.

First, the belief that codes, algorithms and robots would solve all of mankind’s problems, effectively making life frictionless and social relations collaborative, a form of technological solutionism (Morozov 2013). Amazon’s original idea of creating an “everything store” (Stone 2013), was inspired by the collaborative utopian project of the “Whole Earth Catalog” (F. Turner 2008). Second, the idea that the arrival of new technologies would benefit humanity but would also “disrupt” conventions and established anachronistic arrangements. This revolutionary eschatology was epitomised by Google’s motto “Break the rules, you can apologize later”, or Mark Zuckerberg’s slogan “Move fast, break things” (J. T. Taplin 2017). The start-up of the new economy was an “outsider firm”, even though it was frequently well connected with Wall Street and venture capitalists. Bezos, for instance, was a former hedge fund executive and Amazon’s initial venture capitalists were all networked with Wall Street. Third, the actor of this change was the entrepreneur with its start-up firm (Galluzzo 2023). A charismatic, mythical figure such as Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos, bringing about a “vision” and capable to raise the commitment of its workers, which in fact were conceptualised as members or follower rather than employees. At Amazon, the company preferred the term “associate. Even if was not necessary an invention of the New Economy (it was already in use at Walmart), the term associate implied a relationship of cooperation between market actors, hiding the subordination typical of conventional employment relationship.

If the problem of capitalist accumulation was, as explained by Boltanski and Chiapello, the research of “motives” that mobilised economic action, the new economy and platforms tried to provide them. In this respect, they could be considered as sort of social movement. Platforms try to mobilise users in their everyday life, capturing free labour through the control of micro-transactions (Casilli 2019; Gray and Suri 2019); they also try to mobilise citizens in referenda when their business

is threatened by the intervention of regulators (Culpepper and Thelen 2020). Finally, as all capitalist enterprises, they need to mobilise the workforce in order to commit it to the goal of accumulation (Burawoy 1979a; Coutrot 1998), a problem that, by the way, is also central in lean management (J.-P. Durand 2019).

All these characteristics define platforms as if they were social movements, i.e. forms of organised collective action that, starting from a phase of effervescence and coherence, eventually enter a process of “normalisation” and “bureaucratisation”, where the organisation becomes more crystallised and hierarchical, the division between membership and leadership is amplified, and the original ideals that infused the organisation fade (Michels 1911; Selznick 1948; 1949) – even if a variegated scholarship do not consider such a pattern of development predetermined by metaphysical laws (Gouldner 1955; Castoriadis 1959; 1988; Crozier 1963; 1964; Voss and Sherman 2000; Zald and McCarthy 2017).

No “iron law” of development of organisations can be established *ex ante*; yet, when one looks close at its characteristics, it appears that platform capitalism, and Amazon in our case, followed such an evolutionary pattern of “disruption”, if we allow ourselves to borrow such a term, followed by normalisation. The new economy first and the platform paradigm later, emerged as a by-product of the ideals of emancipation and self-determination of the 1960s’ counterculture – the *critique artiste* identified by Boltanski and Chiapello. This movement had generated on the one hand the “sharing economy” the project of resorting to new digital technologies to promote no-profit cooperation in the satisfaction of daily life needs (from housing to transport, from research to exchange); on the other hand, it generated the platform paradigm, which undertook the same path opened by new technology but with the purpose of appropriating these “commons” to extract value from them (Lobel 2016; Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Galière 2018).

The platform paradigm tried to maintain its original emancipatory discourse – a clear example is the rhetoric on self-employment deployed by certain platforms in order to legitimise the precarious employment status of their workers (Abdelnour and Bernard 2018; Rosenblat 2018; Galière 2020; Bernard 2023) – but such a discourse has been emptied by the deterioration of working conditions came under public scrutiny. Likewise, if the platform paradigm promised a world of decentralised exchanges, today platforms behave like monopolies whose viability depends on the centralisation of market control.

Amazon is the perfect incarnation of these contradictions. If the end of fordism was expected to bring flexible, smart, and decentralised organisations, Amazon nowadays is a monopolist, vertically integrated firm – among the largest in the world – founded on blue collar work no less than a fordist company. The first argument of this thesis is that Amazon produce a *sui generis* model of

capitalist firm: new for its capacity to integrate and centralise physical and digital fluxes, but also old in so far as such a business strategy depends on the revitalisation of key organisational elements of the previous fordist paradigm – from vertical integration to monopoly power, from scientific management to bureaucratic principles of organisation. This is the specificity of Amazon’s “Platformist” paradox.

1.2. Amazon, the fordist side of platforms

When employing the term “fordism”, it is important to raise one point. When I use such a term, I do not refer to the notion of fordism as an accumulation regime based on the class compromise between capital and labour, state intervention, and mass production during the Golden Age.

The regulationist conception of fordism postulates a sort of multi-level coherence between the labour process, the economic policy, the norm of consumption and the wider mode of socialisation (Jessop 1990; 1992); in other words, this conception of fordism assumes the coherence between the micro-, meso- and macro- level.

Such a vision has been criticised for its functionalism determinism and harmonicism (see above). In its beginning, fordism was far from representing a stable form of class compromise, and it was characterised by violent class conflict caused by capital attempts to exert power on the organisation of work and to overcome workers resistance (Foster 1988; Dockès 1993; Gambino 1996; Bernstein 2010). The first three decades of 20th Century was characterised by confrontation between workers and capitalist management, where the stake was knowledge and the power on the organisation of work (Braverman 1974; Montgomery 1979; 1987; Griffin, Wallace, and Rubin 1986; Noble 1986; Conell and Voss 1990). This sort of proto-fordism or, as Gambino calls it, “pre-trade union fordism” was an authoritarian experiment devoted to the complete domestication of workers and hostile to any form of collective organisation and representation of labour. Further, post-war fordism, the one identified by Regulation School as a coherent socio-economic system, was by no means a direct product of Ford’s assembly line. Ford’s dreams of corporate government of society crashed against workers resistance, the rise of competitors such as General Motors, and the Great Depression of the 1930s. So, ironically in contrast to Ford’s personal vision, fordism as an accumulation regime emerged. It took a much more complex set of institutional, macroeconomic, and societal mechanisms that constrained corporate power in a web of mutual interdependencies with the state and labour. Henry Ford’s fordism could not rely on the will of a man or the resources of a company, but at the same time Ford’s intuition was not totally wrong (Dockès 1993)⁸. If fordism

⁸ Even eminent regulationist scholars have recognised the inconsistencies between Ford’s project, namely his wage convention, and the broad wage-labour nexus realised in the post-war period (Boyer and Orléan 1991).

intended as the personal ideology of Henry Ford aligned with fordism as a mode of regulation, it was on the common intuition that mass production was intertwined with mass consumption. Yet they diverged on the means to secure such a link. Ford believed in corporate power as the only, and sufficient, force able to shape modern society. The mission of large corporation was not only to plan production and create wealth but also to redistribute it and to take care of the welfare of workers (Harvey 1989). Eventually, this project crashed against workers resistance, the rise of competitors (e.g. General Motors), and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Ironically, it was when Ford's societal project went bankrupt that fordist regulation emerged⁹. It took two world wars, the rise and fall of fascism, a communist revolution, and a much more complex set of institutional, macroeconomic, and societal mechanisms to bring it about. On top of that, and retrospectively, such stability did not last for a long time. Finally, Ford's assembly line, mass production, and the institutionalisation of class conflict did not generalise as the sole model all-over the capitalist world-economy (Piore and Sabel 1984; Tolliday and Zeitlin 1987; Jessop and Sum 2006), and one could argue that the fordism of the Regulation was the result of a contingent alignment rather than the necessary deployment of an organisational paradigm from the firm to the entire society.

These considerations are all the more relevant when looking at the period following the demise of the fordist accumulation regime. At the turn of the 1990s, no clear and coherent successor of the fordist regulation had emerged (Boyer 1988; Jessop 1992), and the situation have not become clearer, with the proliferation of new typologies accounting for the variety of "productive models" in the car industry, the rise of finance (Boyer 2000; Montalban 2007) or the emergence of "platform capitalism" (Montalban, Frigant, and Jullien 2019; Boyer 2021). None of these new paradigms, however, shows either the internal cohesiveness of the fordist one – the heuristic condition to become a reference comparable to Fordism – or the actual capacity to sustain stable growth (Grahl and Teague 2000; Froud, Johal, and Williams 2002; Froud, Leaver, and Williams 2007).

At the macro-economic level, post-Keynesian economists developed the notion of "profit-led" growth models, opposed to the "wage-led", i.e. fordist, one (Lavoie and Stockhammer 2013; Baccaro, Blyth, and Pontusson 2022). These approaches, however, remain interesting exclusively to the macro-economic and national-comparative dimension and neglects the meso-level of the firm and of the workplace.

At the micro-level of the workplace, labour process theory has abandoned its initial comprehensive approach (Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1979a; R. Edwards 1979), where the coherence

⁹ Some critics of Aglietta's reconstruction, contested the actual existence of a compromise, questioned the effectiveness of working-class gains during the 1950s-1960s decades, and casted doubts on the supposedly decisive role of the capital-labour accord in "ensuring that consumption kept up with investment and wages kept up with profits" (R. Brenner and Glick 1991, 92–96; see also Gambino 1996; Husson 2001).

between the labour process and the macro-level regulation was assumed and somewhat taken for granted; the stream of labour process theory more attached to the project of bridging the dimension of workplace with that of capitalist accumulation, highlights the latter's "dysfunctionality" and the lack of structural cohesiveness between the mode of regulation and the labour process (P. Thompson 2003; 2013; Vidal 2013; Bagnardi and Maccarrone 2023). However, on the one hand, Thompson points at the contradiction between managerial discourse on the promotion of progressive and integrated human resource practices (the so-called "High Performance Work Systems"), and the structural constraints of financialised and globalised capitalism foreclosing the actual implementation of these practices¹⁰; on the other hand, Vidal suggests that, under certain circumstances, managerial agency finds in this "disconnection" the space for enforcing precisely the HPWS associated to lean management. As we will see, the Amazon shop-floor management takes advantage of this space of agency to increase coercion rather than workers' autonomy (Chapters 5 and 6).

* * *

In sum, the notion of fordism, in spite of its success and great sophistication, has been criticised for its over-determinism, while the notion of post-fordism never achieved a satisfactory level of analytical and empirical coherence. Why then resorting to this term to explain Amazon?

First, this research does not have the ambition to propose a new comprehensive paradigm such as those of fordist regulation. The scope of my analysis, as we will see, spans from the workplace to the level of the firm, although one of the largest *multinational* firms in the world, and to the interaction between the firm and the surrounding *institutional* environment. In other words, our discussion will be bounded to a meso-level. It is for this reason, for example, that I do not talk about such a thing as "Amazonism" as if the organisational and business model of this firm could be the matrix of a new accumulation regime and mode of regulation, analogously to the fordist regulation.

Therefore, the use of the fordist/fordism term refers to the level of the fordist firm as defined by Coriat and Weinstein (1995). The Regulation theory, especially its first generation, did not develop a theory of the firm. Yet, according to some of its representatives, the Regulation approach contains *in nuce* a theory of the fordist firm as a micro-foundation of the macroeconomic patterns of fordism (Coriat and Weinstein 1995, 167–88; Lung 2007, 5). The distinctive elements of this "implicit" theory can be summarised in three basic features:

¹⁰ As summarised by Bagnardi and Maccarrone in their discussion on the problem of "connectivity gap" in labour process theory, "on the one hand, workers are requested to growingly invest in their "human capital" with shrinking opportunities of stable employment. On the other hand, management needs to maximise shareholder value in the short term, which leads to increasing labour cost squeezing, continuous restructuring, and outsourcing" (Bagnardi and Maccarrone 2023, 45).

(1) the (fordist) firm is the place of the antagonism between labour and capital. It is the existence of this antagonism that makes necessary the implementation of principles; protocols and mechanisms of control in order to make possible the highest extraction of value from the amount of work bought by the capitalist from the workers. It is a clear reference to Ricardo and Marx, as well as one of the basic assumptions of labour process theory (Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1978; P. K. Edwards 1989; P. Thompson and Newsome 2004; Bagnardi and Maccarrone 2023);

(2) the fordist firm is large, vertically integrated and pursues economies of scale. Its large size is the driver of mass production and of market stabilisation. In this respect, the Regulationist description of the fordist firm evokes the contribution of Chandler to the history of the enterprise (Chandler 1977);

(3) by virtue of its size and position within the economy, the fordist firm is the place of elaboration of formal and informal standards and conventions, likely to be extended beyond the boundaries of the single firm to the rest of the economy and society. The main one among these conventions is the “wage-labour nexus” (*rapport salarial*), which bridges the micro dimension of the workplace to the macro dimension of the collective institutions that regulate class conflict and the norms of distribution of value between social classes.

According to the authors, this neo-regulationist approach to the firm presents some advantages in comparison with conventional approach to the firm in industrial relations and labour process theory. The first one is that markets are not considered as self-regulating mechanisms, but socio-economic spaces underpinned by institutions, among which the firm play an important role. The second is the integration of the historical dimension. The third advantage is the complementarity between the morphology of the firm and its coherence with the accumulation regime. While I agree with the first two points, it seems to me that the third “advantage” of this framework should be handled carefully, for it risks to reproduce the over-deterministic vice of the classic regulation approach (Pardi 2011, 41). Postulating an automatic mechanism of “spillover” and “generalisation” from Amazon to the scale of macro-economic regulation is unsustainable not only theoretically, for the reasons discussed above, but also empirically. It is true that Amazon’s had now reached the critical mass to “disrupt” and re-shape the institutional mechanisms of the surrounding socio-economic environment, especially for what concern labour relations (Hassel and Sieker 2022)¹¹. However, this

¹¹ Hassel and Sieker (2022) examined Amazon’s establishment in three different institutional contexts – US, Germany and UK, Amazon’s e-commerce largest markets. Drawing from secondary literature, expert interviews, and data on self-employed couriers as a proxy for the dissemination of independent contracting in the logistics sector, they found that Amazon’s “platform effect” is constrained by the specific configuration of welfare state provisions and employment regulation of each country. However, the underlying assumption of this approach is first that Amazon’s optimal solution would be unconventional “uberised” employment relations. The second assumption is that the form of the employment contract is a measure of Amazon’s hold on employment relationship in the logistics sector. I argue that these assumptions are debatable. First, because Amazon has become a vertically integrated firm and not a “nexus of contracts”. Since the

disruption does not seem to bring about radically new forms of employment, as we will see. In this respect, among all the platforms, Amazon is the only one with the capacity to impose its own employment model, but, paradoxically, its employment model turns out to be quite conventional: wage work and labour market segmentation via temporary work agencies in the warehouses; outsourcing to large and small third-party logistics service providers (which in turn relies on open-ended and fixed-term employment) for delivery; only a residual use of “uberised” self-employed contractors in the delivery segment.

In sum, Amazon is not bringing about a new convention for employment relations, differently from the fordist-regulationist pattern, where the wage-labour nexus diffused to the rest of the economy and became the new norm. On the contrary the company seems to hybridise the platform business model with the conventional employment relationship. To be sure, this convention does not represent anymore a “nexus” – this is why we should handle the notion of fordist firm carefully. First, because this convention has been significantly eroded (Weil 2014; G. F. Davis 2016; Baccaro and Howell 2017; Bernard 2020); second, because the direct connection between the employment dominant firm and the mode of regulation has been interrupted and no rigid correspondence can be found between these two levels. Even this does not prevent sociology of work to engage with investigating the forms of these uncertain connections (P. Thompson 2003; 2013; Benquet 2015; Benquet and Durand 2016; Vidal 2022). With its vertical integration, millions of direct employees, and taylorist organisation of work, Amazon is a fordist firm without a fordist (or “amazonist”) mode of regulation¹². In this respect, the term “fordist” contained in the notion of plat-fordism, implies the hybridisation and interdependence of two organisational models, but it does not theorise any derivation from mode of regulation from the firm-level.

1.3. A business history of Amazon: between platform and fordist capitalism

Amazon’s business model corresponds to the platform blueprint, although as we are going to see, it is not totally encapsulated in this paradigm. Amazon was born in 1995 from the initiative of Jeff Bezos, a former Wall Street executive, and the venture capitalists that funded his start-up. In the

beginning, its warehouse workforce has been employed under conventional employment contracts – in coordinated-market economies as well as in liberal-market economies – rather than self-employed. Even since Amazon entered the last mile delivery segment, it has relied far more on subcontracting (third-party logistics outsourcing plus the so-called DSP program, in which drivers are waged workers) rather than on bogus self-employment (the so-called Amazon Flex program). Second, the employment contract it is not a good proxy of Amazon’s domination which relies not only on algorithmic monitoring (DSP and Flex drivers use Amazon’s software for delivering orders), but also on market power, as an increasing if not exclusive part of its partner’s volumes belongs to Amazon. Amazon’s control, therefore, is not a matter of employment isomorphism (Baccaro and Howell 2017), but it needs to be analysed on the grounds of labour process, collective bargaining, and also inter-firm competition (see, for instance, Alimahomed-Wilson 2020).

¹² In this respect, Gambino’s (1996) notion of “pre-trade union fordism” can also shed light on the current period of union weakness and harsh anti-union especially in Amazon workplace.

very beginning, Amazon’s business was to sell the greatest variety of books online, but the “long-term” goal was to build an “everything store”. In 1997, Amazon went to Wall Street and started surfing the Internet bubble. It benefited from generous liquidity injected by investors. From 1998 to early 2000, Amazon raised \$2.2 billion in three separate bond offerings. It spent much of that on acquisitions, on an aggressive policy of discounts on sales (in order to increase its market share)¹³, and in the expansion of logistic capacity. Cash was burnt massively to “grow fast”, while attention to operating efficiency was low. Investors’ enthusiasm skyrocketed in front of Amazon’s rapid expansion.

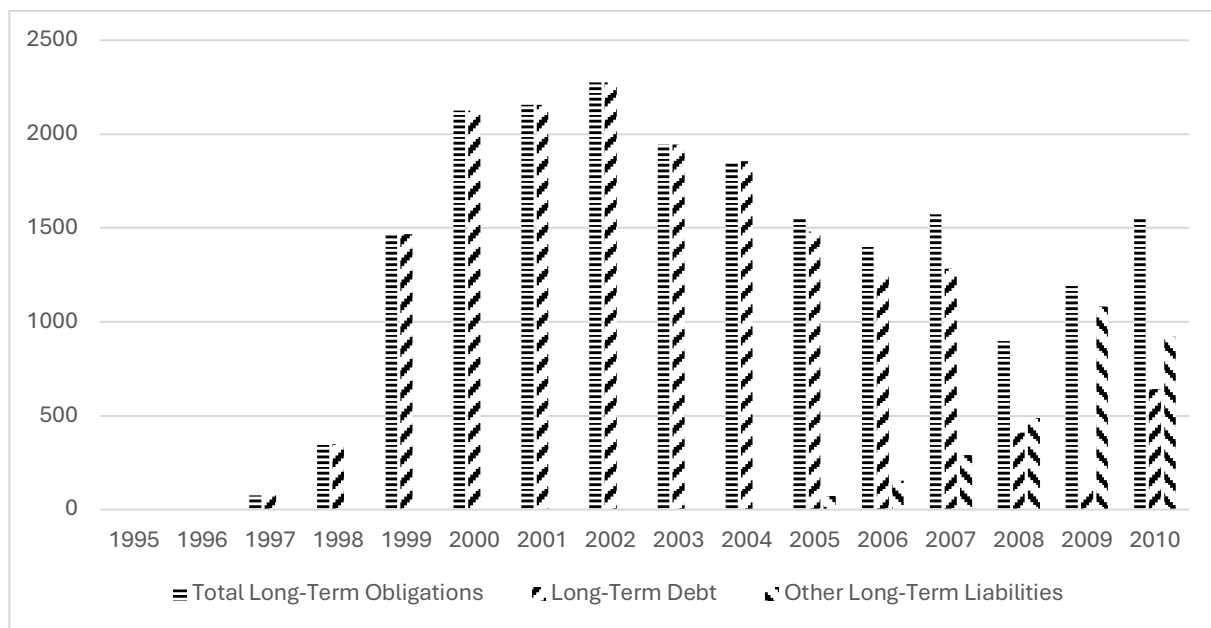


Figure 1 – Amazon’s long-term debt and liabilities (1995-2010); million \$

Source: Amazon’s Annual Reports

At the beginning Amazon focused on books, but rapidly expanded its e-commerce catalogue to music and videos (1998); videogames, electronics, toys, tools and hardware (1999); kitchen and housewares (2000). By 2000, Amazon was already a major online seller, but not a platform in a strict sense.

Another important element to keep in mind is that Amazon embarked very soon on a project of overseas expansion. Since the beginning, Amazon developed transnationally, even if the centre of gravity of its operations, revenues, and profits would remain the US.

¹³ For example, Amazon offered first-time buyers the opportunity to buy bestselling books for one penny.

Box 1 – Amazon uneven international development

Amazon's international expansion can be divided in two phases. A first cycle of expansion took place between 1999 and 2000. Money collected in the stock market and the rapid growth of revenues gave Amazon breath for its first wave of expansion, geographical and sectoral. For the most part, Amazon expanded into new countries and new businesses by acquiring existing firms. In 1998, Amazon expanded to the largest European markets for its business, Germany and UK, by acquiring Bookpages, a British electronic bookstore that provided access to all 1,2 million books in print in Britain, and Telebuch Inc., a major online bookstore in Germany, which had 400 thousand German-language books in its catalogue. The company were renamed Amazon.co.uk and Amazon.co.de respectively and their renewed website relaunched in October with all the Amazon.com features and technologies. In parallel distribution centres were set up in Marston Gate, England, and Bad Hersfeld, Germany. By the end of the year, the two international subsidiaries were the leading online booksellers in their respective markets. In September 2000, Amazon launched its French website and opened its first warehouse, even if, as will see in the next chapter, the penetration Germany or the UK. Meanwhile, in November 2000, Amazon.com launched its Japanese-language site, Amazon.co.jp. Japan was already Amazon's biggest foreign market, with 193.000 customers and annual sales of \$34 million. This cycle was interrupted by the dotcom burst and by the need of the company to organise its existing network rather than further expanding it.

Expansion started again after recovering from the dotcom burst, Amazon devoted all its international efforts to conquer the Chinese market. Amazon had entered China promptly in 2004, acquiring the bookselling start-up Joyo.con for about \$75 million. Despite the initial progress, by the middle of the 2010s decade, it was blatantly clear that the attempt had failed. Amazon suffered competition from a cast of cutthroat local competitors, especially Alibaba and its subsidiaries Tmall, Taobao and Alipay. Furthermore, Amazon had not been able to adapt to the specificities of the Chinese market – where both sellers and customers were fee- and price-sensitive for many goods (*The New York Times* 2019a; Stone 2021) –, and its Chinese operations did not have enough independence from Seattle. The company was not even able to quickly build its own logistic infrastructure and to replicate its popular and profitable FBA business; devoid of this powerful asset, Amazon did not manage to find an alternative way for growth. Finally, Amazon underestimated the importance of cultivating political relationship with the Chinese Communist Party. Amazon China continued operating sluggishly and was dwarfed by the explosion of Chinese tech and e-commerce giants such as Alibaba, JD.com and Tencent. Amazon would eventually withdraw its e-commerce activities from China (*The New York Times* 2019a).

Amazon's international expansion was more successful in foreign Western markets. The company continued growing in Japan, UK, Germany, and France, and expanded to other countries. A new cycle of expansion in Europe started in the 2010s decade. Amazon launched its local e-commerce website in Italy (2010) and Spain (2011). Initially, these markets were served through the existing European network, and few product categories were introduced. Soon, the company would open its first FCs in Italy (2011) and Spain (2012), and it enlarged its selection with a third-party marketplace. In 2013, reacting to fast-growing European markets and to the first European strike organised in Germany by the Ver.Di union, Amazon set to open three logistics centres in neighbouring low-cost Poland (*Financial Times* 2013). The launch of two FCs was announced in Czech Republic, but was eventually scrapped and postponed to 2015, when a single FC was opened (*The Wall Street Journal* 2014). The expansion to Central-Eastern Europe followed another

path: at the outset the new Polish and Czech sites would mainly serve Amazon's German and Western European business; only later they would aim at a local e-commerce market. Amazon's Polish website would open only in 2021.

While losing China and expanding into Europe, Amazon tried to put its foothold in other regions. In India, Amazon tried to penetrate the local e-commerce market adapting to its specificities, but it remained grossly unprofitable (a murky regulation, uncomplete communication infrastructure, established local competitors, and difficult relations with political power). For what concerns Latin America, Amazon struggled to establish dominance in the e-commerce market because of the existence of savvy competitors such as the Argentinian website Mercadolibre. Amazon also landed in promising Middle East markets – the UAE (2019), Saudi Arabia (2020), and Egypt (2021) – through the acquisition of the local website Souq.com. Here the company seems to suffer from less harsh competition, but its economic performance remains uncertain.

In general, Amazon's international business does not seem to perform as well as the North American segment. Amazon discloses little about revenue trends by country. As reported in 2019 by *Bloomberg*, “the annual growth rate of Amazon's core North America e-commerce segment had topped currency-adjusted international growth each year since 2010”. In the period 2010-2019 period, the company generated close to two-thirds of its e-commerce revenue in the US, despite multiplying efforts in international markets. In its Annual reports, Amazon discloses data on net sales in selected countries, those who represent its largest markets: US, Germany, UK, Japan. Country-data are aggregated and include all Amazon's business in that country. Looking at these figures we see the huge size gap between the US and the rest of Amazon's market.

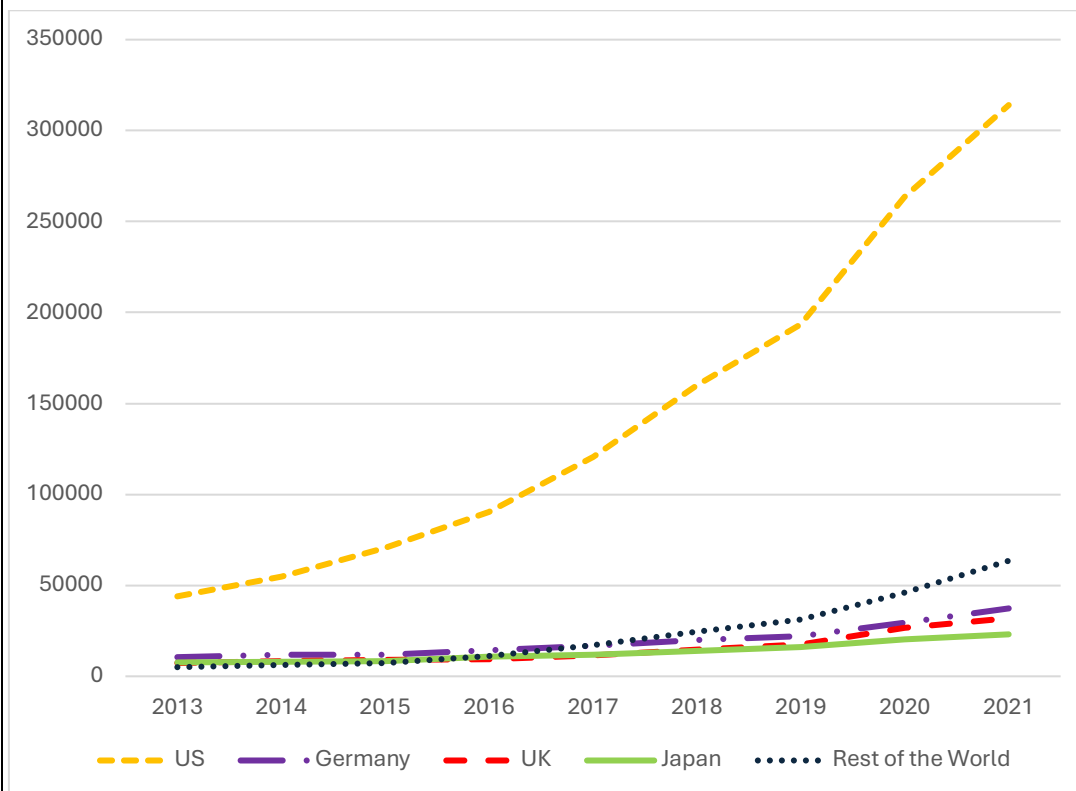


Figure 2 – Amazon.com net sales per countries (2013-2021), \$Million

Source: Amazon's Annual report¹⁴

Furthermore, the internationals segment posted not only lower revenue growth than the North American, but also consistent operating losses, that were reversed during the 2020 pandemic year but eventually reappeared in 2021¹⁵:

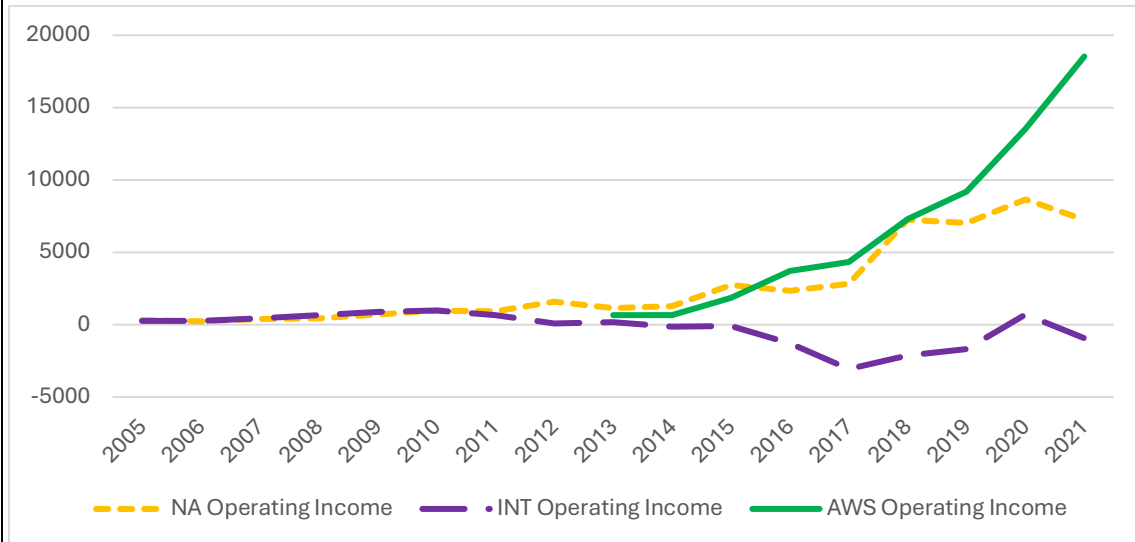


Figure 3 – Amazon's operating income, per business segment, \$Million

Source: Amazon's Annual Reports

When the dot-com bubble burst, Amazon's losses/revenue equilibrium had deteriorated, and the company was likely to sink. Shares fell from their all-time high of around \$106 in early 2000 to \$15.60 on May 2001. Since the beginning of 2002, Amazon stopped issuing stock and would not start until 2009. However, while many competitors went bankrupts, Amazon resisted and got by, thanks to a review of its pricing policy, restructuring of operation and an important cut of jobs¹⁶.

1.3.1. Normalisation: how Amazon survived the dot-com burst

Joe Galli, named chief operating officer, engaged in cost revision and a general reform of the corporate structure to enhance traditional managerial discipline. Galli was considered a "veteran" of

¹⁴ Data are available only for the selected countries.

¹⁵ Amazon executives tend to be vague about its geographic sales trends and insists that the endemic unprofitability of most of overseas subsidiaries is due to the fact that Amazon is still developing its infrastructure. For instance, during September 2021 quarterly call, Amazon's CFO, Brian Olsavsky said that Amazon was in different stages of growth depending on the country and that "the long-term trends remain the same in international [...] we're going to make money long term" (Amazon.com, Inc. 2021). However, Amazon's lagging pace of international sales shows that the company's business model does not make it a lock in every country. It seems that Amazon makes profits where it has been able to build a logistic infrastructure and to exert control on suppliers and independent sellers.

¹⁶ The company was also lucky: it had sold \$672 million in convertible bonds to European investors just a month before the crash of the stock market, after which it became exceedingly difficult for any company to raise money.

the Old Economy” and brought a way of “normalisation” in a firm that could no longer be considered a start-up. Since his arrival “budgets were formalised, every division became accountable for expenditures. Executives had to write operating plans that outlined specific financial deadlines and had to reach specific sale goals and margins. Amazon employees were thought about profit-and-loss statements, balance sheets, and cash-flow analysis” (Spector 2002, 239).

Jeff Wilke, a young but experimented operation manager was hired in August 1999 as general manager for operations. In the warehouses, Amazon introduced a new accounting system that for the first time calculated how much money were made or lost on each sold product: it emerged that more than 10% of electronics, kitchen, and tool department were losing money; 5% in the book, music, and video products (Spector 2002, 246). To tackle these inefficiencies, Wilke tried to improve packaging, renegotiate the shipment standards with suppliers, and purge its catalogue from money-losing products. But it was the entire strategy of directly managing operations which was put in question by this wave of “normalisation”. “Why did Amazon build five warehouses when it could easily hire companies like Ingram Books to handle much of its shipping?”, was the common question reported by the *New York Times* from Seattle headquarter (*The New York Times* 2001).

It was clear that Amazon.com had opened up too many warehouses in anticipation of tremendous growth that never materialized. Bezos defended that choice on the ground of customers’ satisfaction: “We made a very deliberate decision to overbuild, although we hoped we were overbuilding by a little bit. If we hadn’t done that, we would have disappointed customers, as a lot of Internet companies did, and we wouldn’t be around anymore” (*Ibidem*). However, the dilemma was there: how to keep inventory at a minimum, while ensuring that when someone ordered several products, they could be shipped in a single box, preferably from the warehouse that was nearest the customer? In a contemporary article, *Forbes* suggested that the question was put under debate during the annual shareholder meeting in May, where many wanted to reconsider the insource strategy (which costed \$300 million) and transfer 10-20% of orders shipped directly to customers from distributors, a method called “drop shipping”. Wilke himself talked about outsourcing single orders, while another senior Manager, Lyn Blake, was told having said to a group of stock analysts: “Every time we touch a product we are less efficient” (Spector 2002, 246). The magazine reported that “the crowd was clearly receptive to the idea of offloading some fulfilment”. An analyst quoted in the article said that “he’d love to see Amazon shut down another distribution center”, because “any growth they can deliver without using the [distribution centers] means higher margins” (*Forbes* 2001).

Amazon began to outsource warehousing and shipping of some products, such as books and personal computers. In Japan as well as in Canada, where Amazon had just opened its website,

warehouses were run on the base of co-sourcing agreement with local third-party logistics players. After pressuring for years to convince publishers and other product makers to sell goods to it directly, rather than forcing it to pay higher prices from wholesalers. Urged by Wall Street analysts and by its need for cash, Amazon went in partnership with brick-and-mortar retailers (Borders Books & Music) and with the UK-based book chain Waterston, Circuit City (electronics) and Target for a variety of products. A similar partnership had been previously signed with Toys “R” US (August 2000). Amazon got much-needed cash and filled its distribution centres which the company had been running at overcapacity and in a “improvable” way.

Amazon logistic infrastructure was under the scrutiny of investors. In January 2001, under investors’ pressures, Amazon announced plans to cut 1300 employees, or 15 percent of its workforce. The plan included the shutdown of a distribution centre in McDonough, Georgia, which Amazon had opened two years before, with its 450 employees; the termination of the Seattle’s customer service centre, with 400 employees; the layoff of 450 more jobs in the headquarter. One month later, layoffs also touched Europe: the general manager of international operations, Diego Piacentini, went to Netherlands to announce layoffs in the Hague Amazon’s pan-European call centre, where 240 persons were employed. The company was accustomed to adding people, not losing them, and the layoffs were brutal. It is interesting to note that in this same period Amazon started calling its employees “associates”, as if it would attempt to cement cohesion within its ranks in a moment of crisis. Words were not deemed enough, however, and to secure the morale of its workers, that same month, Amazon repriced the stock options of employees: they could trade three shares at their old stock price for one share at the new price. The dot-com collapse had taken a heavy toll inside the company. As stressed by Stone, “employees had agreed to work tirelessly and sacrifice holidays with their families in exchange for the possibility of fantastic wealth. The cratering stock price cleaved the company in two. Employees who had joined early were still fabulously rich (though they were also exhausted). Many who had joined more recently held stock options that were now worthless” (Stone 2013, 132).

The years between 2000 and 2001 were critical for Amazon. For what concern the relation with financial markets, first the company surfed the Internet wave, accessing easy credit from investors and seeing its stock price skyrocketing. Thanks to this financial flow, the company was able to build a Web and logistical infrastructure, supporting a hybrid business model who mixed classic retail and platform marketplace. This wedding was made possible by the Internet and the logistic revolution, who provided the business model the necessary digital and physical infrastructure to claim the role the middleman of internet economic transactions.

However, the burst of the bubble proved the fragility of this model. Investors’ expectations changed rapidly, and Amazon became the object of scrutiny and critique. The choice of the classic

“retain and reinvest” approach – which belonged to the Old rather than to the New Economy orthodoxy – was criticised and Amazon had to respond and compromise with Wall Street pressures. A quite classic plan of restructuring was designed, in a very financialised-firm fashion: standardising operations, cutting employment, closing facilities, holding back physical expansion and rerouting toward outsourcing. Amazon business model was still suspended between insourcing and outsourcing, vertical integration and the eBay approach.

This situation of *impasse* is quite visible in figures about Amazon number of distribution centres, logistics capacity and employees (Figure 4). The number of distribution centres remained the same between 2000 and 2002, when Amazon expanded to Canada without changing the whole number of facilities since 2000. Logistics capacity, measured in facilities’ square feet surface, remained unchanged until 2004, when it started growing again. A similar path was followed by the number of employees which peaked in 2000, decreased in 2002 and started growing again in 2004, but at a lower rhythm than surface expansion (Figure 5).

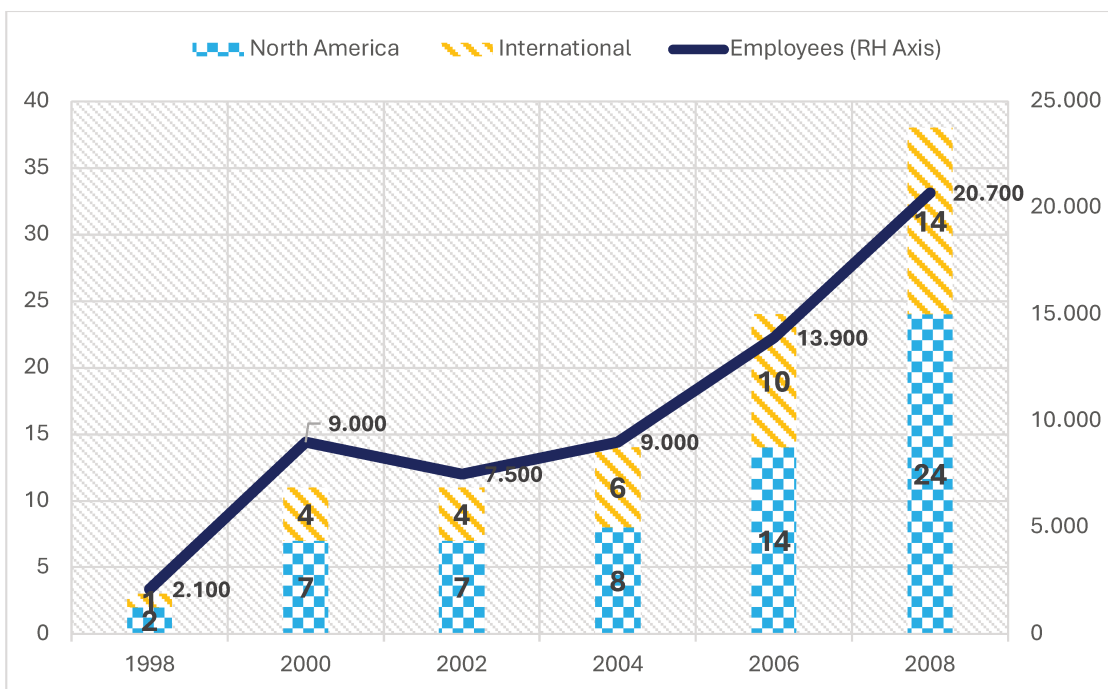


Figure 4 – Number of Amazon’s FCs (North America and International) and employees (1998-2008)

Sources: Amazon’s Annual Reports and MWPVL.com

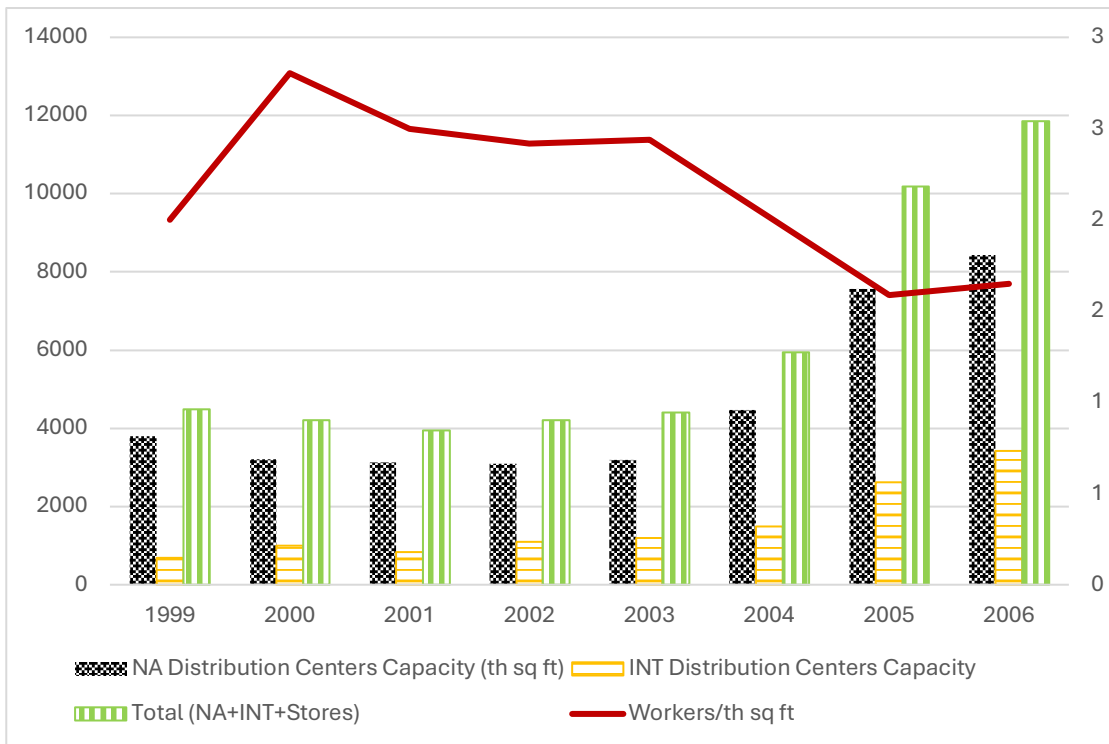


Figure 5 – Amazon’s logistics capacity and worker/surface ratio (thousand Sq. feet, Right axis)

Source: Amazon’s Annual Reports

In January 2002, thanks to these emergency cutbacks Amazon reported its first profitable quarter, posting net income of \$5 million, a meagre but symbolic penny per share¹⁷. Marketing costs were down, international revenues from the United Kingdom and Germany were up, and sales from third-party sellers on the vaunted Amazon platform made up 15 percent of the company’s orders. Additionally, these results allowed a reduction of long-term debt (Figure 1).

1.3.2. Amazon after the bubble: from niche e-commerce to the marketplace-logistics circle

Amazon survived the Internet bubble, but the path to economic safety had been painful. Most of the managerial ranks had changed. The company had increased in size and was forced to adopt more standardised and monitored procedures, both in the headquarters and in the warehouses. In the

¹⁷ The achievement of profitability, made possible by the “normalization” of Amazon business model, marked the restoration of the power of finance over the company. As clearly summed up by Feng et al., “under a capital market double standard, from 1995 to 2000, new companies with digital prospects could recover their costs from the capital market; but, after the tech stock crash in 2000, all companies were required to generate profits from the product market. This encourages a blurring of old and new firm identities, because sectoral power is increasingly necessary to secure cost recovery. But this does not imply any return to business as usual when the financial ecosystem for new technology survives the crash and large-scale venture capital investment continues. From this point of view, the new economy illustrated, concretely, the determining role of finance in the broader processes of financialization” (Feng et al. 2001, 467; for a recent overview on the big tech-finance nexus, see Klinge et al. 2022). Amazon makes no exception in this respect, although in its official discourse the company tries to cast itself as a champion of long termism as opposed to short-term dividend distribution.

US, the lowest ranks had been seriously touched by layoffs and even lured by the opportunity to unionise (see par. 7.1).

The expansion of Amazon restarted soon after. Seeking horizontal *diversification* of its business and the horizontal *expansion* of its network, Amazon sought to combine economies of scale and economies of scope at the same time. The former was pursued through the expansion of the logistic infrastructure; the latter through the platformisation.

After a pause of a couple of years, the company decided a comeback on its logistic infrastructure, a choice that would reveal decisive. Between 2002 and 2006, the number of Amazon's FC rose from 11 to 24, and the number of employees almost doubled from 7.500 to 13.900 (Figure 4). Amazon was betting on an original business model for e-commerce, based on the control of logistic operations and not, like Ebay, the epitome of e-commerce platforms, on pure intermediation.

The subsequent dramatic increase in logistic capacities allowed Amazon to develop a full-fledged platform strategy, for it attracted independent sellers on Amazon's marketplace. More sellers increased the supply on the website, which in turn attracted more customers, which in turn made Amazon's marketplace more attractive for sellers. This was the typical two-sided/intermediation mechanism that allowed a platform to internalise a market.

"Amazon Prime" subscription program, was an essential piece of this market circle and above all an outcome of Amazon upgraded logistic capacity. Amazon's ability to ship products gave the company a competitive edge over its rivals, particularly eBay. Logistic efficiency made two-day shipping possible, while less friction translated into more customers' expenditures¹⁸. When customers spent more, Amazon's volume increased, so it could lower shipping costs and negotiate new deals with vendors, thus reducing overhead costs. Prime was launched in 2005, and, in the years since, Amazon further added other deals and perks, like renting e-books, streaming music and video, one-hour or same-day delivery. According to Khan, "the program has arguably been the retailer's single biggest driver of growth" and a driver of Amazon's stock price increase (Khan 2016, 750). For the first years of the program, Amazon did not disclose the exact number of Prime subscribers. Analyst's estimations have been indicating that the worldwide number of Prime members has soared, starting from 2 million in 2009, climbing to 10 in 2011, reaching 25 million in 2013, doubling to 50 million within two years (2015), and, since then, more than triplicating to 159 million subscribers in 2020 – to have a glimpse of Prime's size, consider that there are over 120 million households in the US in 2020.

¹⁸ Friction was reduced by the 1-Click ordering method, a system for fast and secure online payment that Amazon had patented.

Table 1 – Date of launch of Amazon Prime subscription program per country

Country	Year of launch
Germany, Japan, United Kingdom	2007
France	2008
Italy	2011
Canada	2013
India	2016
Mexico	2017
Turkey	2020

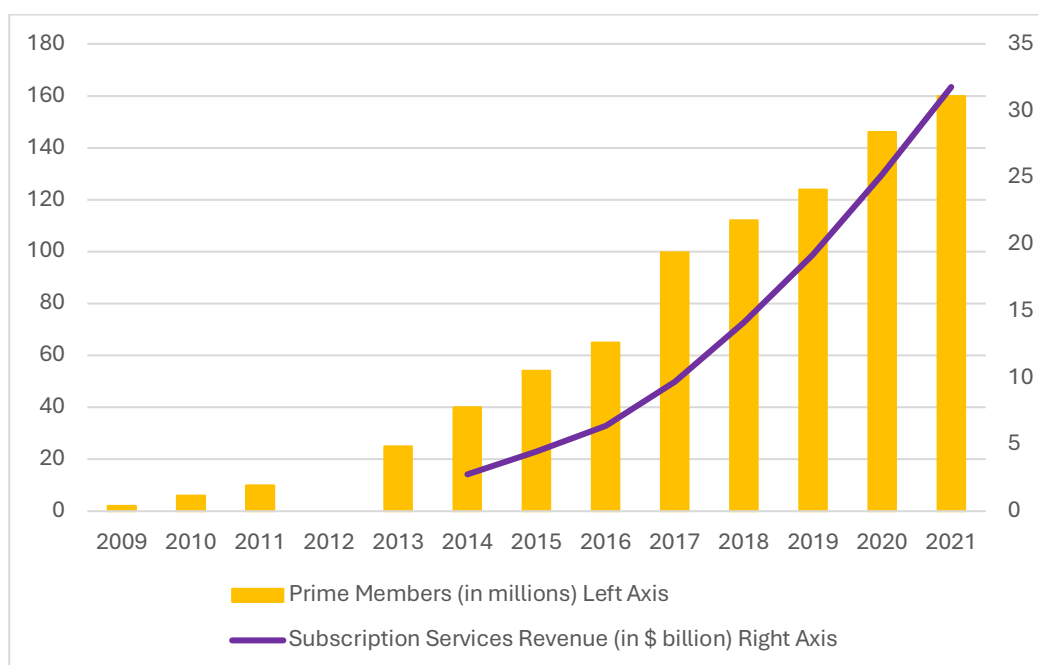


Figure 6 – The growth of Amazon Prime

Sources: The Wall Street Journal; Amazon's Annual Reports; Statista

Amazon does not disclose figures about Prime Subscriptions’ revenue as well. However, amidst growing pressures to make data accessible, the company have been reporting net revenue per aggregated segment since 2014. Prime revenue can be estimated looking into the “Subscription services” segment.

Table 2 – Global net revenue of Amazon 2014-2021, by product group (in billion U.S. dollars)

Source: Amazon’s Annual Reports

Online stores	Physical stores	Retail third-party seller services	Subscription services	AWS	Other

2014	68,51		11,75	2,76	4,64	1,32
2015	76,86		16,09	4,47	7,88	1,71
2016	91,43		22,99	6,39	12,22	2,95
2017	108,35	5,80	31,88	9,72	17,46	4,65
2018	122,99	17,22	42,75	14,17	25,66	10,11
2019	141,25	17,19	53,76	19,21	35,03	14,09
2020	197,35	16,23	80,46	25,21	45,37	21,45
2021	222,08	17,08	103,37	31,77	62,20	2,18

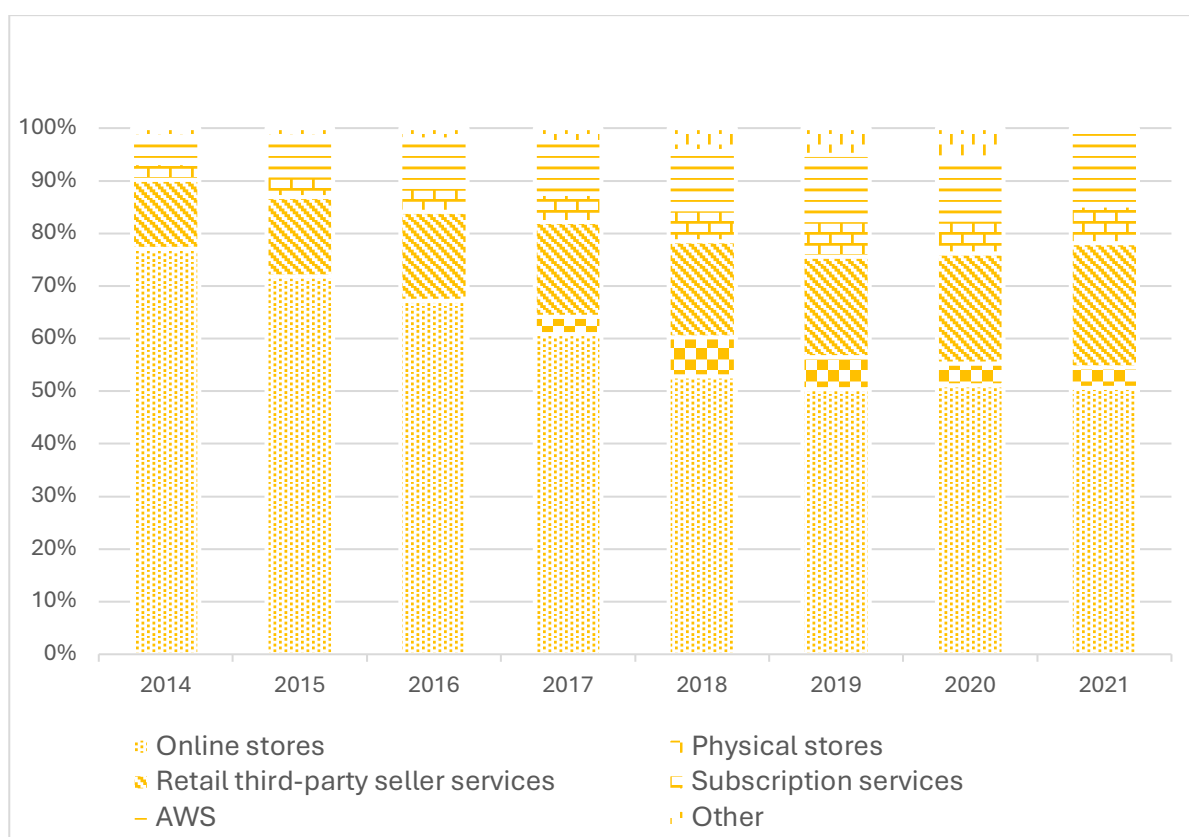


Figure 7 – Global net revenue of Amazon 2014-2021, breakdown by product group

Source: Amazon’s Annual Reports

Amazon invested aggressively in Prime, at cost of losing money. As with its other ventures, Amazon lost money on Prime to gain buy-in. In 2011, it was estimated that each Prime subscriber cost Amazon at least \$90 a year – \$55 in shipping, \$35 in digital video – and that the company therefore took an \$11 loss annually for each customer (*The Wall Street Journal* 2011). According to other Amazon experts, Amazon lost \$1 billion to \$2 billion a year on Prime Membership (*Reuters* 2015). In parallel with Prime expansions, shipping costs surged – first in 2006, then in 2010, and again in 2016. Amazon invested massively in warehouses, delivery facilities, and trucks as part of its plan to speed up delivery for Prime customers, expenses that squeezed its bottom line.

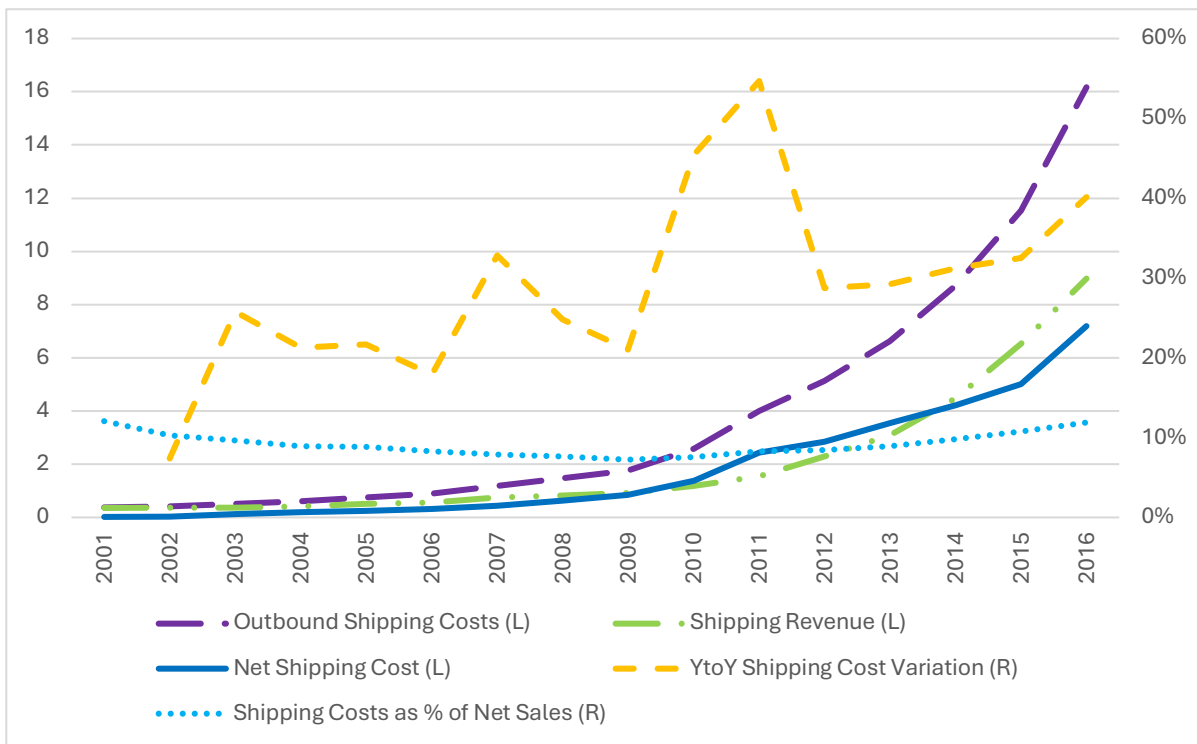


Figure 8 – Amazon’s Shipping Costs and Revenue (billion US\$)

Source: Amazon’s Annual Reports

However, sales grew as fast as costs – shipping costs remained stable as a part of total net sales (around 10%) (Figure 8) – and returns did not long to appear¹⁹. As experts exposed plainly, “What this program has done is something that’s normally very difficult to accomplish: It’s changed consumer habits, and, perhaps even more remarkably, it’s changed them in ways that solely favor Amazon” (*Time* 2010). Not only Prime members increased their expenditures on Amazon.com, but they became also “addicted” to its services, with a lowering sensitivity to prices. In 2014, Amazon hiked its Prime membership fee to \$99 per year. The move prompted criticism, but 95% of Prime members surveyed said that they would either definitively or probably confirm their subscriptions regardless. Analysts stressed that, on the one hand, this suggested Amazon had created significant buy-in and that no competitor was able to offer a “comparably valuable service at a lower price” (Khan 2016, 753), and, on the other hand, that this confirmed the stickiness of online shopping patterns (Candeub 2014).

¹⁹ Customers increased their purchases by about 150% after joining Prime, as the annual fee drives customers to maximize their return on their investment (*Bloomberg* 2010). By the end of 2015, Prime members would comprise 47% of Amazon’s US customers. By 2018 Prime subscribers would spend more on the company’s website than regular members – an average of \$1500 annually, compared to \$625 spent annually by non-Prime members (Rubin 2016) – and much more likely to buy on Amazon than elsewhere (*Time* 2010).

More loyal customers attracted more independent sellers on Amazon marketplace. Amazon began to sell them not only the marketplace but also its logistics services. Amazon had inaugurated its marketplace already in 1998 (called zShops)²⁰. In 2006, Amazon scaled it and introduced a service called Fulfilled by Amazon (FBA): while Prime aimed to use logistic capacity to entrench Amazon among customers, FBA leveraged on logistic infrastructure to target independent sellers i.e., the other side of the platform. The program allowed independent merchants to have their products stored and shipped from Amazon's FCs.

Table 3 – Amazon third-party seller share 2007-2024

Source: Amazon's Annual Reports

Share of paid units sold by third-party sellers on Amazon platform from 2nd quarter 2007 to 1st quarter 2024	
<i>Quarter</i>	<i>Share</i>
Q2 '07	26%
Q4 '14	43%
Q4 '15	47%
Q4 '16	49%
Q4 '17	51%
Q4 '18	52%
Q4 '19	53%
Q4 '20	55%
Q4 '21	56%
Q4 '22	59%
Q4 '23	61%

Products sold through FBA were eligible for service through Prime, namely two-day shipping and/or free regular shipping, depending on the order. In many instances, orders routed through FBA were being shipped and delivered by UPS, FedEx or the US Postal Service, for Amazon relied on these firms for the last mile delivery. As Amazon, thanks to its high volumes, had secured discounts from these providers that were unavailable to any other sellers, especially the small independent ones, it was cheaper for merchants to go through Amazon than to deal directly with UPS, FedEx and the USPS. Yet, the advantage of stopping dealing with logistic providers was not the only reason that

²⁰ The company offered exposure to its 12 million customers and in exchange got a monthly fee of \$9,99, commissions ranging from 1 to 5 percent and extra-fees in order to give a seller more emphasis and visibility on the website (ranging from \$2 to \$99,95). Amazon was leveraging its customer (they were more than 16 million in 2000) base to extract rent from independent sellers. On top of that, it increased the variety of its selection, thus attracting more customers (the so-called *long tail*).

persuaded independent sellers. Since many merchants selling on Amazon were competing with Amazon's own retail operation, using FBA was almost a compulsory choice. For sellers that already sold on Amazon website, the option was either getting on board and enjoy Amazon's competitive edge at the price of fee and potential loss of control, or to keep playing alone in a market that was getting more and more consolidated. Furthermore, Amazon could leverage on sellers' dependence on Amazon's marketplace to induce them to pay Amazon for the logistic management of their items. Since Amazon had been building a reliable logistic service, the condition for a seller to be eligible to Prime was to use Amazon's FBA logistic service. Sellers were free to choose other logistic providers, the company said, but in that case their products were not eligible for Prime profitable market. As, Bezos itself would illustrate in its 2014 letter to shareholders "FBA is so important because it is glue that inextricably links Marketplace and Prime" (Amazon.com, Inc. 2014, 3). FBA was the natural complement of Amazon's marketplace and Prime program, as each segment made the others stronger, building powerful economies of scale and scope. Amazon operating leverage became visible already on April 24, 2007, when Amazon announced surprisingly strong results from its first quarter. Amazon was stealing customers from other Internet players and likely even from offline chains. eBay was declining. That year eBay stock lost over half its market value, and in July, Amazon's valuation surpassed eBay's for the first time in nearly a decade. Coupling marketplace and logistic capacity Amazon has found the formula to overtake its historical competitor in eBay's territory of independent sellers' market. By 2014, FBA's segment had become profitable for the first time and the number of sellers using FBA was growing briskly. Above all, Amazon's successful combination of logistics and platform allowed the company to extract value across its entire supply and distribution chain: data and sales income from buyers, data and rent from sellers.

There was a third spinoff of Amazon's logistic capacity that would turn into a fundamental asset for the company: Amazon Web Service (AWS). In late 2004, Amazon started developing a series of online tools called application programming interfaces (API) allowing third parties to easily harvest data about searches, prices, products, and sales ranking. During the first phase of expansion Amazon had built logistic and informatic capacity that now, it realised, could become a spin-off, a separate service that could be sold to a new constituency: external developers and companies that wanted to implement new digital services and products but were in need for additional capacity. Amazon's researchers developed two interfaces: EC2 (Elastic Computer Cloud), a system for operating complex software where customers could pay for the computing time they needed, when they needed it, like a utility; S3 (Simple Storage Service), a kind of pay-for-use data warehouse;

together, they would be at the heart of AWS and would become the engine of the “Web 2.0” boom²¹. One year after the launch, it was already clear that Amazon had found an original and rentable business line. Finally, ten years after the breakthrough into e-commerce, Amazon had found new virgin territory in which it could consolidate its first-comer advantage and entrench an unshakable market share. The company became the almost exclusive web services provider overnight. Competitors like Microsoft and Google took years to realise it and were able to offer comparable services only by, respectively, 2010 and 2012. Meanwhile, Amazon had further developed its offer and expanded its customer base, layering additional services like Flexible Payment Services and Amazon CloudSearch alongside of EC2 and S3. The growth of its market share and the scaling up of its operations would provide very high margin in the years to come. Furthermore, economies of scale were combined with economies of scope. The creation of AWS gave Amazon competitive advantage in its e-commerce business line, making it a confusing target for Walmart, which did not have a comparable source of technologies and profit. In the following years Amazon did not post the results of this new line of business. It was only since 2013 that Amazon has started providing a breakdown of its revenues and profits: AWS then emerged as remarkably profitable, compared to the e-commerce segment which posted very tiny margins.

²¹ In the same period, Amazon started developing a platform of software for coordinating groups of people around the world to work on problems and accomplish task that the computers weren’t very good at fulfilling. It was the origin of crowdsourcing. Amazon developed this intuition and created a new service: Mechanical Turk (the name recalls a famous 18th-century hoax, where what seemed to be a chess-playing automaton really concealed a human chess master). AMT began life as a service that Amazon itself needed in 2005.

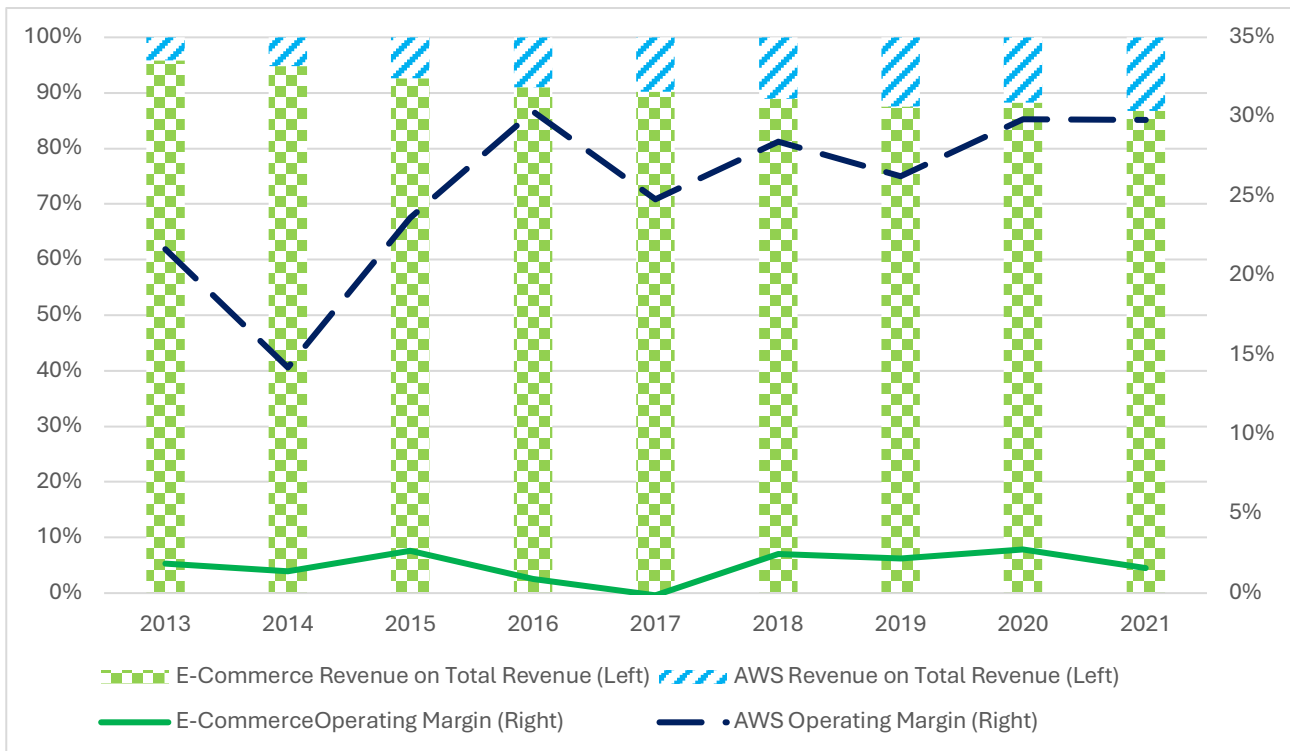


Figure 9 – E-Commerce vs AWS: revenue and operating profit margin

Source: Amazon’s Annual Reports (NA for previous years)

This led many commentators to consider AWS as the new core of its business and to consider logistics and e-commerce as a simple appendix.

In fact, the e-commerce/logistics branch is far from marginal. Even if AWS posts a profit margin of 30%, it still represents a residual part of Amazon’s revenues. For instance, in 2021, AWS registered over \$62 billion in revenues, while the logistics/e-commerce branch (North America and International, in Annual Reports) summed up to over \$400 billion: 13% vs 87% of Amazon’s total revenue. In addition, the origins and strength of this new business lines, AWS but also AMT, was their complementarity with Amazon’s logistic and digital e-commerce infrastructure. In November 2006, reported the *Wall Street Journal*, “Mr. Bezos said the endeavour reflects the technological expertise Amazon has developed in the past 11 years in running its far-reaching retail operations. ‘We have to be very efficient at Amazon.com in order to offer the kind of pricing and free shipping we do. We always operate our infrastructure with that mentality’” (*The Wall Street Journal* 2006). The concept was well clear in the mind of management overseas: “the cloud is a way to make our equipment profitable”, said a French Amazon top executive (*Le Monde* 2009b, author’s translation), i.e. the cloud allowed to elicit extra-value from Amazon logistic network and from its computing capacity. In his 2010 letter to shareholders, Amazon recapitulated the origins of AWS, a spinoff of Amazon e-commerce and logistic operations:

State management is the heart of any system that needs to grow to very large size. Many years ago, Amazon's requirements reached a point where many of our systems could no longer be served by any commercial solution: our key data services store many petabytes of data and handle millions of requests per second. To meet these demanding and unusual requirements, we've developed several alternative, purpose-built persistence solutions, including our own key-value store and single table store. To do so, we've leaned heavily on the core principles from the distributed systems and database research communities and invented from there. The storage systems we've pioneered demonstrate extreme scalability while maintaining tight control over performance, availability, and cost. To achieve their ultra-scale properties, these systems take a novel approach to data update management: by relaxing the synchronization requirements of updates that need to be disseminated to large numbers of replicas, these systems are able to survive under the harshest performance and availability conditions. These implementations are based on the concept of eventual consistency. The advances in data management developed by Amazon engineers have been the starting point for the architectures underneath the cloud storage and data management services offered by Amazon Web Services (AWS). For example, our Simple Storage Service, Elastic Block Store, and SimpleDB all derive their basic architecture from unique Amazon technologies.

(Amazon.com, Inc. 2010)²²

In sum, the strategic choices made in the second half of 2000s would eventually pay off, allowing the company to constantly augment its sales. The company had managed to build a self-reproducing circle, with logistics capacity supporting e-commerce sales and attracting independents sellers on the marketplace, which in turn attracted more customers, to which Amazon offered a loyalty program, which in turn attracted more customers and more sellers.

1.3.3. Vertical integration: the spine of Amazon's monopoly

However, in this model there were two limits. First, profits remained extremely tiny. Second the company did not have full control on its distribution network. Amazon had expanded its network horizontally, by opening hundreds of FCs in the US and overseas. However, FCs carried on only the storage and shipment of commodities, while delivery depended on third-party logistics providers, huge companies such as UPS, FedEx and USPS, the US national postal service. The FBA program could not be fully deployed in these conditions. Reliance over third parties proved to be a vulnerability of Amazon economic model during the 2013 and 2014 Christmas *fiasco*, when Amazon failed to delivery thousands of customers on time due to bottlenecks in UPS and FedEx networks.

Learning the lesson, Amazon outfitted a plan of vertical logistics expansion in order to reduce its dependence on third parties, thereby increasing its bargaining power vis-à-vis them. The plan was

²² Another example of the complementarity between logistics operation and AWS, and more broadly the development of computer science promoted by Amazon is the release of a large dataset of warehouse images to train Artificial Intelligence: https://github.com/silverbottlep/abid_challenge.

to extend Amazon’s in-house logistic network inbound to the air freight and outbound the home delivery segments, controlling merchandise from the warehouses of its suppliers to its FCs, and all the way to customers’ doorstep.

For what concern the outbound segment, since 2014²³, Amazon started building dozens of “Sortation Centers” for the dispatching of packages and hundreds of smaller “Delivery Stations”, put in the outskirts of major urban areas to collect packages for the last mile shipment. This infrastructural expansion implied a consistent increase of Amazon’s workforce. In 2012, Amazon directly employed 88.000 workers worldwide, in 2014 that number rose to 154.000, in 2016 to 341.000, a twofold expansion every two years that continued until 2021 – an unprecedented rhythm of growth that led Amazon to become the second largest private employer in the US and worldwide, behind Walmart.

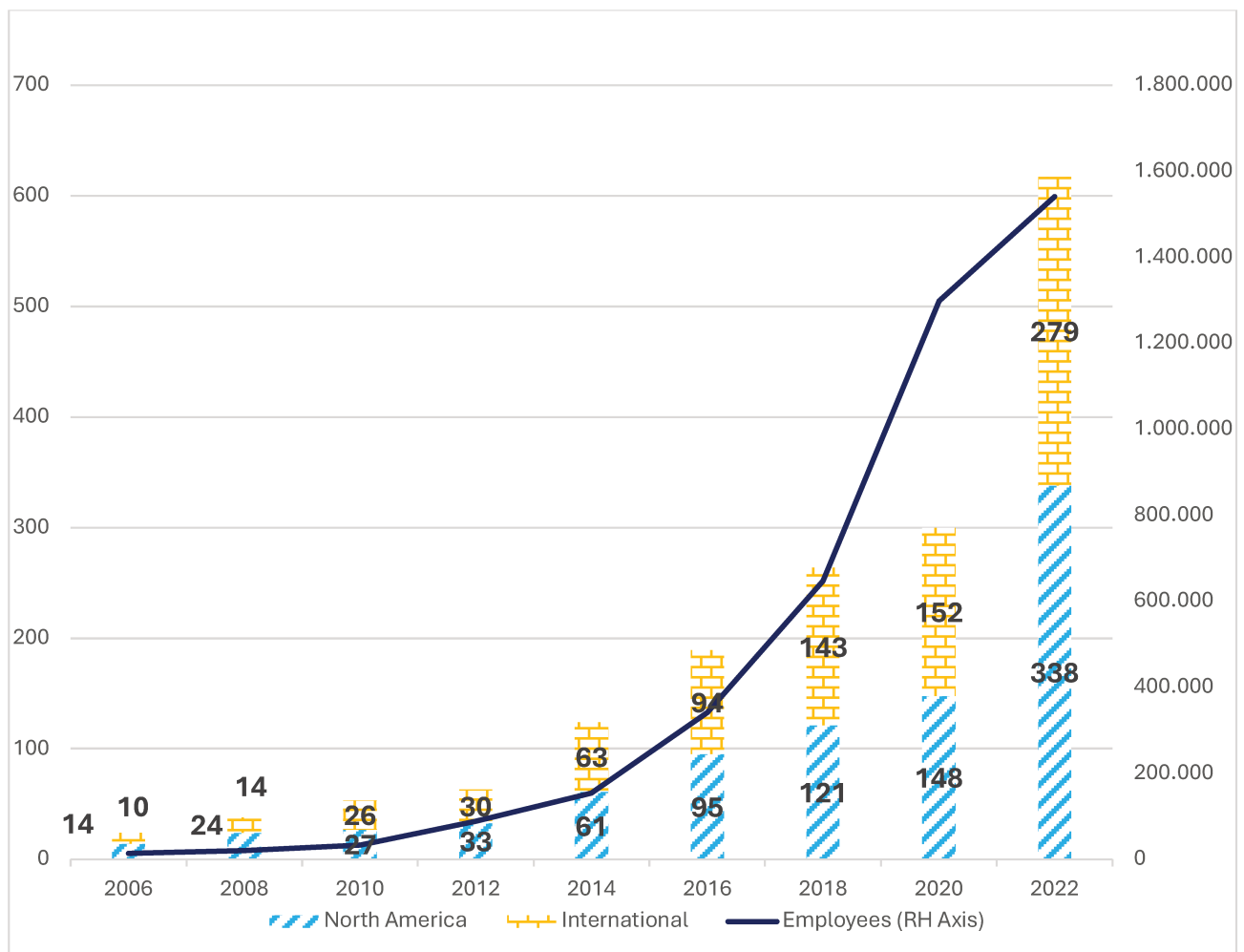


Figure 10 – Amazon’s vertical expansion. Number of FCs and employees (2006-2022)

Sources: Annual Reports; MWPVL.com

²³ In July 2015, Amazon introduced an online shopping holiday called *Prime Day*, where the company offered discounts only to Prime members.

Those figures would be even larger, possibly two-fold bigger, should we include last mile and truck drivers into the count. For what concerns this segment of the workforce, Amazon decided not to employ it directly. Last mile delivery is a traditionally low-margin business, and its economic viability relies not only on efficient organisation but on squeezing wages and other labour costs. In the US industry, there were two models of employment relations: on the one hand, UPS with its established and influent Teamsters Union, which regularly bargains company-level collective agreement; on the other hand, FedEx, DHL and the majority of parcel delivery companies, opted for not directly hiring workers, but instead used smaller independent contractors. Amazon chose this model: it created relationship with independent delivery companies - called DSPs (“delivery service partners”) – that employed non-union drivers at lower rates than UPS and without the awful perspective, for Amazon’s executives, of regular rounds of collective bargaining. A similar system was adopted since early 2016 for what concern the inbound segment: Amazon purchased thousands of truck trailers with the Amazon Prime logo on their sides, which were managed by line-haul service providers with their own semitrailers and drivers.

A final piece of this expansion was inbound air freight shipment. In the end of 2014, Amazon was dependent on UPS Next Day Air and FedEx Express. These air logistics services allowed to deliver less frequently purchased items to Prime customers across the country when they were not stocked in nearby FCs and available for ground delivery. As in the case of parcel delivery, by the end of 2014, Amazon did not intend to rely anymore on UPS and FedEx and started leasing planes on its own in order to supply its FCs for fast deliveries. The advantage of owning air capacity was to shorten its delivery times and pay only the true cost of transporting cargo in the air rather than the public rates charged by UPS and FedEx. The risk was, also in this case, to expose the company to pilots’ unionisation and the scrutiny of the FAA, the federal agency for the regulation of air traffic. The solution was, again, to insource this service only partially. Thus, in the spring of 2016 Amazon announced a partnership with two airlines: ATSG and Atlas Air. They would continue to maintain and operate aircraft, but the planes would be rebranded with the Prime Air logo and operated exclusively for Amazon for a period of five years. To serve the air operations, Amazon stroke a deal with DHL, to use its international hub in Cincinnati International Airport. However, Amazon’s ambitions grew higher and in January 2017, the company announced it would build a Prime Air hub at the same airport. Amazon’s new hub was expected to create around two thousand new jobs and Amazon secured \$40 million in tax incentives from local and state governments (Stone 2021).

A further step toward the construction of a larger physical was the acquisition, in June 2017, of the premium organic chain Whole Foods Market. Whole Foods had provided Amazon with a large network of brick-and-mortar shops, and access to traditional retail sector. It was the most expensive

acquisition up to date (\$13,7 billion), which Amazon financed through the issuance of \$16 billion-worth debt.

Table 4 – List of main Amazon’s acquisitions (1994-2020)

Source: Author’s elaboration on press sources; Dolata 2017

	Company Acquired	Purchase price (billion US\$)	
1999	PlanetAll	0,09	Shares
1999	Junglee (online shop; electronics, clothing, books)	0,19	Shares
1999	Alexa Internet (server; website rankings)	0,25	Shares
2008	Audible (audio book download provider)	0,3	Cash
2009	Zappos.com (online shop; shoes, clothing)	1,2	Almost exclusively shares
2010	Quidsi (online shop; drug store, pet food)	0,55	Cash
2011	Living Social (special offers; gift cards)	0,4	Cash
2011	Lovefilm (video rental)	0,3	Cash
2012	Kiva Systems (automatic ordering systems)	0,78	Cash
2013	Goodreads (book community)	0,2	Most cash, part in shares
2014	Double Helix Games (video games)	n/a	
2014	Twitch (video game platform)	0,97	Cash
2016	Curse (game portal)	n/a	
2017	Wholefood (grocery/health food stores)	13,4	Cash

(Dolata 2017)

The vertical integration of Amazon’s logistics backbone implied a huge increase in investments and fixed costs.

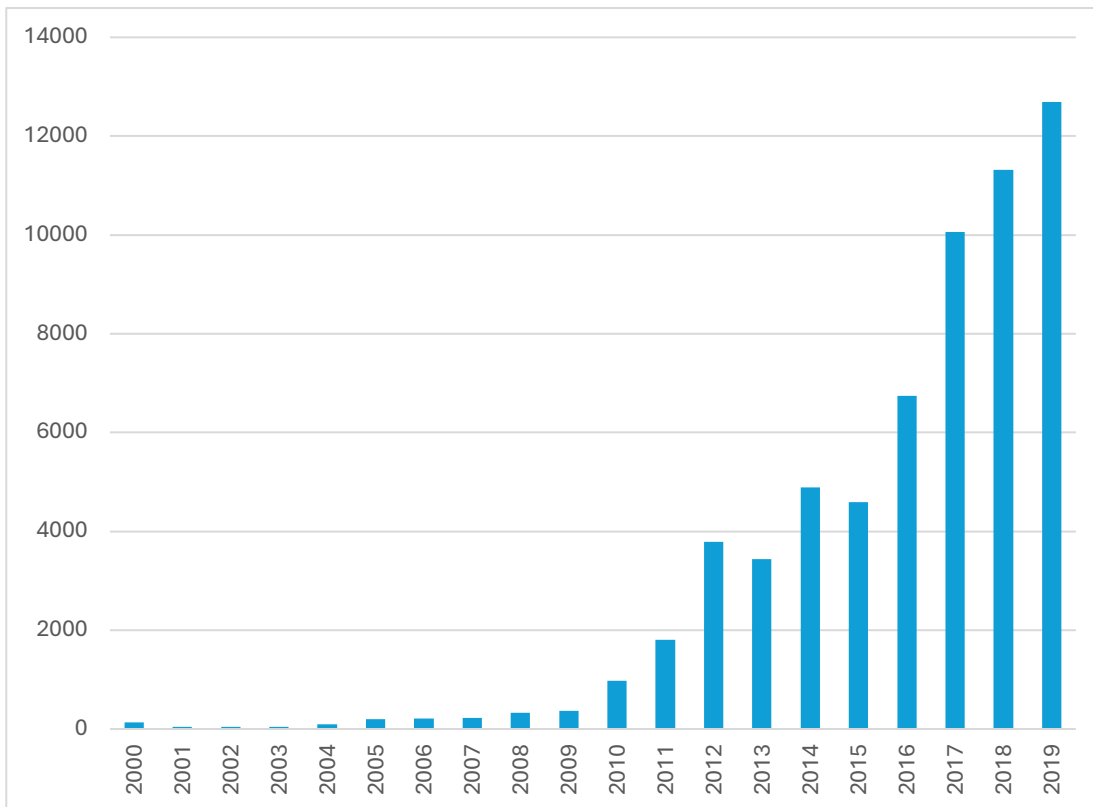


Figure 11 – Purchases of property and equipment, including internal-use software and website development, net (Capex, million US\$)

Source: Amazon's Annual Reports

Capital expenditures more than doubled between 2011 and 2012 – a growth that anticipates the opening of the first dozens of Sortation Centers (Rodrigue 2020) – and then increased dramatically between 2015 and 2019, because of the further vertical expansion of Amazon's network.

The unprecedented scaling up of Amazon's infrastructure impressed the public. "Amazon is not a marketplace. It's angling to become a nation-state, and a highly developed one at that", cried out *Forbes* (*Forbes* 2016). Wall Street reacted enthusiastically: since early 2015, Amazon's stock prices started growing and market capitalisation would accelerate exponentially through the following years, although the company had posted losses in 2015 and would not record significant profit increase until 2018.

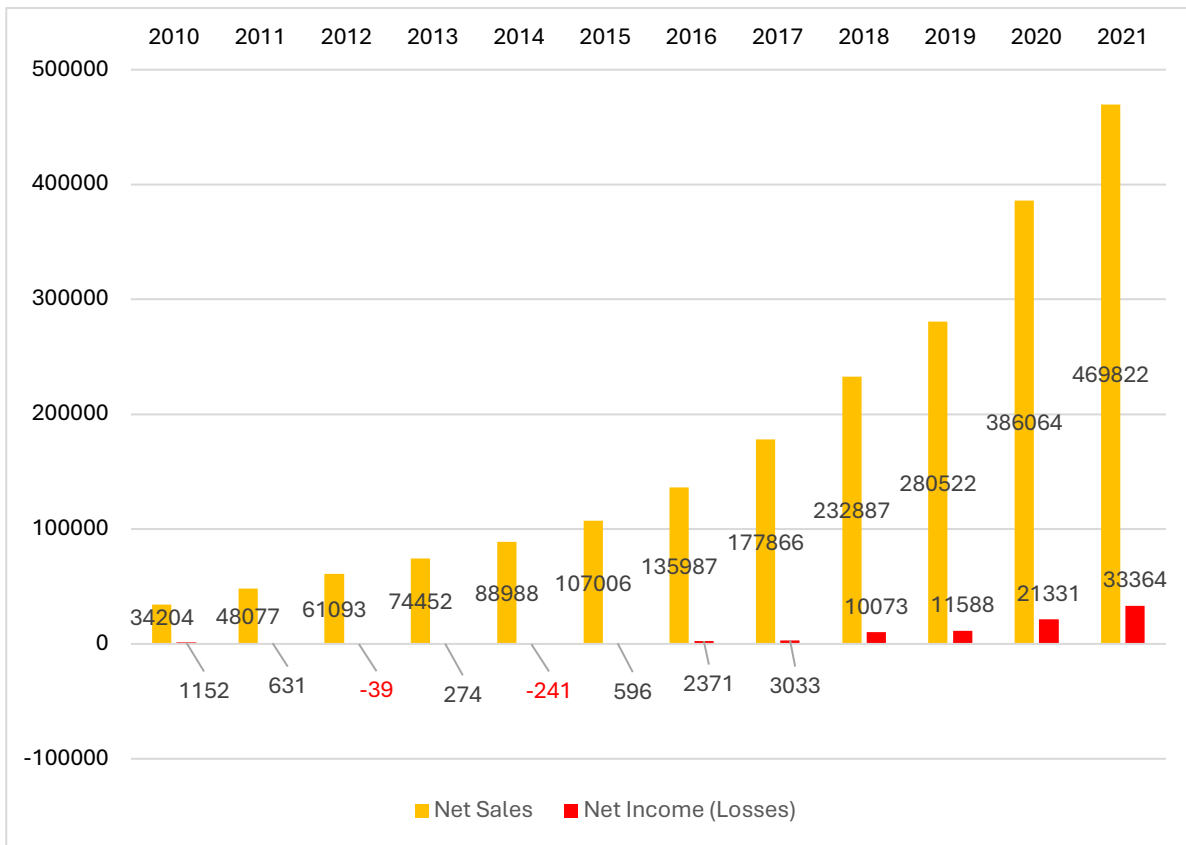


Figure 12 – Amazon’s revenue and net income (losses), th. US\$ (2010-2021)

Source: Amazon’s Annual Reports

Amazon’s bottom line was seriously hit by the huge investments and the increase in fixed costs²⁴. However, Amazon was proving able to magnify its revenue by taking advantage of its massive infrastructure. As stressed by Baud and Durand (C. Durand and Baud 2023), more than trying to reduce fixed costs, Amazon was able to leverage them “i.e. to seek the maximum of profitable uses possible of its investments and of the operational outcomes of its operations. In other words, the orientation towards the leveraging of fixed costs expresses a willingness to take advantage of the versatile character of the capabilities corresponding to these fixed costs” (C. Durand and Baud 2023, 14).

The impact of leveraging fixed costs is visible in the evolution of Amazon’s cost structure, especially in the “dramatic diminution of the cost of sales category (from 91%) in 2009 to 57% a decade later” and the corresponding growth of two items related to fixed costs: “fulfilment” accounts for around 15% of total costs at the end of the 2010s, against less than 10% in the previous decade.

²⁴ Fixed cost are defined by Amazon as “the costs necessary to build and run our technology infrastructure; to build, enhance, and add features to our online stores, web services, electronic devices, and digital offerings; and to build and optimize our fulfillment centers and delivery networks and other facilities” (Amazon.com, Inc. 2020a).

Amazon was spending more on operation, but it was saving expenditures for the purchase of sold goods – as an increasing part of it was property of independent sellers. This allowed not only to reduce cost of sales, but also to increase gross profit and cash flow thanks to the growing amount of fees that Amazon was collecting from independent merchants for the unique set of complementary service it sold to them. These were ranging from data management to convenient cost of delivery: marketplace, AMT, FBA and, more recently a further business connection including Walmart: Amazon Multi-Channel Fulfillment (MCF), “a less known subdivision of the company’s highly successful Fulfillment By Amazon (FBA) programme. Where FBA stores, packs and delivers to Amazon customers, sometimes in as little as a day, MCF offers much the same for sales on other websites, such as Walmart, eBay, Etsy, Shopify and several others” (*Financial Times* 2021).

Vertical integration prompted a shift in the composition of Amazon’s operations from product sales (dominant in the previous decade) toward service sales. Furthermore, it allows Amazon to seize control on the distribution chain. Control on logistics flows reinforced the marketplace, thus increasing the capacity of the company to capture value across the supply chain. By the end of the 2010s decade, Amazon had definitively turned into a digital monopoly (Khan 2016; Coveri, Cozza, and Guarascio 2022; Klinge et al. 2022; Rikap 2022; Vasudevan 2022; C. Durand and Baud 2023), a path that existed *in nuce* the platform model (Dolata 2018; Montalban, Frigant, and Jullien 2019). The realisation of this potential, however, would have not been possible without the construction from scratch of a powerful logistics infrastructure, vertical integration and the recruiting of a massive workforce whose labour allows this logistics infrastructure to operate.

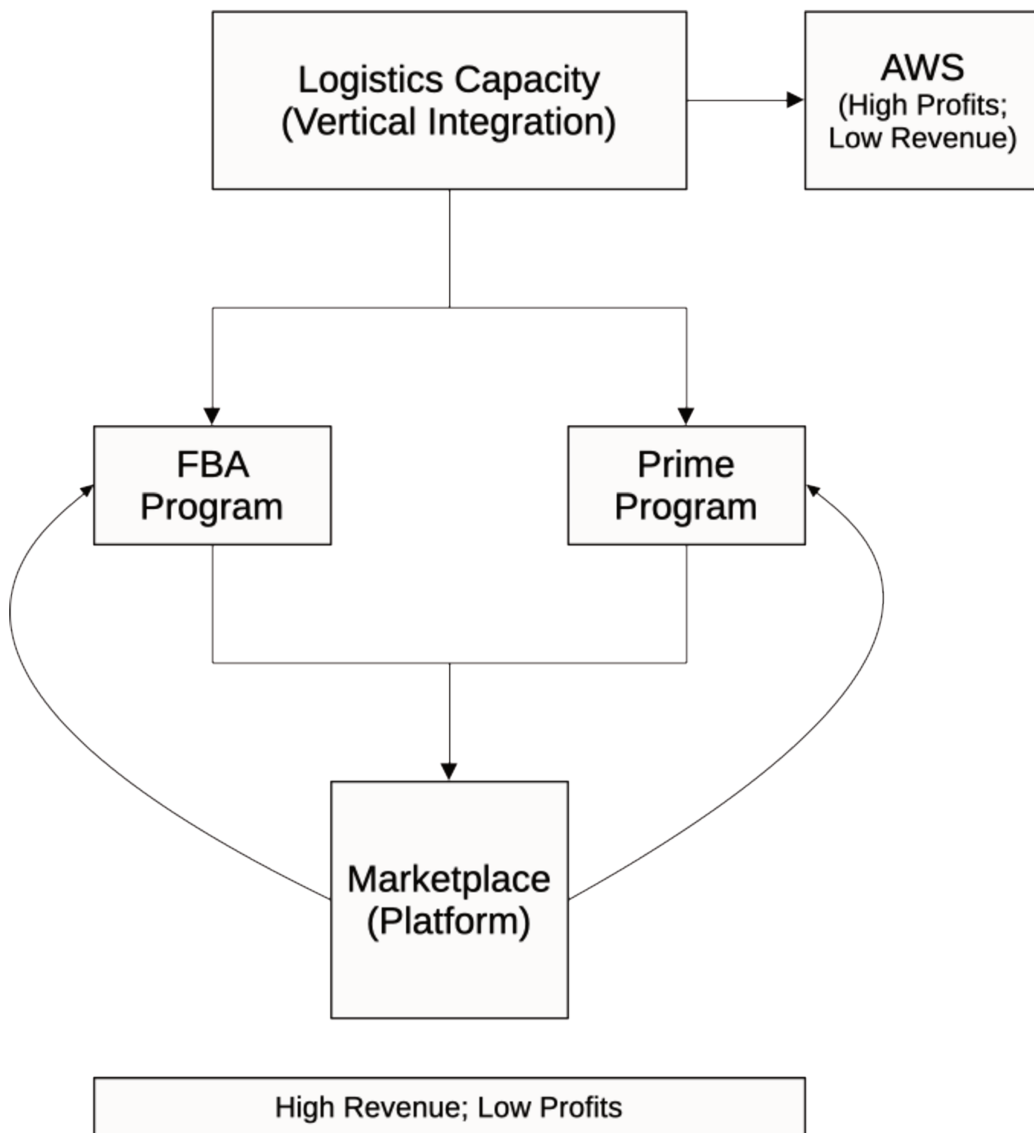


Figure 13 – Amazon’s business model (author’s elaboration)

1.3.4. From the new to the old spirit of capitalism: Amazon’s plat-fordism

During its first twenty years of history, Amazon casted itself as an outsider firm, a challenger of “established” interests. An early example was the controversy with its first rival, the book distributor Barnes & Noble (1997). In 1997, three days before the Amazon’s IPO, Barnes & Noble filed a lawsuit against Amazon, alleging that the company was falsely advertising itself to be the “Earth’s Largest Bookstore”: “Barnes & Noble stocks more books than Amazon and there is no book that Amazon can obtain which Barnes & Noble cannot”, the company said in its suit (*The Wall Street Journal* 1997). Amazon’s counterstrategy was to play the role of the outsider: how could such a big company sue a small start-up? Under the leadership of its charismatic founder, Amazon had built a community of customers who reviewed books on the website and identified with the Seattle-based start-up’s brand (*Financial Times* 1997). As Amazon would later publicly state:

Those who make choices that are genuinely good for customers, authors, and publishers will prevail. Goliath is always in range of a good slingshot (quoted in Spector 2002, 199).

If you do anything that challenges the establishment, you're going to annoy some people (quoted in Spector 2002, 189).

Another example was the litigation with Walmart. In 1999, Walmart filed suit against Amazon.com and its affiliates, alleging Amazon infringed on Walmart trade secrets by recruiting several executives from the Bentonville-based retailer. An Amazon spokesperson declared:

We're not interested in other people's trade secrets – we're interested in hiring the brightest, hardest-working and most talented people, wherever they might be. Even if every single Amazon.com employee came from Wal-Mart, it would still be less than two-tenths of one percent of their work force. They're about 300 times our size and probably sold more yesterday than we sold in the last 12 months ('Wal-Mart Sues Amazon.Com' 1998).

Amazon followed a similar textbook against the trade unions that, already in 2000, tried to organise warehouse and customer service workers in the US. Amazon's spokesperson declared publicly:

We hired intelligent and dedicated employees, and we trust them to make decisions about what's best for their future but obviously we don't believe a union is best for their future or our customers. (*The New York Times* 2000a)

Internally, the company catechised its middle management with the following messages:

Reasons a Union is Not Desirable. [...] Unions actively foster distrust toward supervisors. [...] They also create an uncooperative attitude among associates by leading them to think they are 'untouchable' with a union. [...] A union promotes and thrives upon problems between supervisors and employees. Front-line supervisors who deal effectively with associate problems avoid associates believing they need a union. (*The New York Times* 2000a)

In all these struggles, Amazon claimed that its goal was to provide its customers with “low prices” and “excellent quality of service”. To pursue this mission, Amazon was ready to disrupt any convention and institutional constraints, from trade and fiscal obligations to labour relations. Amazon was not alone in this march: Google's motto “Break the rules, you can apologize later”, or Mark Zuckerberg's slogan “Move fast, break things”, expressed the same ethos.

However, in the mid of the 2010s, the decade that followed the Great Recession, Amazon and the other big techs could no longer cast themselves as outsiders. The revolution was over, and Amazon had seized the power. In the space of two decades the company had been able to become a central actor in the market displacing distributors, suppliers, and sellers. Amazon success was celebrated, but it started attracting a growing number of critiques. The company came under closer scrutiny of the press, which raised questions over Amazon's commercial strategies that suffocated suppliers²⁵, and tax optimisation escamotages²⁶. A landmark inquiry of the *New York Times* shed light on Amazon's controversial labour practices in its headquarter as well as in its warehouses. Reporters made a portrait of a company pursuing the permanent mobilisation of employees, with a corporate culture that

²⁵ The most complete examination of Amazon's monopoly strategy is illustrated in the landmark essay of Lina Khan, who would later be appointed chairwoman of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) by the US President Joe Biden. Khan's work inspired a series of investigation on Amazon. The US Congress initiated investigation of Amazon's market power and its role as a gatekeeper for digital markets in June 2019. Before and concurrent with this investigation, many international and US enforcement authorities also opened antitrust investigations into Amazon's business practices. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is investigating Amazon's past acquisitions activity. The FTC is also reportedly investigating Amazon's treatment of third-party sellers and its cloud services business. Additionally, Amazon reportedly faces antitrust scrutiny by state attorneys general offices in California, Washington, and New York. The European Commission began its in-depth antitrust investigations of Amazon in July 2019, focusing "on the use by Amazon of accumulated, competitively sensitive information about Marketplace sellers, their products and transactions on the Amazon marketplace, which may inform Amazon's retail business decisions" (*Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial, and Administrative Law of the Committee on The Judiciary of the House of Representatives 2020*, 253). In late 2022, Amazon and the EU Commission reached a deal to end the investigation. Amazon avoided a major fine but agreed to changes that had long been sought by third-party merchants: give them equal access to the Buy Box, stop using non-public data about merchants, allow outside sellers to participate in Amazon's Prime program even if they do not use Amazon's logistics business (*The New York Times 2022*). At the European national level, Italian antitrust authorities have also begun and concluded investigations on Amazon's e-commerce and logistic activities, noting that "Amazon's presence has significantly influenced the competitive dynamics of this market: in just four years, Amazon has become the leading player in the domestic deferred e-commerce delivery market and the second player in express delivery. Amazon's performance is undoubtedly attributable to the competitive advantage it derives, on the supply side, from its vertical integration and, on the demand side, from the countervailing buying power it enjoys as a purchaser of delivery services. There is, therefore, the possibility that Amazon may in the future be the only player able to take advantage of the growth potential of the parcel delivery market resulting from the development of e-commerce, with a negative effect on the competitiveness of the market and, therefore, on the quality of services" (*AGCOM 2020*, 63).

²⁶ In 2017, the US Internal Revenue Service IRS reclaimed from Amazon a more than \$1,5 billion over transactions involving a Luxembourg unite between 2005 and 2006 (*Wall Street Journal 2017*). The IRS case involved "transfer pricing", which arises when different units of multinational companies transact with each other. Amazon's plan, known internally as "Project Goldcrest", was to transfer US assets, such as software, trademarks and customer lists, to the Luxembourg headquarters and to have the vast bulk of the income from Amazon's European businesses taxed in Luxembourg at a very low rate. The plan, a complex 28-steps mechanism, was disclosed by *The Guardian* (*The Guardian 2016*). The litigation went in front of a US federal judge. Eventually, the US Tax Court ruled in favour of Amazon, stating that the IRS had made arbitrary determinations and abused its discretion in several instances. The Project Goldcrest's mechanism was targeted by the European Commission's antitrust authorities between 2016 and 2017. At the end of an investigation, the European regulator ordered Amazon to pay \$300 million to Luxembourg, home of the company's European headquarters and where regulators said the company received unfair tax treatment. According to regulators, Amazon and Luxembourg had violated a law meant to prevent companies from receiving special tax benefits from European governments (*The New York Times 2017b*). Amazon filed appeal to the decision, and, in May 2021, the General Court of the European Union struck down the 2017 of the European regulators. These judicial decisions did not silence activists and experts' critiques on Amazon tax optimisation and tax avoidance practices, and the question remains a subject of political debate and judicial as well as journalistic investigation. Another interesting element that has been recently raised is the issue of subsidies, to which Amazon has been used to resort for a long time. The US-based NGO Good Jobs First, published a report in which the total amount of subsidies collected by Amazon is estimated at \$4,18 billion in the US and at least \$600 million worldwide (K. P. Thomas et al. 2022).

promoted competition, effort and devotion at cost of putting employees under unbearable pressure (*The New York Times* 2015). The NYT's story was not totally new²⁷, but it confirmed a growing trend of dissatisfaction toward Amazon's commercial and labour practices. The whole image of platforms and big techs started obfuscating, with raising concerns over the concentration of considerable power in the hands of corporations. It was the resurgence of the "social" critique that the new spirit of capitalism had supposedly managed to disarm. It revealed that Amazon economic model, despite its innovation, was restoring some elements of the old spirit of capitalism.

Amazon was a network, but it had also become a vertically integrated firm. Products and services were diversified (the variety of items sold by Amazon was unprecedented), but the logistic process was typical of the mass production. Amazon was a platform, but it carried out most of its operations inhouse with a workforce of hundreds of thousand permanent employees. By fully developing the platform paradigm, Amazon was in fact revitalising fordism. This bet for the vertical integration seems to be at odds with Amazon's platform nature. In fact, Amazon's "Plat-Fordist" business model rely on the combination of both. As we saw, Amazon's logistics infrastructure is complementary to Amazon's marketplace: Amazon logistics facilities ship either Amazon's product or independent sellers' goods. Sellers use both Amazon website and Amazon facilities to sell and ship their product, and Amazon extracts revenue from this service. Amazon's most profitable segment, AWS, is a spinoff of Amazon logistics and marketplace operation. Retail operations continue to be the platform's largest source of revenue, while AWS is a key source of its overall profits. In 2019, Amazon's cloud business contributed over 60% of Amazon's total operating income, despite accounting for only 12,5% of its total revenue. When consumers visit its website, Amazon's private-label products, such as AmazonBasics or its Kindle E-Readers, are listed for sale alongside independent merchants. It is estimated that about 37% of Amazon's third-party sellers rely on Amazon as their sole source of income. Amazon's unique features in the e-commerce is its fast and free shipping on an extremely broad selection of products (much broader than traditional retailers). In other words, Amazon built a (multiple) market segment in which it exerts absolute dominance, and this dominance relies on its large logistic capacity. On the one hand, companies that bet on the marketplace without investing in a logistic infrastructure, as eBay, were overtaken by Amazon's

²⁷ Press coverage over working conditions at Amazon, especially in the warehouse had already popped up in the previous years in the US (*The New York Times* 2000a; *The Morning Call* 2011), the UK (*The Sunday Times* 2008). Despite sparking a certain attention in the media and indignation in the public, these accounts of labour conditions in Amazon facilities remained seemed to remain just an isolated episode. At the turn of the first decade of 2000, the public opinion in Western countries had just started debating about the emergence of a new economic model: the platform, a new kind of business able to facilitate transactions between producers and consumers. Amazon still appeared as a story of improving consumer welfare and not (yet) as an economic actor harmful for workers. Still in 2013, during a visit to Amazon's FC in Chattanooga, Tennessee, President Obama praised Amazon for creating jobs, training workers and contributing to "strengthen the middle class" (*The Verge* 2013).

explosive growth. On the other hand, traditional retailers such as Walmart or Carrefour, that did not leverage on a platform framework, lagged behind Amazon's pace of innovation. Amazon's platformist synthesis appear as a synthesis of fordist and post-fordist paradigms: vertical integration ensures control, while platformisation provides flexibility.

This chapter has showed that logistics is crucial to understand Amazon's business model. But what were the characteristics of this labour process? How did they evolve and co-evolve with the company's business model? What kind of problems in terms of labour politics does this co-evolution raise, especially in terms of adaptation of Amazon model to the local socio-economic context of the overseas countries where it deploys its operations? In the next chapter we are going to shed light on the functioning of Amazon's logistics facilities and on what kind of labour process is built the platformist paradigm.

2. Amazon labour process from the start-up to the industrialised paradigm

In the previous chapter, I have illustrated why logistics and vertical integration is crucial to understand Amazon's successful economic model. Amazon labour process has been the object of numerous works for the last decade across the US and beyond, which emphasised the taylorist nature of Amazon's labour process (Barthel and Rottenbach 2017; Delfanti 2021a; 2021b; Massimo 2019; 2020b; Vgontzas 2020).

The persistence of taylorist principles beyond the post-war fordist era is not a recent discovery. Already in the 1993, the French sociologist Danièle Linhart questioned the enthusiastic announcements of a post-Taylorist era (D. Linhart 1993; see also Clarke 1990; Vallas 1999)²⁸. During the late 1990s, many authors questioned the dominant idea that the contradictions of scientific management had been transcended. The term taylorism was refurbished to describe the transformations in the capitalist workplace. In 2001, the American magazine *The Nation*, published an article on the growing "surveillance and constant psychological pressure to work harder". According to the author Christian Parenti, this phenomenon was due to the diffusion of new ICT in the workplaces, from Customer Relationship Management to Warehouse Management systems:

From the low-tech body and bag searches at retail stores, to computerized ordering pads at restaurants and the silent monitoring of e-mail and phone traffic in offices, the American workplace is becoming ever more transparent to employers and oppressive for employees. Along with being invasive and increasing the rate of exploitation, on-the-job surveillance makes it easier for supervisors to fire or harass restive workers. Rather than "freeing workers" and "flattening hierarchies"—as the New Economy hype would have it—computers, databases and high-speed networks are pushing social relations on the job toward a new digital Taylorism, where every motion is watched, studied and controlled by and for the boss. (Parenti 2001)

Drawing from survey-based cluster analysis of changes to "socio-productive models" in French firms between 1992 and 2005, Amossé and Coutrot (2008; 2011), not only found empirical evidence of persistence but also of an increase in the relative importance of what they called a "neo-taylorist

²⁸ See also the considerations of Coriat, at that time a committed supporter of the idea that Toyotism represented a paradigmatic break in the organisation of work: "Taylor, the heart of his teaching, at least, is still present and very much alive at the centre of the complex systems that are supposed to be the most 'modern' and the most sophisticated" (Coriat 1990, 15).

model”. This model was the most common among French firms (36% of workplaces and 35% of employees), especially those in the manufacturing of producer and intermediate goods, in mass retail and cleaning. The organization of work was labelled as “just-in-time”, but it was characterized by low levels of employee’s discretion, strict management control and low employee participation – in contrast with the “Toyotist” model. Similar findings were illustrated at the same time in Germany and elsewhere (Pfeiffer 2007). Authors started claiming that taylorist features could in fact also be found in allegedly post-fordist forms of organization (such as the lean production system in particular), which have been enabled not least by information technologies. Though, perhaps relying more on teamwork, job rotation and formal employee involvement, post-fordism often combines these features with strict instructions and supervision (Crowley et al. 2010). In the same years, the notion of “digital taylorism” was revitalized by influent authors and introduced in the academic debate (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011, 72).

Brown and co-authors conceived of digital taylorism as a sort of “migration” of scientific management principles from manufacturing to the service sector, including office work, investment banking, or customer contact centres – defined as “the equivalent of the fordist production line [...] where there is an extensive use of scripts which instruct employees about what to say, often with online instructions on what to do” (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011, 72) – enabled by the new ICT (see also, Aneesh 2006). This process started in the 1980s, accelerated in the 1990s and emerged at a global scale with the diffusion of internet and the digitalisation of every-day life brought about by platforms (Aneesh 2009; Cardon and Casilli 2015; Casilli 2019).

It was precisely with the development of the platform economy that the notion of digital taylorism re-emerged (Nachtwey and Staab 2015; Butollo et al. 2018; Altenried 2020). The term is used to refer to an organisation of work in which digital devices (real-time tracking and tracing, digitally supported assistance systems and automation) not only enable the three distinct principles of taylorism as described by Braverman – i.e., (1) the “dissociation of the labour process from the skills of the workers”, (2) the “separation of conception from execution”, (3) management’s use of its “monopoly over knowledge to control each step of the labour process and its mode of execution” (Braverman 1974, 112–20)²⁹ – but even increase them, thus fostering an “augmented” taylorism (Delfanti 2021a; Moore and Woodcock 2021):

²⁹ On the issue of knowledge and data accumulation, this quote from Braverman deserves to be mentioned, in so far it illustrates that the question was critical already in scientific management: “The data derived from all these systems, from the crudest to the most refined, are used as the basis for engineering the “human factor” in work design. Since the accumulation of data does away with the need to time each operation, management is spared the friction that arises in such a procedure, and the worker is spared the knowledge that the motions, time, and labor cost for his or her job have been precalculated, with “humane” allowances for rest, toilet, and coffee time, before anyone was hired and perhaps even before the building was erected” (Braverman 1974, 178).

[W]hile Taylor, Gilbreth and others faced a back-and-forth between their studies and improvements in the production process, digital Taylorism's horizon is a system of real-time control, feedback and correction. In this sense, the growing importance of algorithmic management based on sensors, networked devices and integrated software architectures can also be interpreted as a form of a real-time or cybernetic Taylorism (Altenried 2019, 122).

In the same context, since the mid 2010s, many authors proposed the concept of “algorithmic management” – although an earlier, isolated, use of this term dates back to the early 1990s (Vallas 1993). Numerous definitions of algorithmic management exist, and they all revolve around the multiple possibilities of combination of information technologies for the administration of an organisation (M. K. Lee et al. 2015; Ajunwa, Crawford, and Schultz 2017; Moore, Akhtar, and Upchurch 2018; Adams-Prassl 2019; Mateescu and Nguyen 2019; Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020; Stark and Pais 2020; Wood 2021; Baiocco et al. 2022; De Stefano and Taes 2022). The technologies that empower algorithmic management are of different kinds.

The notion of “algorithm” has existed since the antiquity and they have been used for millennia for all kinds of problems that are susceptible to standardisation and encoding (Chabert 2012). Indeed, algorithms are nothing else than a finite sequence of rigorous instructions, typically used to solve a class of specific problems or to perform a computation. In other words, they could be defined as a set of procedures (predefined rules) inscribed on different kind of supports, from paper to line code, and whose purpose is to prescribe the execution of complex operations, from recipes to bureaucratic procedures. Over the last three decades, following the expansion in the capacity to store, process and communicate information using electronic devices, cloud services and cloud infrastructure (Eurofound 2018; ILO 2021), the possibilities offered by digital algorithms significantly increased: more advanced computer algorithms are nowadays able to improve automatically through experience, giving birth to machine learning and opening new paths of development for artificial intelligence research³⁰.

Social scientists have been focusing on the impact of algorithms on workers-management relations and on working conditions, especially in connection with intertwined processes of digitisation and platformisation (Baiocco et al. 2022). In the platform economy, the introduction of

³⁰ Management can be defined as “a set of tasks which are necessary for the administration of an organisation. These tasks are normally implemented by a specialised position which is at the top of the organisational hierarchy (the managers)” (Baiocco et al. 2022, 6). Drawing from the French engineer and business administration theorist Henri Fayol (1841-1925), Baiocco et al. identify five main tasks of management: planning, staffing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling. All five are reshaped by the introduction of digital and AI algorithms in workspaces. With these technologies Fayol's tasks can be supported or even partly implemented with computer algorithms. Such a transformation raises the question of the automation of management (Adams-Prassl 2019; Baiocco et al. 2022).

digital devices for the coordination and monitoring of work went in parallel with the erosion of conventional employment relations (Huws et al. 2017; Abdelnour and Bernard 2018; Rosenblat 2018; Thelen 2018; Hassel and Sieker 2022). This phenomenon is older and broader than the emergence of platforms (Weil 2014; L. F. Katz and Krueger 2019): algorithmic management is embedded in an historical process of shifting toward casualisation and outsourcing of work. However, the “fissuring” of the workplace is magnified in the case of platforms, where the diffusion of digital technologies that allowed capital to break the traditional wage-labour nexus and circumvent conventional regulations of labour without renouncing to forms of control typical of scientific management (Woodcock 2021; Pignot 2023). Indeed, a hybrid form of control seems to emerge both across conventional and unconventional employment settings: one that combines the real-time control (typical of direct supervision) with the restriction of workers’ self-latitude typical of technical control³¹.

Despite drawing from the study of digital platforms, algorithmic management and digital taylorism are not confined to this part of the economy. Increasingly, key elements of these organisational models have been identified in conventional productive and employment settings (Wood 2021): most significantly in warehouses (Gaborieau 2012; Gent 2018; Gautié, Jaehrling, and Perez 2020; Krzywdzinski, Schneiß, and Sperling 2024); couriers and last mile delivery (Davidson and Kestenbaum 2014; Alimahomed-Wilson 2020); also, though to a lesser degree, in retail (Van Oort 2019), manufacturing (Briône 2017; 2020; Moro and Rinaldini 2020), public transport (Hodson 2014), marketing (Briône 2020; Walsh 2019), hotels and restaurants (Orlikowski and Scott 2014), call centres (Briône 2020), consultancy (Buckingham and Goodall 2015), journalism (Christin 2018), lawyer profession and police (Brayne and Christin 2021), tech professionals (Liu 2023).

Amazon’s labour process is a case in point of digital taylorism and algorithmic management and it has been studied in this vein (Barthel and Rottenbach 2017; Delfanti 2021a; 2021b; Massimo 2019; 2020b; Vgontzas 2020). However, these studies lack an historicization of Amazon labour process. Other works stresses the importance of connecting the labour process to the co-evolving conditions of capitalist political economies (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2020; Cirillo et al. 2023; Kassem 2023). Yet they also miss the genealogy of Amazon’s labour process, its turning points and impasses.

³¹ I refer here to the notions of direct and technical control developed by Richard Edwards and other labour process theorists (Edwards 1979; on the hybridisation of forms of control made possible by digitalisation see Fana, Massimo, and Moro 2022). I further discuss the notion of control and coercion in the introduction to Part II. As personal control relies more on either new technology of real-time control (e.g. VPN, chats and other communication software), or forms of standardization (e.g., recording or reporting), the boundaries become blurred between forms of control.

In this chapter, I am going to show the genealogy of the current labour process in Amazon's FCs. I will show that in the initial phase, the labour process was rather disorganised and rooted in a start-up spirit, where the division of work was confused, most tasks manual, and hierarchies informalized. Under the pressure of Bezos and investors' plans for growth, however, the work process taylorised: it became more normalised, bureaucratised, and industrialised. A transition that culminated with (partial) automation and the unfolding of a neo-fordist labour process which constitutes the thrust of Amazon's platform business model.

2.1. First phase: finding the best "one best way" (1995-2004)

As we saw in the previous chapter, during its first decade, Amazon grew fast but in a confused way. Operations reflected this uncertainty. The entire supply and distribution system had to be set up and adapted to the specific business model of Amazon. During this first phase, Amazon labour process was completely manual, but it rapidly adopted the dominant model for logistics retail, Walmart. Walmart's model however, turned out to be unfit for Amazon's specific e-commerce business. A new "best way" had to be found.

2.1.1. Getting the goods: from just-in-time to ahead-of-time

In 1995, Amazon offered over one million book titles, of which only two thousand were stocked in company inventory (C. S. Price 2004). The vast majority of titles was shipped from publishers or wholesalers to Amazon's FC in Seattle. Amazon initial model functioned according to a basic just-in-time demand-driven model: books were ordered from distributors (and later publishers) only after customers had ordered them from it. The goal was to operate with significantly less inventory costs than physical bookstores. The strategy turned out to be appropriate. In 1996–97, Bezos claimed, Amazon.com generated more than \$300,000 a year in revenue per operating employee, compared to physical bookstores that generated about \$95,000 a year in operating revenue per employee³².

How was Amazon's supply chain organised? Amazon ordered books from Ingram and Baker & Taylor, two major distributors, and then resold and shipped them to customers via the US Postal Service or other private operators such as UPS. At that time Ingram and Baker & Taylor shipped almost every order the same day it was received, with virtually every shipment delivered within 24 to 48 hours. For that service, customers like Amazon had to pay the wholesale markup, which was a 10% to 20% over what they would pay if they bought the book directly from a publisher. On top of that Amazon.com had the additional costs of packaging and shipping books to customers

³² That goal was eventually to be abandoned, as far as Amazon growth escalated.

(approximately \$4 for each order). Nevertheless, in order to establish and expand a loyal base of customers, Amazon's policy was to offer significant discounts, slashing the retail prices on virtually all of these titles. The company could afford such a policy precisely because its overhead costs were much lower than those of a common book superstore. Another supply problem Amazon successfully dealt with was that distributors sent no less than 10 books per shipment. This was at odds with Amazon business model, who tried to have a large but not thick catalogue (the long tail). Initially, Amazon asked for a flat program, but distributors refused, a sign that Amazon had not yet enough leverage vis-à-vis suppliers. Thus, Amazon tried another way and found a loophole in Ingram's policy: ordering books that the distributor did not have in stock. In that case, only book in stock were shipped.

Apart from prices, time delivery was another critical factor for the viability of Amazon's business model. Also, this factor had to be resolved at the operational level. In this early stage, the shipping time was four days for books that distributors had in stock. If Ingram had them in its nearby warehouse, the book could often make it out in one day. If a book had to be ordered from a publisher, delivery to the customer might take a week or two. If the book was out of stock at both the publisher and distributors, it was listed as "shipped in four to six weeks or maybe never", while books that were out of print fell into the "maybe never" category (Brandt 2014).

However, customers weren't willing to wait more than two days to receive a popular bestseller they knew they could find on the shelf in any bookstore. So, in November 1996, Amazon leased a 93.000-squarefoot warehouse in Dawson Street, South Seattle, from which it could pack and ship books to customers as soon as orders were placed. There, it stocked enough copies of the bestsellers so it could fulfil those orders quickly. Soon, the company was inventorying between 200 and 300 thousand of the best-selling books in its Seattle facility (and later, in a second warehouse that Amazon opened in Wilmington, Delaware, in September 1997). Bestsellers came from a network of about a dozen different wholesalers – among them Ingram and Baker & Taylor were the largest. The rest, between 400.000 to 1,5 million books, came directly from 20.000 different publishers.

Amazon was figuring out that a pure just-in-time model was not viable, because the JIT approach did not guarantee short and predictable time delivery. The solution was to segment supply. One part of supply needed to be stocked waiting for orders. Another part, the longtail, could be treated according to a lean approach. Amazon would soon learn to segment customers and work in order to manage and plan the whole supply and distribution chain.

Another significant change of this relocation was that the warehouse was separated from the offices. Amazon's first two warehouses – the one in Dawson and the one in New Castle, Delaware, that Amazon leased in 1998 – were completely manual. The entire inventory was processed by hand:

items, that were already in Amazon's stock, were picked manually, transported to the packaging table, packed, and then shipped by mail; orders coming directly from distributors were simply redirected to customers. As customer orders increased, their operations were forced to scale dramatically.

For the first time, Amazon resorted to temporary staff agencies to recruit people for the warehousing tasks. Even today, in the US, as well as in many European countries, including France, Italy, Spain, UK, Poland (but not Germany), warehouse workers start as temporary agency workers. According to Spector, the warehouse, filled up with a couple of dozen "Gen-X Seattleites" – "musicians, poets, geeks, students [...] trying to make ends meet" – "quickly developed a subculture of its own, separate and apart from management" (Spector 2002, 113).

2.1.2. Walmart's logistics revolution. A best-way for Amazon

During its first two years of existence, Amazon warehousing capacity expanded sixfold. It enabled Amazon to buy the bulk of its books directly from publishers, which was a cost saving and also a reduction of its reliance on Ingram and other major distributors. With distribution centres on both coasts, Amazon could dramatically reduce the time between taking the order and delivery in the customer's mailbox. This new warehouse capacity was enough to stockpile and ship 95 percent of its orders for in-print books the day the orders were received. "The logistics of distribution are the iceberg below the waterline of online bookselling," Bezos would once say at that time (Brandt 2014). Amazon was just at the beginning of taking the process of stockpiling and distributing books into his own hands.

This logistic expansion was not an original dynamic at all. In those years the "logistics revolution" had already started, and Walmart was at its forefront.

2.1.2.1. Walmart's Technological Innovations

Logistics innovation is also at the base of another monopoly firm, Walmart. Walmart's "logistics revolution" is embedded in the broader transformation of the American political economy (Vidal 2012; Hacker et al. 2021; Thelen 2025), but they also relied on important technological innovations.

For what concerns this aspect, retail applications of IT were first circumscribed to few financial and inventory-management functions. It was in the 1970s that IT development acquired two crucial functions: fostering the integration of systems for reliable tagging and automatic identification; point-of-sale (POS) scanning and recording devices such as electronic registers, credit cards, and check

(“electronic fund transfer”, EFT³³) readers. The standardisation of workplace and supply chain procedures began in this period with the development of the Universal Product Code (UPC) system by some major food suppliers and grocery chains. It was a landmarking innovation, which paved the way for a new system of automated checkout counters equipped with bar code scanners and it “created an opportunity for efficient integration of the front-end, financial, and inventory-management aspects of the business process” (Petrovic and Hamilton 2006, 116). At the same time, its adoption was an expensive investment³⁴, and the condition for its full capacity was that at least 70-80% of the products were coded. However, the benefits promised by this technology convinced first the supermarket and then the discounter industry to introduce it during the following years. In the 1980s the discounter industry became the champion of the UPC, driving its diffusion along the entire supply chain³⁵.

At the high end of the chain, there was a galaxy of atomized manufacturers (most of them characterised by a relatively high level of import). At the low end, there was intense competition among discounters. This double pressure made particularly useful the introduction of the barcode and easy for discounters to impose on suppliers. Thus Walmart, as well as other big-box retailers started pressuring manufacturers to tag all their products before the delivery, and in general to implement rapid and efficient systems of delivery. A second similar innovation introduced by Walmart was the electronic data interchange (EDI) standards and codes for shipping containers and intermediate products. EDI protocols “facilitated rapid transmission of large amounts of information with far greater accuracy than possible via paper and manual transactions. Like bar codes, EDI involves both technological developments and standardization of methods for data transfer. At this point, standards have been developed for business-to-business communications, including purchase orders, shipping invoices, and funds transfer. And by eliminating the clerical and mailing activity associated with paper-based information, EDI reduces costs, time delays, and errors” (Abernathy et al. 1999, 62). EDI required hardware and a common software platform capable of capturing and moving information efficiently in a standardised language, and this was made possible in the 90s by the development of informatics and the falling cost of computing. Walmart, Kmart and other discounters were the first to introduce these systems, which made real-time connection between point-of-sales, distribution centres and vendors, thus integrating the supply chain of retailers.

³³ EFT is the electronic transfer of money from one bank account to another, either within a single financial institution or across multiple institutions, via computer-based systems, without the direct intervention of bank staff.

³⁴ “When a major U.S. department store, for example, decided to adapt a system of bar codes in the late 1980s, it needed to modify 40,000 registers, at a cost of \$200 to \$300 per register. Additional major investments were required in software and hardware for operating the system at the store and enterprise level, as well as the costs associated with training workers to use those systems” (Abernathy et al. 1999, 61).

³⁵ It sped up checkout and improved inventory management (Leibowitz 1999).

This became particularly important since retailers had started automatising their warehouses (Halebsky 2018, 219). Walmart was a pioneer in the reconfiguration of warehouses, which were renamed to “distribution centers” (DCs). The nominal change reflected a substantial shift in the management of this pivotal facilities in Walmart network. Distribution centres were regional nodes, receiving commodities from suppliers coming through an increasingly longer supply chain. In traditional warehouses most new merchandise was meant to be stocked for an undefined period before reaching its destination. The time spent by saleable goods in the warehouse was a downtime, in which commodities were not valorised: the owner of the products was losing money. A Walmart distribution centre, by contrast, was intended as a platform for *crossdocking* and *sorting* products rather than simply *stock* them. Inventory turnover had to be much higher for the retailers in order to ensure low margins while remaining profitable.

2.1.2.2. *Walmart’s distribution centres*

How did the new distribution centres operated, and what were its salient features? A DC “consists of bays for inbound and outgoing trucks, an automated, fastmoving conveyor network connecting them, and a sophisticated information system to control movement from receiving to shipping docks as well as process the transactions relating to those shipments” (Abernathy et al. 1999, 63). A first distinction with traditional warehouse is the size and the layout: a typical warehouse built in the 1980s by a department store was about 650.000 square feet in terms of floor space and was equipped with about fifty bays for loading and unloading trucks. A typical DC was smaller, 300.000 square feet, but equipped with far more doors: about 150³⁶. Another main difference concerns the size and composition of the workforce. Simple warehouses employed hundreds of people, usually working in a single shift. Jobs included the loading and unloading of trucks, reception and inspection of items, “picking and packing” tasks, i.e. assembling outgoing orders for stores, adjustment to space limitations arising from unexpected delays in shipping out or arrival of orders. The capital-worker ratio reflected the low content of technology in the warehouse (essentially forklifts and other engines): capital incorporated in infrastructure and machinery was about \$8 to \$10 million (in 1997 dollars). The new DC, by contrast, had a much higher investment in fixed capital: \$60 to \$70 million (always in 1997 dollars), even if, and this is crucial for business planning, a distribution centre usually has a relatively short payback period (Abernathy et al. 1999, 64). Rapid processing in a distribution centre involved sophisticated and powerful computing capacity: a typical centre must handle hundreds of

³⁶ A typical distribution centre spanned one million square feet and was operated 24 hours a day by a staff of 700 associates. It was highly automated and designed to serve the distribution needs of approximately 150 stores within an average radius of 200 miles. When orders were pulled from stock, a computerized “pick to light” system guided associates to the correct locations.

thousands of transactions associated with inbound and outbound flows on a daily basis³⁷. Modern distribution also required expensive and advanced materials-handling machineries, such as conveyors, and information technologies, such as laser diode scanners, sensors and switches controlled by microprocessors³⁸. These mechanical and digital technologies operate in a complementary way. Scanners along the conveyors permit the real-time identification and routing of packages once they are unloaded from trucks. In this way, the physical flow is paralleled by an informational flow. The informational systems plus the conveyor not only replaced tasks of manual handling and manual inventory check, but they became cheaper as long as prices of information technologies decreased. The global result was a reduction of the cost of operations with equal or higher volumes.

The organisation of work in a DC was also different compared to a traditional warehouse: a state-of-the-art facility employed around 500 workers, distributed along two shifts: equipment running time is therefore longer and reflects a leaner planification of fluxes. The lower number of employees in a DC reflected the partial automation of administrative and handling tasks. Furthermore, many administrative tasks, such as inventory management, became standardised functions that did not need any more to be executed on the ground but can be centralised and moved to a single office which serve multiple warehouses.

The location of DCs was designed for each one to serve region as large as Southern California and about 150 stores located within a radius of 200 miles, with each store receiving approximately five deliveries each week. Each DC could handle every day up to 70.000 containers and pallets of various size, weights and fragility, and operators could load and unload between fifty and seventy-five trucks at any one time. When orders were pulled from stock, a computerized “pick-to-light” system guided associates to the correct locations. “Cross-docking” was introduced to transfer products by conveyor directly from in-bound vehicles to store-bound vehicles, enabling goods to be delivered continuously to warehouses, repacked, and dispatched to stores often without ever sitting in inventory (Abernathy et al. 1999). At Walmart, cross-docking concerned roughly 10% of merchandise in 1994.

The remaining incoming goods required some sort of manual processing in which packages were opened and items selected for repackaging and delivery. This process was more labour intensive,

³⁷ The reduction in costs of computer memory, storage, and processing capability has been critical in providing affordable capacities for processing and operating these systems. For example, increased RAM and high-speed CPUs enable computer systems to process incoming bar code data, matching them with purchase order data.

³⁸ Another fundamental step was the spread of containers. “Containerisation” – the practice of using identically shaped, stackable, interchangeable containers to transport merchandise to and from seaports, train depots, and truck terminals – is another advance that aided the big-box stores. The “box” is now the standard method for transporting large amounts of goods throughout the world (M. Levinson 2006). The increased use of the box has led to the enlargement of the container ships that move the boxes across the waterways of the world (Cudahy 2007; Bologna 2017).

and products used to remain in the distribution centre for longer period. In 1993, analysts estimated Walmart’s cost of inbound logistics, which was part of cost of goods sold, to be 3.7% discount store sales, compared with 4.8% for its direct competitors (S. P. Bradley and Ghemawat 1997).

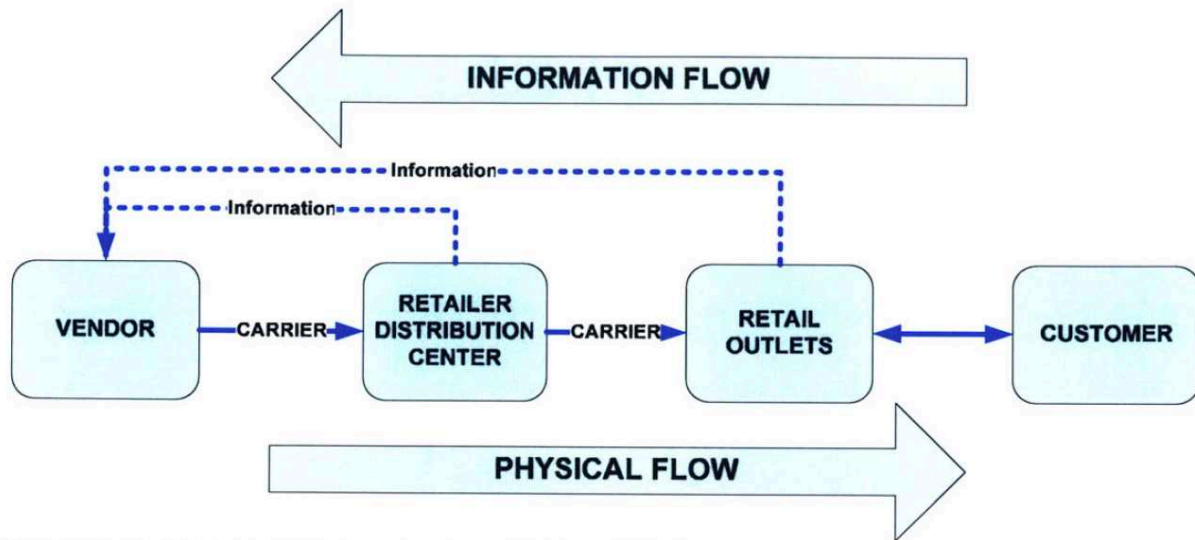


Figure 14 – Supply chain structure in traditional brick-and-mortar retail
(Chiles and Dau 2005)

Walmart’s fleet of trucks delivered more than 688.000 trailer loads of merchandise from its distribution centres to its stores in 1995. Each store received an average of five full or partial truckloads a week, and because Walmart stores were grouped together, trucks could resupply several on a single trip. Returned merchandise was carried back to the distribution centre for consolidation, and since many vendors operated warehouses or factories within Walmart’s territory, trucks also picked up new shipments on the return trip. Roughly 2.500 people drove Walmart’s fleet of more than 2.000 trucks, which ran 60% full on backhauls (S. P. Bradley and Ghemawat 1997). A store could select one of four options regarding the frequency and timing of shipments, and more than half selected night deliveries. For stores located within a certain distance of a distribution centre, an accelerated delivery plan was also available, which allowed merchandise to be delivered within 24 hours. Under the traditional retailing model, the lapsed time between the arrival of the truck and the stocking of a product could took up to five days. A crew of workers was assigned to “inventory control – counting individual items in each carton and comparing the count to the truck’s manifest – unloading, bringing items up to the sales floor for stocking, or storing them in the basement for display in the future” (Abernathy et al. 1999, 68). Usually such a check was not done by individual item (in jargon, “stock keeping unit”, SKU), because this would have taken too long, but by total numbers.

This was faster but allowed a far looser control on inventory. Instead, under the new methods, DC-to-store deliveries typically worked as described by Abernathy and colleagues:

a forty-eight-foot truck arrives at 4 A.M. and is unloaded by two workers by 5 A.M. Then a team composed of sales associates and managers works with staff from the shipping dock to prepare and bring the merchandise to the sales floor by 6 A.M., holding only damaged items for storage. By working as a coordinated team, and unencumbered with the need for manual inventory control, they are able to ensure that goods are ready for sale to shoppers when the retailer opens at 9:30 A.M. Drawing on such a system, a department store receiving 19,000 apparel items in a week, typical for a large store, requires less than sixty person hours to transfer those items from loading dock to the sales floor (Abernathy et al. 1999, 68–69).

The result was a new rationalised system of production and distribution, which responded to the new imperative of lean management, the just-in-time approach, but also increased standardisation and centralisation of control (A. Brenner, Eidlin, and Candaele 2006; Rathke 2006).

2.1.3. Amazon “Walmartian” DCs: striving for automation

Inspired by Walmart logistics success, Amazon didn’t want to build simple warehouses, but “distribution centres”. Amazon needed state-of-the art logistics facilities able to organise books, find them quickly, match them with shipping orders, package them, and get them in the mail. Bezos wanted the most efficient high-tech distribution centres in the world and started hiring people to help bring that about.

To take the reins of the burgeoning distribution system, Bezos needed a logistics expert, an experimented executive that knew how to build and run a logistical network. The obvious place to start hiring from was Walmart³⁹. In August 1997, Amazon hired Richard Dalzell as vice president and chief information officer. For the last seven years, he had worked for Walmart, where he held several management positions, including vice president in the information systems division. Prior to Walmart, he was business development manager for E-Systems, Inc., and seven years before he had been a teleprocessing officer in the United States Army. Few months later, in early 1998, Amazon hired one of Dalzell’s former colleagues, a retired Walmart vice-president of distribution named Jimmy Wright. Wright was asked to build a distribution system ten times larger than it currently was, and not just in the United States but also in Europe, where Amazon was about to put its flag. By the end of 1999, with the money coming from growing revenue and bond offerings, Amazon had built

³⁹ Amazon’s pitching in Walmart executive ranks sparked the first attrition between two companies. Amazon and Walmart were not direct competitors, but it was only a matter of time before they invaded their respective businesses. When Amazon’s new recruits started, in turn, to cherry-pick other executives from Bentonville, Walmart sued Amazon in the Arkansas state court, alleging that they were trying to steal trade secrets.

five high-tech warehouses in the US⁴⁰, plus one in Britain and one in Germany. Like at Walmart, warehouses were renamed “Distribution Centers”. Amazon capacity increased by almost tenfold, to 2,7 million square feet. The company could ship nearly one million boxes a day. At the same time, the company also quadrupled its own computer capacity, while direct employees went over 7.000. The further leap in sales had to tackle with serious problem of under-capacity. As a result, the company sought greater efficiencies through the opening of new, partially automated, facilities, in order to process all customer orders with as little human touch as possible⁴¹ (C. S. Price 2004).

The new “Distribution Centers” were a massive investment for a start-up but the rapid growth in revenue and the need to control operation pushed Amazon to tackle the problems of physical capacity. Somehow Amazon was already going beyond its original pure online player business model. However, it would not be a definitive departure from the platform model. It was rather a movement toward the blending of online and logistic intermediation.

The architect of this network of automated facilities was Wright. During his fifteen months tenure at Amazon, between 1998 and 1999, Wright spent \$300 million in building Amazon’s logistic infrastructure. A distribution centre was built from scratch in Fernley, Nevada; others existing warehouses were purchased and retrofitted, one near Atlanta, two in Kentucky, and one in Kansas. These new warehouses were equipped with state-of-the-art machinery. The main advances introduced in these new automated warehouses were:

- computerised systems that tracked the products with barcode readers and radio transmitters;
- aisles and shelves equipped with blinking lights to guide picker-workers to the right products;
- miles of conveyors that moved inbound and outbound inventory throughout the FCs;
- conveyor sortation systems, called “Crisplant”, that received orders picked by hand, scanned, and sorted them automatically;
- packing systems that enabled orders to be packaged completely by machine.

⁴⁰ A new warehouse was built from scratch in Fernley, Nevada with a cost of \$300 million; the other four facilities were existing warehouses which were purchased and retrofitted: one near Atlanta, two in Kentucky and one in Kansas.

⁴¹ See also this declaration of an Amazon executive reported by Spector: “Every time we touch a product, we are less efficient” Lyn Blake, vice president of Amazon’s vendor group, told a group of stock analysts in the midst of Amazon’s 2000 restructuring (Spector 2002, 246).

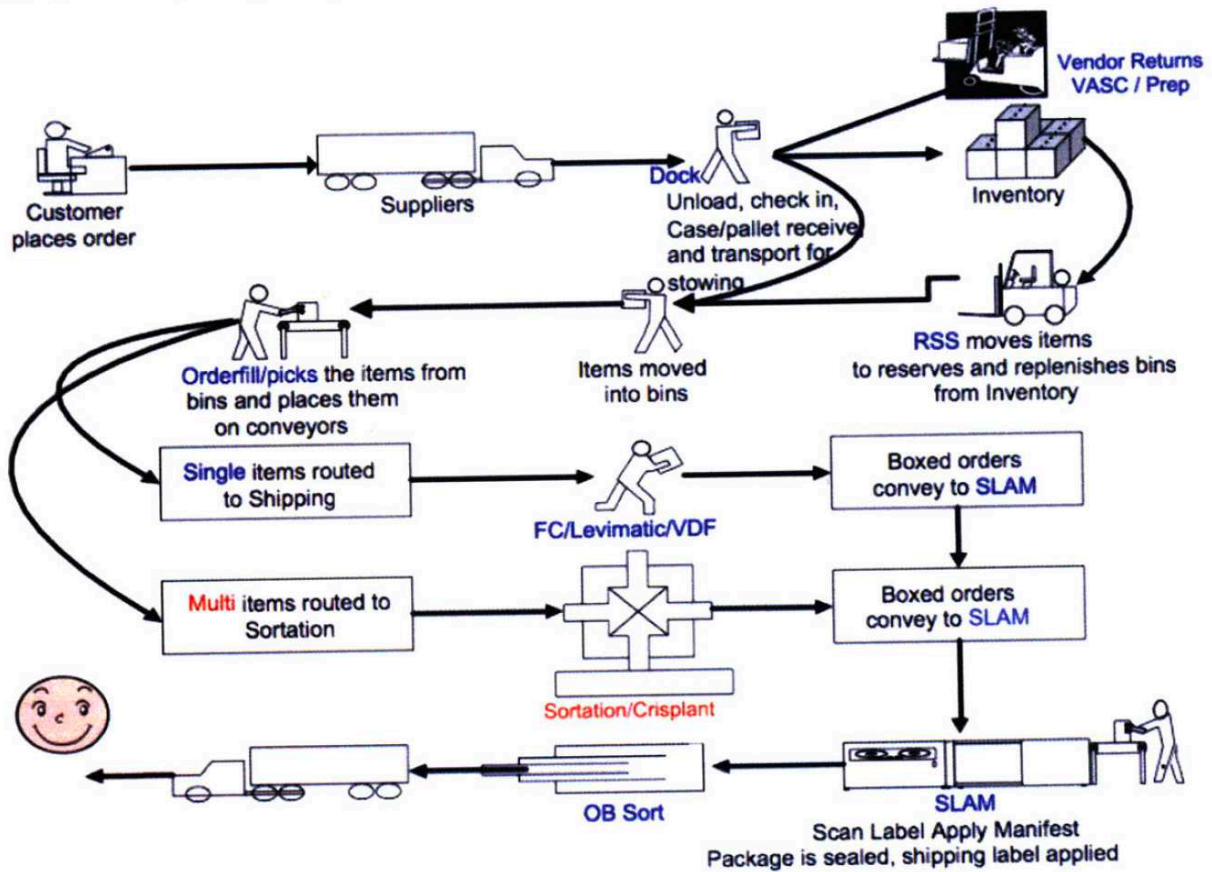


Figure 15 – Process flow in Amazon’s “Auto Sortable” distribution centre of RNO1, Fernley, Nevada (1999)

(Patel 2010)

2.1.3.1. Inbound and outbound macro-processes

The process of orders fulfilment was composed by two separate but concatenated flows: an inbound and an outbound macroprocess.

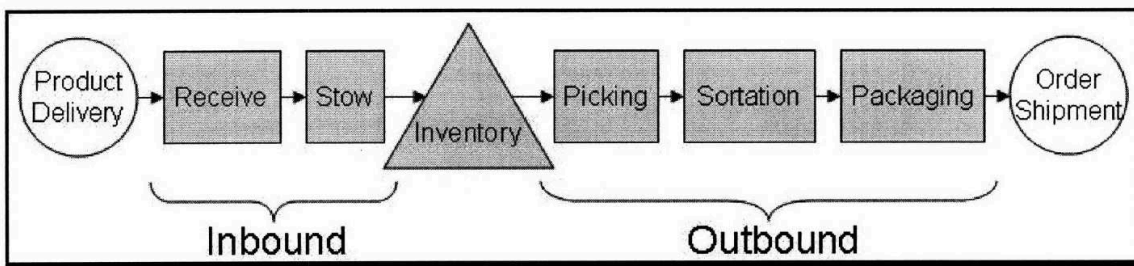


Figure 16 – Scheme of fulfilment workflow in Amazon's sortable FCs

(Z. R. Smith 2008)

The inbound process started with the trucks arriving at the inbound docks. In the early stage of Amazon’s development, trucks were from suppliers. As far as Amazon network grew, the warehouses started exchanging stocks between each other, in order to balance inventory (this process is called “Tranship”) and nowadays a significant part of trucks come from inside Amazon network. In the yard, some Amazon workers called “Marshall” controlled truck traffic, helped by traffic light systems and movable stop signs. Trucks were parked right in front of the warehouse doors and unloaded by forklift drivers or manually. The cardboard boxes were moved to the adjacent receive area. Boxes were registered by workers equipped with scanners and opened. The individual goods were put into black plastic boxes called “totes” or on silver carts, both kind of containers being plastered with a barcode label to identify each one of them. After the receive process, boxes and carts were distributed to the picktowers (the very stock area equipped with shelves and built vertically on two to four floors).

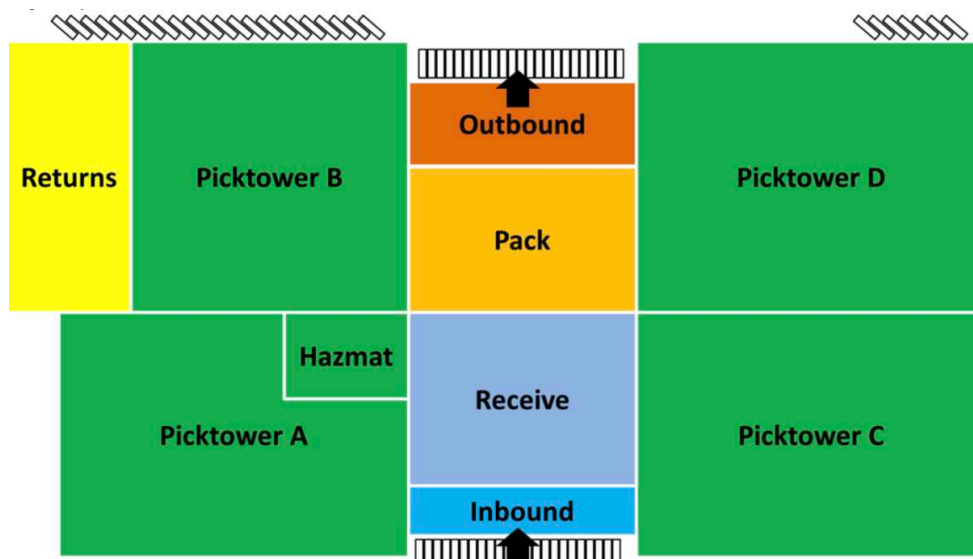


Figure 17 – Layout of Amazon sortable FCs with workflow
(All About Lean 2019)

Once in the picktower, each silver cart, or an unbarcoded cart with barcoded boxes, was assigned to a worker called stower⁴², and each item put into the shelves in a specific case, called bin. One of the basic rules of Amazon warehouse management (and almost proudly recalled), is “chaotic storage”: goods are stored where there is space. This allows space capacity optimisation and, as explained by operation managers interviewed during fieldwork research, to avoid bottlenecks:

“Imagine that we receive massive orders of the same item, say the last book of Prince Harry. What would happen? Had we stowed all the books in the same area, then all the pickers or all the robots would converge

⁴² Later, the FIFO principle would be introduced.

to the area. That would be a mess! Instead, as we stow copies of the same ASIN aleatorily, there is no danger that this would happen: items would be a little bit here, a little bit there and so on...

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 1 – Operation Manager in an Amazon FC, Italy, January 2023⁴³

The condition for a good use of the chaotic storage method is an efficient inventory software and the correct recording of the movement of goods. From this point on, started the outbound flow, which began with pick (the retrieving of individual items), continued with the sortation of the items according to the destination, and terminated with pack and shipment. Pick was carried on by workers equipped with a cart and a tote. At the beginning, Amazon used the common “pick-to-light” system: various lights on the aisles and on individual bins guided pickers to the right location of the order.

Pickers retrieved the item from the bin and then deposit into their carts or their totes. They then delivered their totes to conveyor belts. An operator removed each item from its tote. The item then went through sorting machines which re-dispatched products into customer orders and sent them off on another conveyor to be manually packed and shipped. These were in a nutshell the key macroprocesses in the earliest Amazon’s warehouses. In their essence, they would remain the same through the following decades. Contemporary robotic warehouses still operate according to this macro-layout, even if with significant changes intervened on the top of this design.

2.1.3.2. The failure of Amazon’s “Walmartian” DCs

The distinction between inbound and outbound processes would remain the base of all fulfilment operations in Amazon. However, the powerful automating drive of this initial period eventually turn out to be unfit for Amazon’s business model. Put under pressure by Bezos – who wanted a large-scale distribution network as soon as possible in order to support his plan of fast growth – Wright had designed Amazon network and operations as if Amazon was a brick-and-mortar mass retailer. Walmart had a thick and branched out distribution network. Dozens of distribution centres supplied hundreds of Walmart points of sale. Walmart’s points of sale received goods in a regular and planned rhythm and quantity. Flows of commodity were much more predictable. Amazon, instead, adopted a “direct-to consumer warehousing” (Bishop 2010, 20): the warehouse was directly in contact with the customer, from a logistic point of view. Distribution centres received customer orders and had to fulfil them directly: picking the goods, sorting them according to the destination,

⁴³ Chaotic storage is almost a dogma in Amazon managerial culture. However, there are exceptions. Goods that need to be treated with specific schedule are stocked in pallets in specific zones; “HAZMAT” products – “Hazardous materials” such as aerosol sprays, fragrances, essential oils, paints, and any flammable, poisonous or irritating product – are to be stocked in specific areas of the picktower, protected by a cage; similarly, valuable objects such as jewelry or smartphones, are also stored in specific fenced areas of the warehouse. However, inside this specific zones, HAZMAT and valuable object are stored randomly.

assembling them in case of multiple orders for the same customers, shipping them. In Amazon's business, there was much more variations in orders. Therefore, much less predictability, and the logistic network was much more sensitive to variability in quantity and size, because it could not cushion it through the distribution chain, as – if we consider only Amazon' network and not the delivery which was carried out by third party logistic providers – there was no intermediate step between the warehouse and the customer.

The outcome of this mismatch between Amazon's e-commerce business and its Walmart-like operations was “a mess. It was pretty much how Walmart did all their distribution centers, which was great if you had to send out five thousand rolls of toilet paper. But it was not well suited to small orders”, recalled an Amazon logistics executive (Stone 2013, 161).

As sales and catalogue continued expanding, operations became chaotic, and Amazon it struggled to get profitable. Frequent system outages could shut down facilities for hours and outstanding orders stockpiled on the floor. Facilities were designed to operate in “waves” – moving from minimum capacity to maximum capacity and then back again. At the start of a wave, pickers fanned out across the aisles, each in his or her own zone, to collect customer orders. Pickers retrieved the item from the bin and then deposit into their carts or their totes. They then delivered their totes to conveyor belts that transported them toward sorting machines, which re-dispatched products into customer orders and sent them off on a new conveyor to be packed and shipped.

The problem with the wave method was that the software required pickers to work on separate and independent lists of orders. If almost all pickers completed their lists within forty-five minutes, but a single picker took an additional half an hour, the rest of the team would have to wait and sit idly. Only when the final tote went through the conveyor's chute did the Crisplant sortation system start working at peak capacity. As a result, the machines were operating at full capacity only during brief periods. This created permanent interruptions in the flow and impeded that the different operations were carried on in a continuous sequence (Rubenstein 2006). This was not necessarily an evil for workers, who could enjoy extra breaks, but for a company like Amazon, who strove to maximise its capacity during the holiday season, down-time was a nasty inconvenience.

The internal logistics software, mostly provided by an external partner, was also struggling. It was incapable to deal with the growing expansion of categories: knives were not recognised as special commodities and no specific packaging was requested by the software; toys were treated informatically as books. It was extremely difficult for the company to plan ahead from one shipment to the next, as the company did not store and ship a predictable number or type of orders. The software systems in Amazon's facilities were incapable of precisely tracking inventory and shipments. There was an infinite type of combinations – single or multiple orders, gift-wrapped or standard packaging.

Operation management was often devoid of any protocol to deal with such variability, too many decisions had a large span of consequences. General managers of the distribution centres often improvised their strategies; data on flows were not centralised and synchronised, so they had to continuously pick their phone to coordinate and redistribute orders from warehouses in under-capacity to warehouses who were running at half speed.

2.1.4. The emergence of Amazon's own "best way"

Considered as a whole, this first step toward automation was not successful. As Amazon struggled to become profitable, the huge infrastructure costs of automated site started to come into question. In the middle of 1999 Jimmy Wright left his job at Amazon, and the company hired Jeff Wilke, an engineer trained at Princeton and the MIT during the late 1980s. In his past career, Wilke had joined AlliedSignal, a manufacturing giant – later acquired by Honeywell – where he climbed the ranks to vice president and was infused with principles of lean management.

The arrival of Wilke shortly preceded a sharp turn for the worse in Amazon economic performance. The dotcom bubble was bursting, and Amazon risked being overwhelmed by the tide. In 2000 a quarterly financial loss of \$323 million was reported. A subsequently quarterly loss of \$200 million sent the company share price tumbling by 70%. Losses continued through 2000 with Amazon posting an impressive \$1,4 Billion loss for the year. This all-time low went together with speculation that Amazon would soon file for bankruptcy. On this worrisome background, Wilke was called to fix the operational problems and help Amazon get out of the doldrums.

Upon his arrival at Amazon, Wilke stopped filling his division with retail-distributions veterans and privileged engineers and computer scientists. Wilke predicated the process-driven doctrine of Toyota's lean manufacturing, from the reduction of waste to the inclusion of workers in quality monitoring. He changed the name of the warehouses from the Walmartian "Distribution Center" to the Amazonian "Fulfillment Centers" (FC). In the FCs, Amazon introduced a new accounting systems that for the first time calculated how much money were made or lost on each sold product: it emerged that more than 10% of electronics, kitchen, and tool department were losing money; 5% in the book, music, and video products (Spector 2002, 246). To tackle these inefficiencies, Wilke tried to improve packaging, renegotiate the shipment standards with suppliers, and purge its catalogue from money-losing products. In order to cut costs, he shut down a distribution centre in McDonough, Georgia, which had proven inefficient beyond repair, and fired around 450 full-time employees⁴⁴. Wilke also tried to solve the problems of bottlenecks in the warehouses: his team experimented with trying to

⁴⁴ McDonough was one of the few, if not the unique, FCs that Amazon has closed so far.

run overlapping waves, but that tended to overload the Crisplant sorters and to “blow up” the system, with further and more serious stoppages (Bishop 2010).

In fact, there were more fundamental questions to which Wilke and top Amazon executives had to answer. The failure of Amazon’s Walmart-inspired logistic model was evident. Could it be fixed? In front of this failure, and caught in the midst of a struggle to cut costs, should Amazon insist on investing in logistic operation? Or rather, should it give up and leave the management of its supply chain to an external provider, as eBay and other e-commerce platform were doing? Was distribution a commodity or was it a competency, valuable for Amazon business model? That looked like the most reasonable choice: it would allow the company to save money after burning so much cash to launch its business, and it would also meet investors and analysts’ expectation, based on the downsize-and-distribute paradigm (Forbes 2001; see also Lazonick and O’Sullivan 2000). Despite the dominant doctrine, Amazon’s investment in logistics had fuelled its growth, even if at high cost. Would Amazon business model be viable without its own logistic infrastructure?

In autumn 2000, Bezos, Wilke and Amazon’s top engineers and computer scientists met at Amazon’s FCs in Fernley, Nevada (Stone 2013). They studied the question directly on the ground, and they concluded that the current logistic system was not viable and affordable. However, Amazon did not give up the ambition to support its marketplace with a powerful distribution infrastructure. It was necessary to rebuilt it almost from scratch. While Joe Galli was bringing about a campaign of normalisation inside Amazon’s corporate governance, and while Diego Piacentini shut down the European customer service call centre in the Hague, Wilke restructured logistic operations and infused them with a new spirit, more orthodox but also more adapted to the specific necessities of Amazon’s original business model.

First, with Wilke, the epoch of start-up culture, with its side-effects of improvisation and idleness went to an end. Harsh discipline was enforced. As reported by Stone, “‘When I joined, I didn’t find time clocks,’ Wilke says. ‘People came in when they felt like it in the morning and then went home when the work was done, and the last truck was loaded. It wasn’t the kind of rigor I thought would scale.’” (Stone 2013, 165). Older, sometimes frivolous names for mistakes – for instance, Amazon’s term to describe the delivery of the wrong product to a customer was “switcheroo” – were replaced by more serious denominations, often picked from the Toyotist/Lean management vocabulary: 5S, Kaizen, Gemba, Andon, FIFO etc.

Second, the strict discipline was supported by the introduction of new standards. Wilke’s team devised dozens of metrics, and he ordered FCs’ general managers to monitor them carefully. Data had to be systematically collected on how many shipments each FC received, how many orders were shipped out, and the per-unit cost of packing and shipping each item.

Third – and this was the most decisive change – Amazon’s logistics centre of gravity shifted from automation to algorithms. To escape from bottlenecks and outages, Amazon would have to abandon the Walmart-like system, especially the independent-list picking and the Crisplant automatic sorting machine and write its own software code. This swerve had a series of consequences for labour as well as for management, and overall, for the economic viability of the company.

Wilke’s time developed internal algorithms to integrate the website, where orders were made by customers, with the warehouse management system. New algorithms seamlessly matched demand to the correct FC – balancing geographical proximity and inventory availability, so as to yield the quickest and cheapest delivery – levelling out backlogs and obviating the need for continuous phone calls between FC general managers. Other algorithms were developed to automatically determine inventory allocation: where and when to stock particular products, and how to most efficiently combine various items in a customer’s order in a single box (*The New York Times* 2001). Finally, and of the most importance, algorithms were introduced also in the work process, especially to determine the picker’s optimised path in order to collect items across the FCs.

Concerning automation, Amazon blueprinted and built a new kind of FCs. These were “hybrid FCs”, as they were called inside Amazon. On the one hand, they incorporated only part of the automation technologies – the conveyor and the sortation systems, which proved to fit with Amazon business model – whilst the pick-to-light system⁴⁵, the sorting and the packaging machine were dismissed altogether. On the other hand, the new FCs employed a less automated approach and let algorithms govern workers who were in charge of accomplishing most of the tasks. Employees would bring together their totes from the shelves right to the packing stations, and their movements were carefully coordinated and monitored by software. The first one of these facilities would be opened first in small dimensions in places like Seattle and Las Vegas to handle easily packable items; later they came as large FCs, for instance in Indianapolis and Phoenix.

The new logistics model structured by Wilke and his team would be a success. According to Price’s 2004 MIT engineering dissertation, “these hybrid FCs perform as well, if not better, than the automated facilities” (Price 2004, 7). Experts stressed that waveless picking decreased inventory and increased throughput by as much as 35% (P. Bradley 2007). The increasing role of algorithms had a huge impact on operation. Flows became more predictable and continuous, and FCs increased the accuracy and reliability of shipments. Algorithmic decisions on inventory allocation were millions every hour and helped Amazon to reduce its costs thereby lowering prices and increasing sales.

⁴⁵ It would come back for re-bin in the newest FCs, as I observed during a visit to the BGY1 FC in Bergamo, Northern Italy (2023).

Overall, keeping logistics inhouse (at least in part)⁴⁶ and tightly controlling distribution would allow the company to reduce costs, instead of inflating them, and to customise its operations according to its business strategy.

The competitive edge over off-line retail rivals was the increased concentration of logistics operations within one facility, the FC, instead of dispersing it across a myriad of stores and brokers. The management of flows and the monitoring of work became much easier and efficient. E-commerce logistics was triggering an *industrialisation* of retail: distribution chain became concentrated, and clerk jobs were replaced by warehouse jobs.

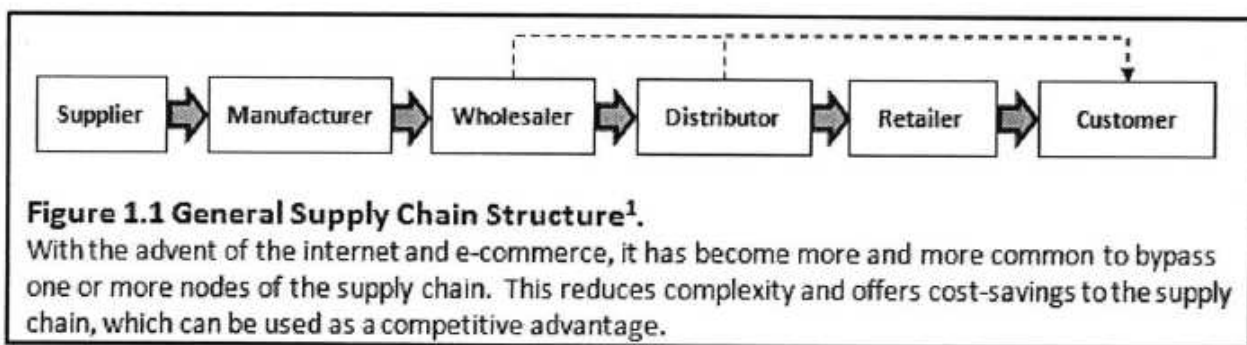


Figure 18 – Supply chain structure in the e-commerce
 (Bishop 2010)

Furthermore, Amazon’s was building an advantage over other e-commerce players. The flowchart below illustrates the four key functions of the online order fulfilment process. In this early stage, Amazon incorporated the first two and part of the three.

The choice of directly managing its warehouse allowed Amazon to reduce cost per unit (the overall expense of fulfilling the order of a particular item) and ship times (how quickly merchandise ordered on the website was loaded onto a truck). By 2002, the fulfilling time for most items in the company’s FCs was as minimal as four hours, down from the three days it had taken when Wilke joined the company, versus the standard twelve hours in the e-commerce industry (Stone 2013).

⁴⁶ As recalled in the previous chapter, in the midst of the dot-com crisis, Amazon resorted to outsourcing for a temporary period. Amazon began to outsource warehousing and shipping of some products, such as books and personal computers. In Japan as well as in Canada, where Amazon had just opened its website, warehouses were run on the base of co-sourcing agreement with local third-party logistics players. After pressuring for years to convince publishers and other product makers to sell goods to it directly, rather than forcing it to pay higher prices from wholesalers. Urged by Wall Street analysts and by its need for cash, Amazon went in partnership with brick-and-mortar retailers (Borders Books & Music) and with the UK-based book chain Waterston, Circuit City (electronics) and Target for a variety of products. A similar partnership had been previously signed with Toys “R” US (August 2000). Amazon got much-needed cash and filled its Fulfillment Centers which the company had been running at overcapacity and in a “improvable” way.

2.2. Second generation labour process (2005-2014): digitalisation

The new Amazon network and its hybrid warehouses – where manual work was governed by algorithms – consolidated in the following years.

Figure 19 shows a slight shrinking of Amazon’s logistics workforce between 2000 and 2002, followed by a rapid recovery after 2004. Regarding the number of facilities, between 2001 and 2005 Amazon opened new FCs, but at a slow rhythm. With the launch of Prime, in 2005, the number of new facilities started increasing at greater speed.

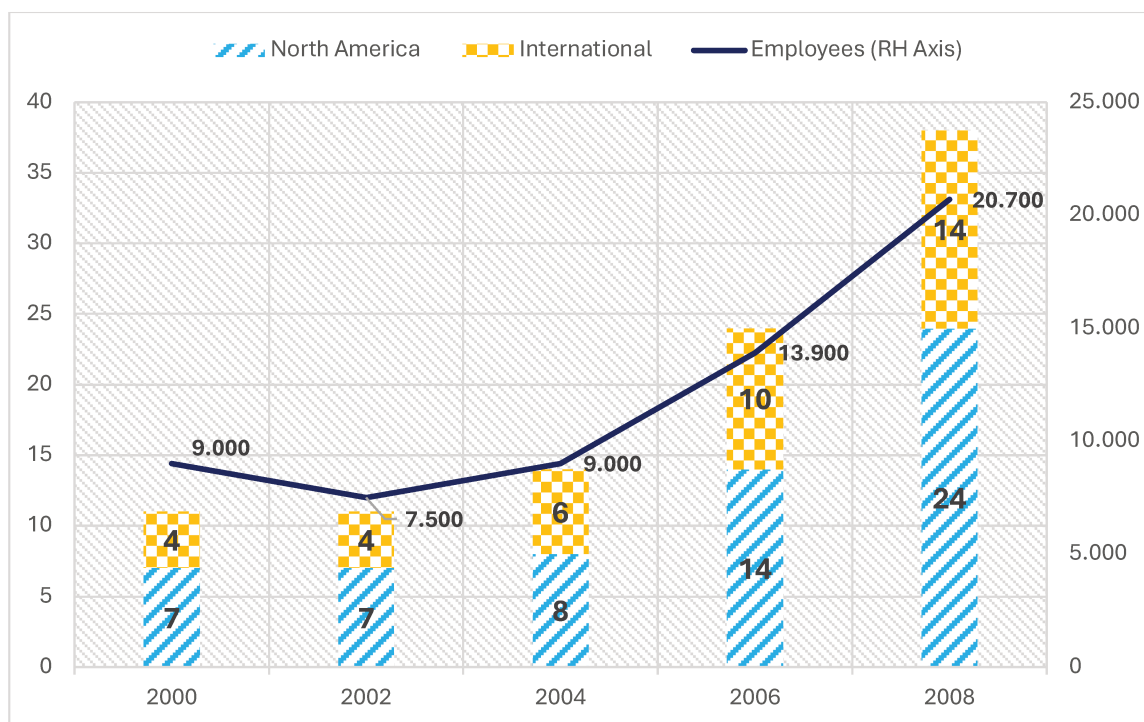


Figure 19 – The (slight) fall and (radical) recovery of Amazon’s logistics infrastructure

Source: Author’s calculations on Amazon’s annual reports and MWPVL.com

Continuing the efforts of rationalisation, Amazon started dividing FCs in categories, according to either the size of the products or some specific logistic function.

Box 2 – Types of FC during the second phase

Sortable FCs could combine multiple sortable items, provided that they were small enough to enter in a tote. There were two types of Sortable FCs in the network: Auto Sort and Manual Sort. The major difference between the two types was the way products were sorted. In Auto Sort FCs, an automatic machine, called Crisplant is used to sort multiple products, whereas, in Manual Sort FCs associates manually scan and sort each item. Both FCs have their advantages and disadvantages. In Auto Sort FCs, the Crisplant capacity can become a bottleneck, especially during high volume peak seasons, since the majority of products have to flow through the Crisplant. On the other hand, capacity can easily be increased or decreased, in Manual Sort FCs, by adjusting the number of associates. The product dimensions limit the

types of products that can be processed through the Auto Sortable FCs. Since products are conveyed in the plastic rectangle type containers, Auto Sortable FCs can only handle products that can fit into these totes. For example, Auto Sortable FCs usually handles smaller products like books, media, iPods etc.

Non-Sortable FCs handle almost any products that are too large to handle in Sortable FCs. These products are usually big kitchen appliances, large electronics, furniture and other large equipment which were processed according to different logistic protocol (for instance the majority of items are handled with forklifts). For most cases, multiple items for same orders are shipped separately because it is not economically beneficial to combine multiple items and repackage into one order. Furthermore, since products are large in size, they sometimes are shipped in their original boxes. However, some products are re-boxed and shipped in Amazon packing.

Although Sortable and Non-Sortable FCs are the most common, there are a few *Small Sortable Centers* in the Amazon FC network. The small sortable centres were built to essentially store the fast-moving items close to customers so Amazon can serve its customer better. Hence most of the small sortable centres are located near metropolitan areas. So instead of shipping fast moving inventory from multiple normal FCs, small sortable centres store and ship these items to the customers in timely manner.

The *Replenishment Centers* (RCs) or *Inbound Cross Dock* (IXD) act as a buffer in the distribution channel. There are two primary functions of replenishment centres. They receive products from vendors, and they also move products between the fulfilment centres. The replenishment centres smooth out the fluctuations in the demand and they also allow Amazon to operate the network at lower safety stock.

Far what concerns dimensions, at the beginning of the 2010s, Sort FCs were on average 800.000 square-feet and used to employ around 1.500 permanent full-time workers. Typical Non-Sort warehouses occupied between 600.000 and 1 million square-feet, and they employed 1.000 workers on average. Small sort and replenishment were smaller and employed a smaller workforce. As far as Amazon grew and expanded its network, other categories of logistic facilities would be added, such as receive centres, specialty, sortation centres, and delivery stations.

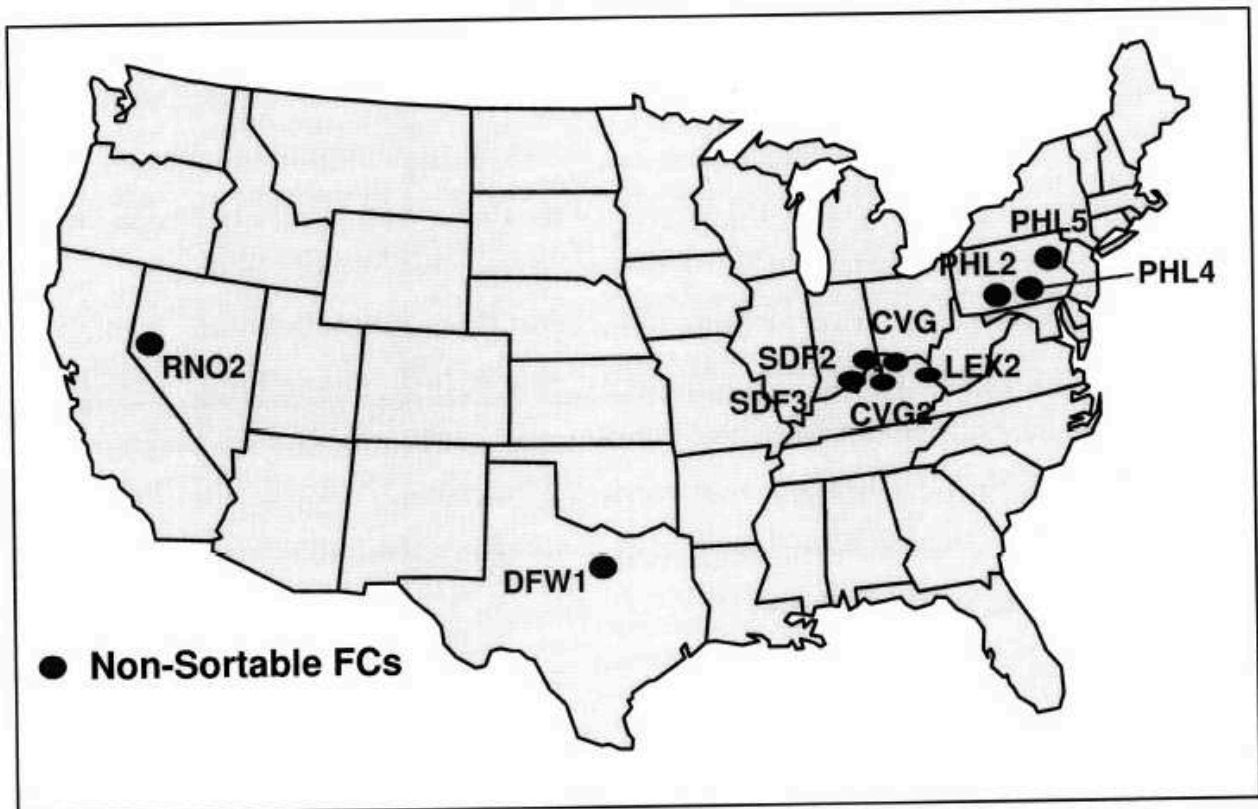
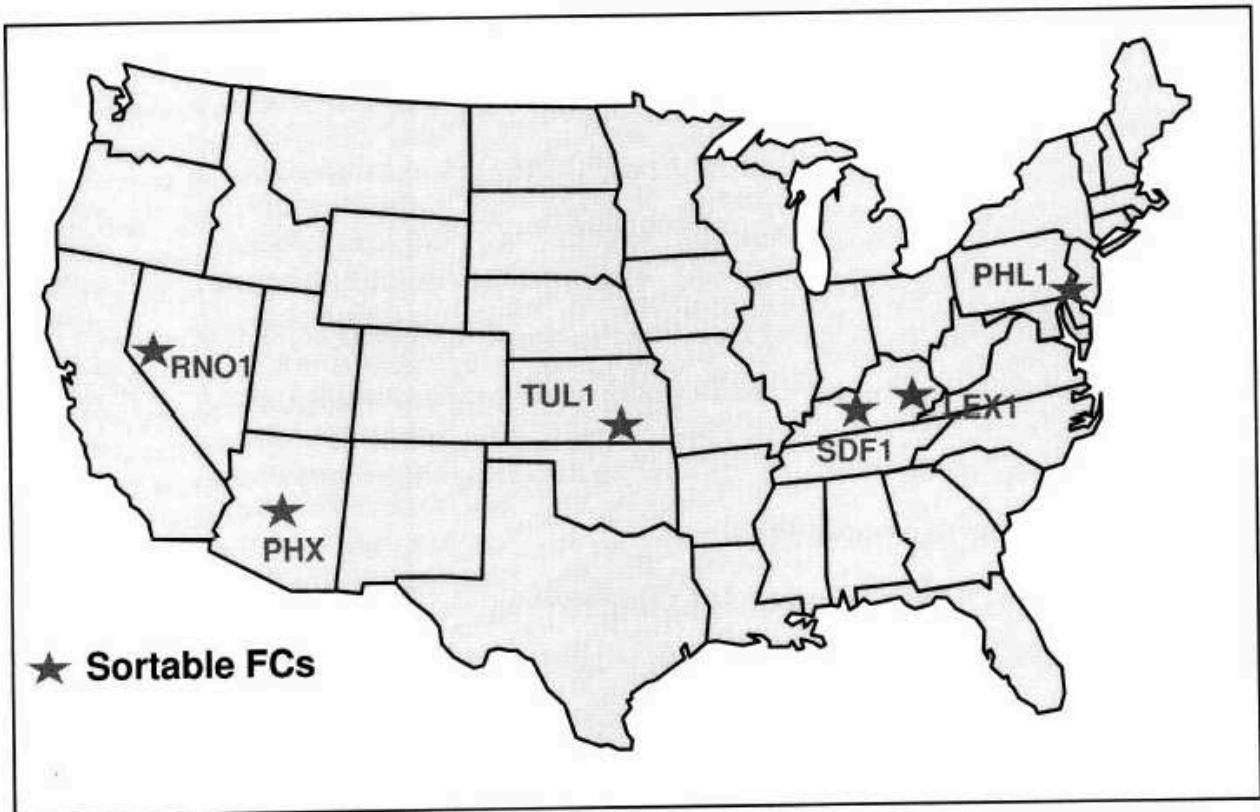


Figure 20 – Locations for Amazon’s sortable and non-sortable FCs in the US in the mid-2000s
(Z. R. Smith 2008)

Inside the warehouses, the labour process continued its transformation, with greater technical division of labour, reduction of workers autonomy and increasing monitoring. Amazon questioned the prevailing orthodoxies of retail distribution. As emphasised by supply chain experts, Amazon introduced a new approach in the operational design and control of warehouses (Onal, Zhang, and Das 2018). Scholars identified six specific operational differentiators:

“[...] explosive storage policy – incoming bulk inventory is exploded into a large number of small lots which are then dispersed to storage locations throughout the warehouse; very large number of beehive storage locations – storage is organised into small library style bins (1–3 cubic feet) as opposed to large bulk holding spaces; bins with commingled items – multiple items are simultaneously stored in an unorganised way in the same bin; immediate fulfilment objective – customer orders arrive continuously throughout the day and the goal is for same-day shipment; short picking routes with single unit picks – most orders are only for a single unit and the pick list retrieves several different items within a short pick zone; and high transactions volumes and total digital control – there is a much higher rate of store/pick movements per unit shipment, and all movements are modelled and instructed by a central controller. Together these differentiators uniquely describe a new approach to fulfilling online orders. Consider just the first three differentiators, each of which is a radical departure from traditional warehousing theory. (Zhang et al. 2019, 496)

Macroprocesses (inbound, outbound, and other support functions) became more distinct one from each other and each was broken down in simple tasks such as pick, pack or stow. Each task, in turn, was decomposed in simpler unit. Every unit was standardised, thus enabling digital monitoring and evaluation of their execution.

2.2.1. *Inbound macro-process*

Inbound basic logic did not change in the warehouses. Inbound’s main purpose were, first, to receive inventory promptly so that customer orders could be fulfilled on time; second, to minimise defects as much possible in order to eliminate larger impacts downstream. Even if principles did not change, operations became more complex and processes more distinct.

2.2.1.1. *Unloading and Receive*

Trucks arrived at the dock and were unloaded on the staging area. Usually, products arrived at the dock in boxes, pallets, or totes. There were four different types of receive: *case* receive (boxes were opened, items scanned and then put back in the box and sent inside by conveyor), *pallet* receive (pallet were opened, items scanned and then put back in the pallet and sent inside by conveyor), *each* receive (items were extracted by their shipping container, scanned and put into totes and sent inside

by conveyor) and *tranship* (these were items coming from other Amazon's facilities, and they came already into totes, which were sent inside by conveyor, as well). In inbound, the critical steps were the inspection of the shipment in order to ensure the quantity and content of the cases matched Amazon's order request; "virtually" receiving the items in Amazon's software systems for tracking purposes; lastly, staging the items for the next process.

Receive workstation were usually formed by a roller or automatic conveyor over which boxes were transported from the dock area to the receiver workstations. A station was equipped with a computer, a scanner and some tools to handle and cut the boxes. The conveyor traced a line, along which the stations were installed, thus forming a sort of *disassembling* line. Work pace was determined by the rhythm of unloading, the quantity of each load and the type of items to be processed. Workers' performance was measured according to the number of single items processed and the accuracy of inventory registration. These metrics depended on the ability of the employee but also on the type of commodity. Therefore, workers occupying the stations at the beginning of the line had some margins to choose the "easiest" boxes, leaving the "bad ones" to those at the end of the line. Team leaders and area managers had usually assigned workers to each workstation, supposedly according to a principle of rotation. However, there was a certain discretion in the enforcement of this principle: other factors, such as seniority, friendship or punishment could intervene in managerial assignment to the workstation.

2.2.1.2. *Stow*

This was the process in which products were physically stored in preparation for retrieval in the downstream picking process. As mentioned above, a single unit storage at Amazon was called "bin". Bin composed shelves. Shelves were positioned in aisles. Aisles were piled vertically on three to four floors, thus forming a picktower, the core of the warehouse, where commodities are stowed. Each floor of the picktower had dozens of aisles. For tracking purpose, each bin was given a unique barcode and an "address" formed by an alphanumeric sequence. For instance, the bin label P-3-A-100-F104 is located at the third floor of the picktower, zone A of the floor, aisle number 100, shelf number 4, level F (usually the highest).



Figure 21 – Bin location labels in Amazon’s FCs

Source: Fieldwork

When an ASIN is placed in a bin, it is essential to Amazon’s quality and customer service that the item is both physically and virtually stowed.

In its FCs, Amazon used two general storage methods: *random*, the most used, and *directed*, used only for certain categories. Random storage has already been defined: items were physically stored anywhere that there was available space in the area. Once the stower found an available bin location, they would use a barcode scanner to register the item and the bin location, such as that the item was both physically and virtually stored in Amazon’s software systems. This would enable the item to be retrieved once an order was placed by a customer. In the directed storage methodology, an ASIN was assigned to a specific bin location. Items were directed to various storage types based on their demand velocity (set by the software engineering team): items with higher demand would be directed to pallet areas, while lower demand items would be placed in smaller storage types.

From a space utilisation perspective, the random stow methodology performed much better than the directed storage. However, there were at least two drawbacks to this methodology. The first one was that products might take longer to stow as workers searched for available space. The second one was that workers were not able to learn where products were located. In this way, not only workers were stripped of an element of control on the labour process, but also efficiency could be reduced, unless a strict informatisation of inventory was established. In this way, the individual stower lost knowledge of storing inventory, and this knowledge was incorporated by the informatic system.

In both random and directed stow, stower formed a mobile team of workers who pushed their stow-carts across the aisles in search for “space” i.e., bin available for stow. Stower received their cart from a buffer area located at the entry of each floor of the picktower. Initially, carts were loaded manually by receive workers. Other workers transported the carts to the buffer areas, using an elevator

for the higher floors. Progressively, Amazon introduced an inbound conveyor system that transported directly the totes containing the items to stow. This new system was added to the former, but never replaced it. Once the carts were loaded, two labourers distributed them – according to the FIFO method (first in, first out) – to the stowers.

Stower were assigned a zone in the picktower by their supervisors, by means of floor plans printed or displayed in the briefing area. The fact that stowers were assigned to specific areas of the picktowers questions the “myth” of random storage, as it is usually described by analysts and managers. Storage at Amazon is not completely aleatory. Instead, zones were filled in an order of precedence determined jointly by local management and by algorithms: for instance, items that were expected to be ordered with the highest frequency could be placed in the shelves which were the closest to the conveyor (volume-based storage). Whatever the stowing method, what should be noticed is the fact that stowers had no power in deciding the stow zone. Their discretion was limited to the choice of the bin among the ones available in the zone defined by the management. The decision about the stow zone was in turn taken by management according to the planning of inventory and flows.

After retrieving the cart and individuating the stow zone, stowers pushed their cart through the aisles, stopping in front of every available bin. Then, they would scan the container of the item (it could be a tote, a box, or the cart itself); a container could contain multiple items, either different or identical; all items had to be stored, but the stower could choose the sequence in which he/she would store it. The important thing was that he/she stowed only the items contained in their own container; the stower had the possibility to stow another which was in another container, but it was imperative to scan the container first, so that the informatic system could correctly recognise the item and register the operation. Indeed, all items were inventoried and “belonged” to the container in which they were reregistered during the receive process.

The problem that stowers could find was either that they stowed all the items, so the container was *physically* empty, whilst according to the system one or more items were virtually still in the container; or, conversely, that the container was virtually empty, but physically one or more items were left inside. In both cases, the problem was that of non-correspondence between “the physical” and “the virtual”, a problem that Amazon needed to continuously monitor in order to minimise its downstream effects. In the first situation, a “missing”, the stower would declare the missing item to the system by selecting a button on the touch screen of their scanner. In the second situation, called “extra”, the worker had to skip to another container, and deliver the extra item (with its container) to a problem-solving operator called “sweeper”. In both cases, the problem-solving team would follow special inventory protocols to treat the problem.

Anyway, in most of the cases, the item would be there. Once the item was in their hand, the stower would inspect it for damage. Damage was assessed by the stower under criteria that varied according to the type of order (for instant in case of used/reconditioned product, criteria were looser). If the stower considered the article damaged, then they would perform another specific procedure: select the “damage” button on the touchscreen, scan the ASIN of the article, put the item in a special “damage” bin located at the beginning of the aisle, scan the damage bin. Even in this case, the problem-solving and the quality teams would treat the items separately through a special procedure.

Again, in most of the cases, stower would be in good conditions; the stower, then, would scan the ASIN, put the item into the bin (in case of multiple units of the same ASIN, stowers would specify the quantity by dialling the quantity on the keyboard of the scanner), and finally scan the bin. In this way, the system registered in real time the state of the inventory and the location of every single item.

A stower’s performance was assessed according to the average number of units scanned per hour and the accuracy of inventory registration. Like in the case of receive, productivity depended on the type of stowed items (especially the dimension), and on the space availability in the bins.

Given the seasonality of sales at Amazon, bins’ rate of filling peaked right before holiday season, when Amazon amassed goods before the order increase. In these periods, Amazon inflated the ranks of its stower temporary workers. Stow became more difficult because of the stock density. In these circumstances, a good stow rate depended on the type of items to stow. A “good” cart contained small items, possibly with the same ASIN – for instance: bracelets, candies, or USB pen drives. For a stower who wanted to improve its rate, getting this kind of cart was a stroke of luck.

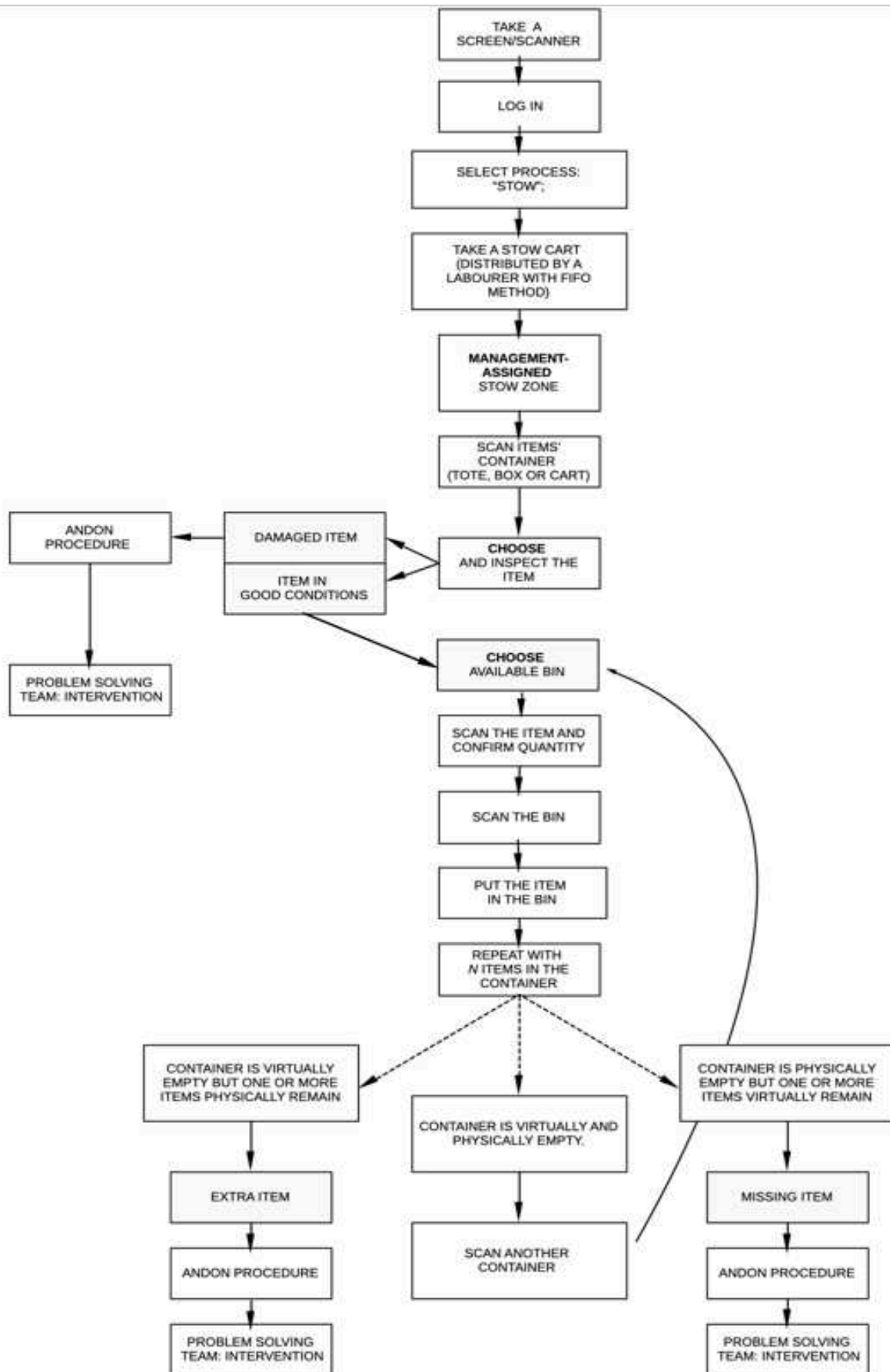


Figure 22 – Task Sequence of the Stowing Process

Source: Author's elaboration

2.2.2. *Outbound macro-process*

Outbound operations were more customer-oriented than inbound operations: outbound operation were triggered when a customer order was placed and dropped into the FCs for delivery, and it was concluded when the order was shipped out toward the customer. This just-in-time configuration would become more and more nuanced, as Amazon started improving its predicting capacity and to extend its distribution chain to the last mile. This allowed the company to plan its flows instead of merely react to demand.

Also, outbound included the most expensive operations within the warehouses. At that time, in a typical warehouse, picking used to account for over 50% of total operating costs (Coyle, Bardi, and Langley 2003).

At Amazon, scheduling was crucial, because it coordinated cycle time and capacity utilisation across the entire system. In the old wave-based system – which was the standard in the retail industry – an order was grouped into a wave and dropped into the warehouse management software; the algorithm applied the same scheduling at all the items in the wave. Waveless systems, instead, did not necessarily require the release of all individual items of an order; the scheduling process involved not just an overall scheduling for the entire wave, but also a calculation of when each item within each order had to be picked (Bishop 2010). This implied that orders could be fulfilled and tracked individually and that batches changed their nature. A “batch” was a list that contained multiple orders. In the wave-based system, the batch was processed as a whole: a number of orders accumulated in the system.

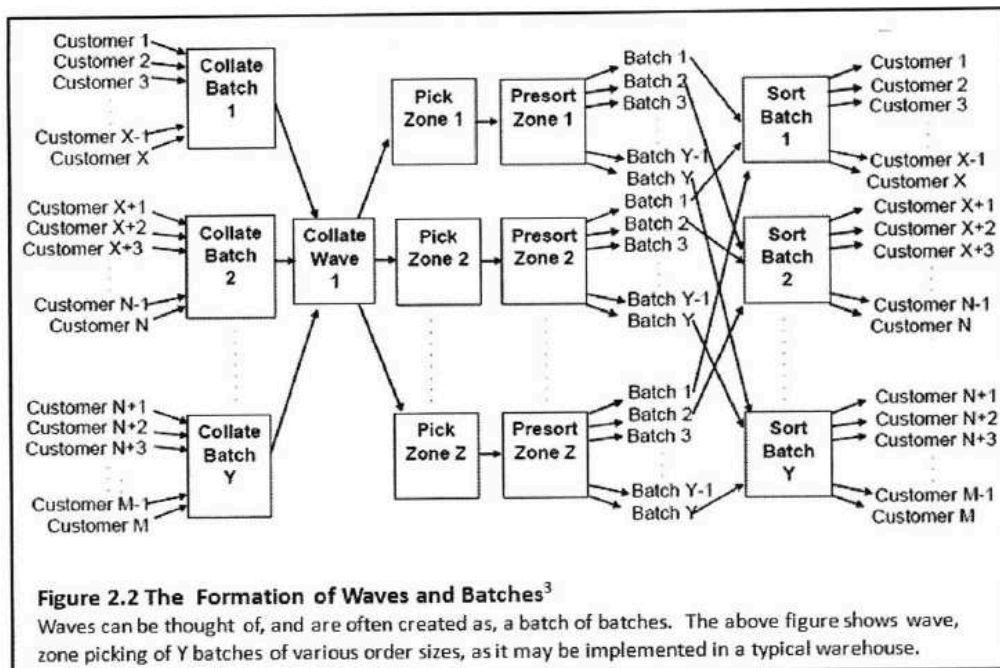


Figure 23 – The formation of waves and batches
 (Bishop 2010)

Instead, in the wave-less system, the batch was fragmented in single orders which were individually treated by the algorithm. This had a direct consequence on picking because it allows for any item to be available as a potential next pick, thus improving the flexibility of the scheduling: the order of the items in the batch could be manipulated according to contingent constraints, such as system capacity, customer promised ship etc. Furthermore, “because waveless picking does not impose stringent restrictions on which items can be picked, the available pool of orders to pick can be increased dramatically, thus increasing the density of picks along a picker’s pick path”, and more density made possible productivity increase, real-time scheduling⁴⁷ and increased monitoring on pick (Bishop 2010, 21).

2.2.2.1. Picking

Picking was the beginning and the core of outbound operations –it was also unanimously considered the hardest process for workers, and it was also the most computer-guided process. Pickers were equipped with a scanner, in which they logged in with their badge, and a two-level cart with the tote in use stored on top and an extra tote placed at the lower level.

⁴⁷ Real-time scheduling means that the scheduling software can react in real-time to orders that may drop into the system throughout the day. In a wave-based picking system, such orders would have to wait until another wave could be created to be picked, regardless of how close the items may be to other items in other waves that pickers may be currently scheduled to pick. In a waveless system, the scheduler can and should be updated to reflect the new orders, and the option is available to have pickers pick items that may-be near other items which are currently scheduled to be picked, thus potentially increasing picker productivity. (BISHOP 21-22).

Most employees at Amazon are equipped with a scanner to carry out their work. This is specifically the case for stow (storage), pick (picking of ordered items) and pack (packaging) operators (packaging), who do most of the work on the site. The scanner makes it possible to monitor as it is a machine connected to a wi-fi network, which records and gives managers instantaneous information on the exact position of each worker, his or her work rate and productivity. The scan can also provide information on whether a process is being carried out correctly, triggering an immediate action by managers in the work floor.



Figure 24 – A picking cart, with two totes and a scan

The one which is already full (and virtually closed) is at the bottom. The one on top is virtually open and where the picker drop the items

Source: Fieldwork

It should be preliminary noted that at Amazon pickers were not picking all of items for a given customer's order (this method is conventionally called "pick-to-order"); rather, they picked items that could belong to tens if not hundreds of different orders. Consequently, multiple different pickers could pick items for the same customer order. Thus, Amazon's sophisticated algorithms aggregated orders in lists, but these lists were not visible to pickers. A picker was simply assigned a specific computer-generated *picking path*, which was determined by a software in order to optimise picking time according to the order's priority and location. The whole picking path was not displayed on the screen of the scanner. Items to pick were displayed once at a time with their description – which

included the name of the item, its ASIN (later, a picture was added to help workers recognise the item more quickly) – its location, and the quantity needed. The location was coded by the same alphanumeric sequence that we mentioned above (paragraph on stow). Later, the system would be further improved, and the screen of the scanner started displaying also, in smaller dimension, the following address, so has the picker could already prepare its next move. During training workers were explicitly instructed that, while picking the prescribed item, they had to look at the address of the next item in order to get things ready (for instance, the direction of the picking cart) for moving rapidly to the following address.

The picker read the item's bin location (a training was needed to promptly interpret the address) and moved in that direction. Once in front of the bin, the picker would scan the bin's barcode. If the barcode corresponded to the address the bin item was found, the picker scanned the item to ensure that it was the correct ASIN. If the bin barcode corresponded to the barcode expected by the software, the scan would emit a short “beep” as confirmation.

In case of wrong barcode (which most of the times meant that the wrong bin had been scanned), the scanner would emit a longer and repeated “beep” as an alarm. The picker had to find the correct bin and scan it, so as to receive positive feedback from the scanner (otherwise the system would not let the picker continue the process).

Once the bin correctly scanned, the picker had to find the item, inspect it for damage (according to specific criteria⁴⁸), and scan it.

In case of damaged objects, a particular procedure had to be performed by the picker, using the touchscreen of its scanner: select the “damage” button, check again the item, rescan the ASIN, confirm and then left the item in a special bin called “damage”.

In case the picker was not able to find the requested item, it would activate a “missing” procedure: select the “missing” button on the touch screen, re-scan the bin, scan the ASIN of *each* item contained in the bin (double-check in case it was a false missing), confirm that the article was missing, continue with the next item. In both cases, likewise in inbound processes, the problem-solving and the quality teams were in charge of processing these various kinds of defects (see next paragraphs).

Anyway, these were standard protocols for anomalous situations. In most of the cases, the item would be in the right bin and appeared in good conditions, so the picker could proceed to scan its ASIN. If the scanned ASIN corresponded to the ASIN expected by the software, the system would

⁴⁸ Criteria depended on the type of customer order: new products needed to be not only in excellent state, including the packaging; second-hand or reconditioned products had looser requirements.

recognise it with another confirmation “beep”. The system would automatically register the picking, and the worker only had to drop the item in the tote.

The picker would usually continue picking and putting the items in their tote until either the picker wanted to place it on the conveyor (because it was physically full, or for any other reason, for instance, because the picker was close to the conveyor and it could be more efficient to send the tote away and start another one); or, the algorithm automatically closed it because the picker had to switch to another batch (because the current batch was completed, or a priority item had to be picked). In the first case, the picker had to virtually “close” the tote, pushing a specific button on the touchscreen and rescanning the tote’s barcode, *before* placing the item in the conveyor (otherwise, it would be impossible to close the tote, once it had left); in the second case, the tote was already closed and only needed to be dropped on the conveyor belt (or temporary stored on the lower level of the cart, and dropped as soon as the picker was closer to the conveyor). Then, the picker could take another tote – usually the extra tote stored on the lower level of the cart – scan it (to virtually “open” it) and continue picking the next item requested by the system.

As far as the complexity of Amazon’s operations (as well as its software capacity) increased, picking started differentiating according to its purpose. The first distinction was that between single and multi-picking: the first – and, more broadly, outbound single – concerned customer orders composed by only one item; the second was specific for customer orders composed by more than one item. Another important type was transship-picking, whose purpose was to send group of items (usually several copies of the same item) from an FC to another⁴⁹. Finally, there were residual forms of pick, such as “hot pick” for urgent articles to be picked with the highest priority; “fracs pick” for unsold and damaged article that were sent to the waste, called “fracs”.

A picker’s performance was assessed according to the average number of items processed in an hour and the accuracy of picking (correspondence between items physically and virtually picked; minimise the number of false missing or false damage).

⁴⁹ Since these are intra FC orders they do not require special sorting or packing. Usually, all transship items are picked into the same totes and items are then sent to an appropriate FC in totes instead of boxes.

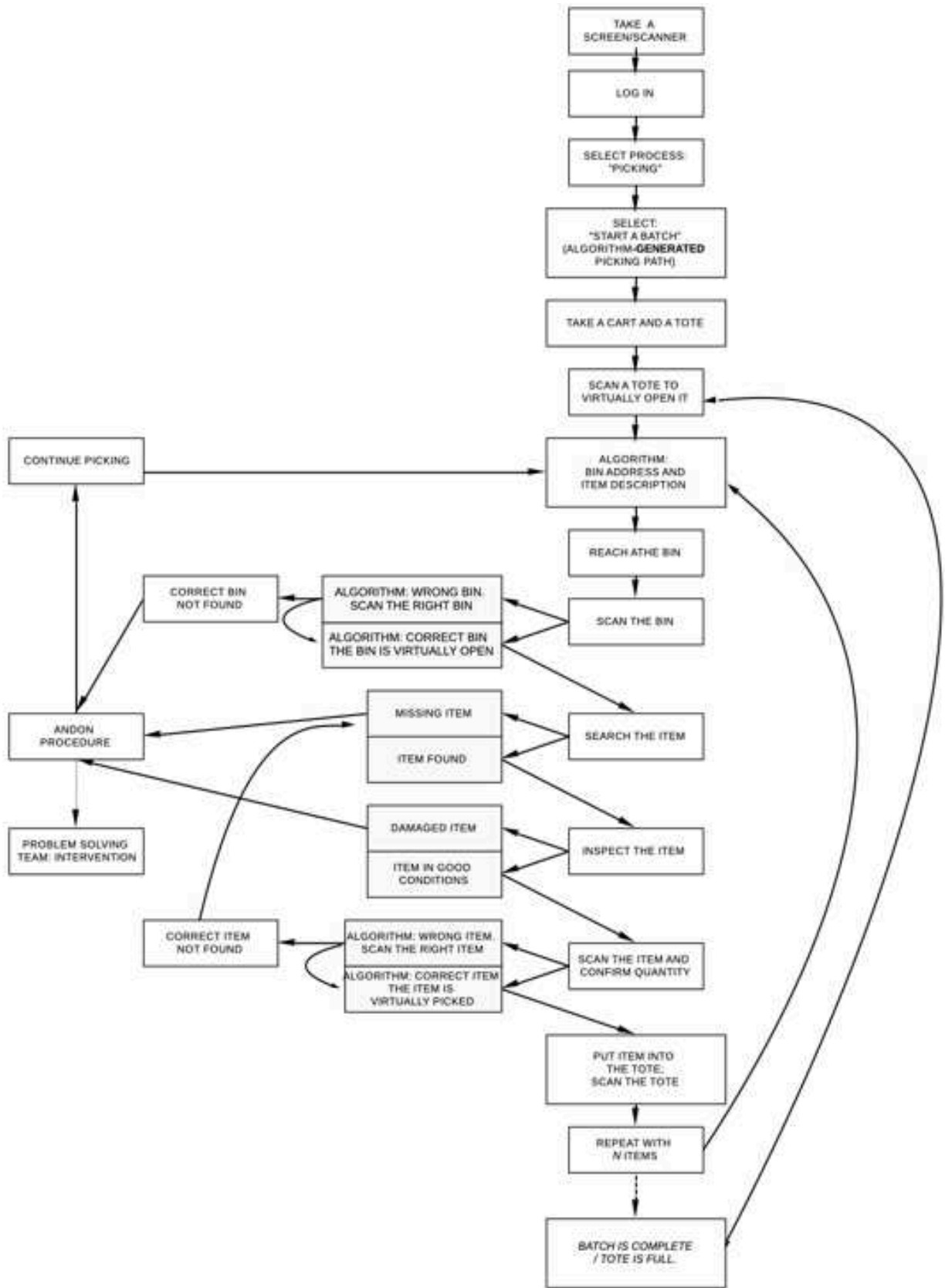


Figure 25 – Task Sequence of the Picking Process

Source: Author's elaboration

2.2.2.2. *Sortation*

The fragmentation of batches introduced with the new waveless method meant that totes would contain items of mixed orders. Therefore, before being shipped, individual items had to be reassembled into their correct customer orders in the downstream process. The process in charge of this function was the sortation. There were different methods to organise this process: manual, automated and semi-automated (C. S. Price 2004; Rubenstein 2006; Bishop 2010; Jackson 2011). The basic functioning of sorting (which in the old FCs was performed automatically by the Crisplant machine), was that each item had to be inducted (manually) from its picking-tote (containing several items) to single inventory totes (containing one and only one item). In case of single-item orders, the process was straightforward: the item would go directly to the pack stations, usually through a conveyor system. In case of multi-item orders, a further sortation process was needed in order to collate all the items associated to a customer order. To perform this task, there was a further process called “re-bin”.

2.2.2.3. *Rebin*

At re-bin, Amazon workers (here called “rebiners”) received inventory totes, usually through a conveyor system. Each rebiner operated in a workstation equipped with a computer screen in front of them, and a wheeled shelf on one or both sides. Each shelf had several dozens of rebin-slots labelled according to an alphanumeric notation. Each rebin-slot corresponded to a customer order, so all the items of a specific order had to be located into the associated rebin-slot. The workstation was fed with inventory bins coming from a conveyor or from carts (like in the image below).



Figure 26 – A rebin workstation, FRA1, Germany
(All About Lean 2019)

The rebinner would pull one item at a time, inspect, and scan it. The system would display on the computer screen the alphanumeric code of the appropriate rebin-slot (for instance “E9”, or “A2”). The rebinner would recognise the slot and put the item into it. Once the slots had been filled, the shelf would be wheeled to a packing station. There were variations of this process across FCs. In other facilities, a shelf would separate two workers. The first worker would take the item out of the tote, inspect, scan, and put into a slot indicated by lights. Once the slot was filled with all its items, a light on the other side would indicate for the second worker to take these items out and put them into another box, a grey tray which would be transported to pack on a conveyor system.

2.2.2.4. Pack

Once the orders were correctly assembled, they could go to the pack station. A FCs of those time had easily 100 pack stations or more, although not all of them were active all the time (during Christmas, extra stations could be added temporarily to face the demand peak). Stations were separated in two main kinds: those for single orders, in which a single item was put in a single box; multiple pack stations, in which different items belonging to one order were packed together. Pack stations were formed by a large table equipped with a computer, a scanner, a tape dispenser, and a set of unfolded boxes of different dimensions.



Figure 27 – Pack workstation in an Italian FC, 2022

Source: Fieldwork

Packer's tasks were mostly dictated by the informatic system. First, the packer would inspect and scan the item. According to the item's size, the system would display on the monitor the right box to use. The goal, according to management, is to optimise item's protection and material consumption, but a non-secondary effect is that of stripping the workers of the task to autonomously choice the box, thus reducing the time of packaging. Then, the packer would build the box, and tape the bottom. The length of tape was predetermined by the informatic system: the packer only had to push a button on the dispenser, take the tape and apply it to the box. After that, the packer would insert the item into the box, together with some crumbled up paper and bubble wrap. Then, they would tape the top of the box and closed. At the end of this process, they would print a barcode, which linked the parcel to all the necessary shipping information, but not the actual address label. It was crucial for the good functioning of the pack station that the packer would not run out of packaging material. In order to ensure that, workers would regularly come to refill the stations, but the station was also equipped with "Andon" lights that the packer could activate in order to receive more cardboard or other material.

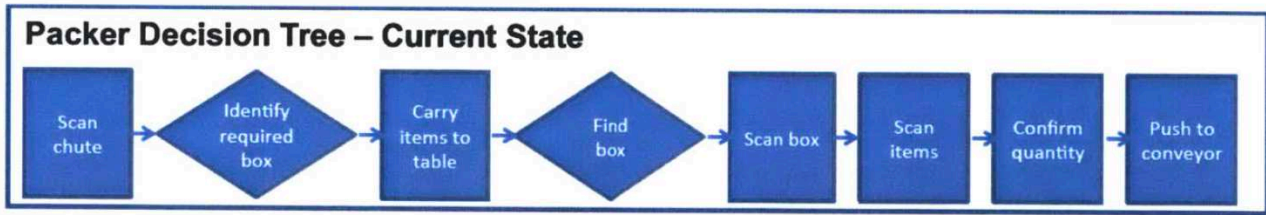


Figure 28 – Pack process

(Jackson 2011)

2.2.2.5. *Final operations*

Once packed, the parcel would be dropped on a conveyor belt and routed to the so-called SLAM process. “SLAM” stands for “Scan, Label, Apply, Manifest” and it would be the final quality check that would weigh the parcel and compare the weight with the expected weight of the items and packaging. If a discrepancy was found, the parcel would be checked again manually. During SLAM, a machine (there could be up to ten machines in a common FC) scanned the barcode on the box, printed a shipping label with the customer’s address, and attached this label to the parcel.

The box would continue its route on another sorter. Amazon’s FC at that time used different kinds of sorters. A tilt-tray sorter is essentially a series of trays that travel in a loop. Products are inducted onto the trays, which physically tilt the item into the destination chute assigned by the informatic system. Cross-belt sorters have similar design to tilt trays but use short belts set perpendicular to the sortation system’s accumulation chutes. As an item approaches its destination chute, the belts powers on, gently rolling the item into the chute. Another common type was the sliding shoe sorter. These are versatile because they can be used in various applications including diverting for pick zones, shipping, and order accumulation. They have small knob-like shoe devices measuring approximately 6-inches in length. A series of these shoes slide in unison across the centre of a moving conveyor, gently guiding product down spurs or chutes. Finally, depending on the floor of the sorting, the parcel could also slide down a corkscrew slide to the level with the outbound loading docks.

Once parcels sorted into the chute, they needed to be loaded into trucks. The passage from the chute to the dockyard was performed manually by workers, who transferred boxes from the chute to containers installed on pallets. Forklift, either manual or engine-equipped, would drive the pallets to the trucks for loading. Alternatively, boxes could be sent to the trucks directly on conveyors and without pallets (the so-called “fluid load”). In this case, workers on the dock would load the trucks directly with boxes, trying to fit as many packages into the truck as possible.

2.2.3. *Auxiliary processes and security jobs*

In addition to inbound and outbound macroprocess, two auxiliary departments were introduced in Amazon's FC operations: Problem Solving and ICQA (Inventory Control and Quality Assurance) that supports entire FCs' operation.

Problem solving was not a stand-alone department but rather embedded into every function. Every department (receive, stow, pick, pack) had a team of problem solvers (between 5 and 10) which intervened in case of stoppages, errors (missing or extra items), or in case an item needed to be picked before the deadline of truck departure (the so-called "cutoff", or CPT, Critical Pull Time⁵⁰). Problem solvers were extremely mobile workers, which operated in tight cooperation with team leaders and area manager. They were usually equipped with laptops or smaller tablets and other tools (portable label printers, for instance), which allowed them to constantly monitor and modify inventory in order to solve any mismatch between physical and virtual operations.

ICQA, instead, was a centralised and stand-alone department, but it was not directly involved in processing the customer orders. Instead, it ensured that a right item was picked, packed and shipped to a right customer. Primarily ICQA was designed to work with individual departments to improve the necessary processes in order to keep FCs' quality metrics (i.e., free replacement rates) in check (PATEL). Moreover, ICQA also processed customer returns i.e., orders that were usually returned, refused or undelivered. After processing each customer returns, items were either put back into the inventory (if sellable) or into damage bins (if unsellable). Inventory control was another critical function of ICQA. The goal was to ensure that the virtual inventory matches with the physical inventory. This implied that ICQA workers conducted regular audit to identify and eliminate any inventory defects. The audit consisted in assigning an area of the picktower to a team of ICQA associates. Each associate would walk through the aisles and manually counting the items contained in each bin of the assigned area. Associates were equipped with a handset scanner (the same used by pickers and stowers) and a small basket (like a common hand basket used by customers in grocery stores). The handset was used to scan the bin, count the items contained in it, and report any mismatch. Mismatch consisted of "missing" items, or "extra" items. In the first case, the system was updated; in the second case, the extra item was removed and sent back to the receive department.

Through time further auxiliary departments and teams would take form. First, the safety department, in charge of validating new equipment, reporting on accidents, risk evaluation and safety improvements. Second, the training department, in charge of organising the training of the new recruits in the basic processes (receive, stow, pick and pack), the coaching of workers who underperformed, and the training to other jobs inside the FCs (for instance, forklift drivers). Third,

⁵⁰ The time in which an order is in danger of not shipping in time for customer delivery cut-offs.

the RME (Reliability, Maintenance, Engineering) department, whose objective is to ensure the correct functioning of all hardware equipment: regular maintenance, rapid intervention in case of troubles, installation of new equipment. Fourth, the IT (Information Technology) department, in charge of monitoring the good functioning of software and the maintenance of internal communication network. Fifth, a series of auxiliary jobs – cart runners, waste workers and labourers – were introduced to assist the main processes, for instance by moving totes and carts for the pick and stow processes, or by supplying packaging material to the pack stations. These were manual jobs that were in a loose relation with the informatic system, so on the one hand they were undervalued as physical jobs but, on the other hand, they were out of the control of the informatic system. Finally, externalised security and cleaning operations were outsourced to large service companies. For instance, in all Italian FCs, security services were provided by ICTS, a multinational security services company; another large company that cooperated with Amazon was ONET, a French business services company which oversaw cleaning operation in Amazon’s French facilities. Security had to be intensified whilst Amazon expanded its catalogue with valuable objects, its workforce increased and became more casualised and less attached to the company. All these elements raised the issue of pilfering in the warehouse (Stone 2013). To deal with this problem, Amazon installed metal detector at the entrance of the shopfloor, through which every person who entered the warehousing area had to pass when going out of the picktower in order to reach the cafeteria and the locker room during break or to simply go home. Every time they want to exit the floor and reach the hall (for instance during a break), workers are instructed to empty out their pockets, including any metal object and walk through the metal detector. If the scanner emits an alarm, the worker is gently but firmly invited to step aside and to be searched. They are there to “guarantee the security inside the warehouse”, says the company. “To prevent workers from stealing”, say the workers I met in the fieldwork. Apart from the unpleasant feeling of being controlled and searched in its own workplace, workers complain about the waste of their break time. It is quite rare that a worker is caught while pilfering, in most of the cases it is a matter of false alarm; yet, for a worker being stopped at the check point means a major inconvenience, as he/she loses precious minutes on his/her break time.

Detectors are a telling representation of Amazon’s policing of the workplace. As stressed recently by US-based scholars, they are part of a wider system of corporate control over the workers: these authors talk about “policing” and “militarisation” of employment relations (see T. L. Lee et al. 2022). Amazon is well-known in the US for choosing former members of the military to fill its middle-management ranks. Also in France, workers stressed, it happens “sometimes” that team leaders or area managers have a military or security background⁵¹. Check points are the plastic

⁵¹ Reported by an Amazon worker and CFDT member of the MRS1 site during an interview, April 2018.

representation of coercion that the employer exerts over the workforce. Security guards are mandated and allowed to stop and search workers – and *de facto* cut their break time – in the name of “security” or, more precisely on the base of a “legitimate” suspicion that its employees steal its properties. After all, it was a principle that the recruit learned in the test: “I think if people weren't controlled, they'd steal”. Furthermore, the use of private security officers can turn into union-busting practices (see, for instance, *Le Monde diplomatique* 2013).

* * *

Amazon's second-generation FCs marked a break from the original organisation of work of the company, but the adoption of this model was not a linear process. As Amazon's activity accelerated, the need for an efficient logistic organisation first pushed the company to adopt the blueprint of the retail industry's leader, Walmart. However, such an organisational model – especially the “wave” system and the automation drive – soon proved unsuitable to support Amazon's economic strategy. Therefore, Amazon bifurcated from this Walmartian approach and found its original way of organising work and flows.

This model departed from the automation drive and focused on digitalisation (or informatisation) as the core of its warehouse management. Rather than replacing human work, the key choice was to break down work processes into – mostly human-executed – small and repetitive tasks. Each worker had to operate insulated from each other, as they did not need to direct interact with colleagues to execute their job. Coordination would not depend on direct human interaction, but on digitalisation: once broken and fragmented, tasks would be individually executed by workers equipped with digital devices such as scanners and laptops. Then they would be informatically merged through these digital devices that constantly monitored the accomplishment of each task. In sum, the introduction of the wave-less approach significantly reduced workers' margins of self-discretion.

At the same time, these margins were not annihilated, as workers were asked to recognise and signal errors, missing items, and other anomalies in the inventory. A certain degree of initiative, implication and self-discretion was thus preserved, even if tightly framed into procedural prescriptions.

The digitalisation of even the most basic tasks allowed to increase monitoring and to elicit more value from workers in the form of real-time information about their activity. Finally, the introduction of the wave-less approach made the flow of orders' fulfilment more continuous and predictable, thus giving management greater control on working rhythms and leverage to reduce down-times. The

digitalisation of the labour process undertaken by this new course was therefore intertwined with an intensification of the technical division of work, of monitoring, and of working rhythms.

The increasing division and digitalisation of work led to a process of skills polarisation. On the one hand, for the vast majority of workers, tasks became more fragmented, monitored and subordinated to the algorithmic management. However, it also created new jobs – especially those related to problem solving and team leading – which had a more “active” relationship with the informatic system. A problem solver, a sweeper, or a team leader were equipped with specific devices and trained to use digital tools for inventory management. The use of these tools required a longer training than the basic tasks of picking and packing. These workers needed a certain informatic knowledge and work experience in order to access these jobs – usually through internal promotion – and their operation were crucial for ensure the efficient and smooth management of inventory. These tasks distinguished these workers, but they were a tiny minority within the whole workforce of the FCs.

In this respect the massive taylorisation of the labour process was not complete. It left some niches for the development of mid-rank jobs (Process Guides, Solvers, Team Leaders, Area Manager) with less repetitive tasks and larger margins of initiative, especially for what concerns the manipulation and the interpretation of data out of the strict proceduralist of low-rank jobs (Receivers, Stower, Pickers, Packers). Nevertheless, “taylorised” jobs employ the vast majority of the workforce at Amazon facilities.

The increasing division of work and the fragmentation helped Amazon to support the expansion of its sales and of its network. First, because the wave-less method converged with the expansion of volumes and the increasing economies of scale in making flows more continuous and predictable. Seasonality was a key element in Amazon’s stabilisation of demand: by concentrating sales in two peaks of activity through the year, the Prime Day in Summer and the Christmas Holidays, Amazon could better plan logistic operations, instead of relying on a completely aleatory demand. Second, the intensification of the division of work was coherent with this strategy. Most of the jobs inside Amazon’s FCs, and especially the core jobs of order fulfilment (receive, stow, pick and pack), required little training (of less than 20 hours). These were the jobs who expanded the most during high seasons, when Amazon hired thousands of temporary workers to deal with the peak of demand, and the simplicity of their tasks made the employment of these seasonal workers as fast as possible.

2.3. *Third generation labour process (2015-now). Automation and neo-fordism*

The third generation of labour process emerged progressively after the second half of the 2010s decade and it is currently the new dominant framework for the organisation of work in Amazon network.

This period corresponds to the surge of Amazon's sales (thanks to the introduction of the FBA program) and to the vertical integration of its network and the unprecedented growth of its physical capacity. Between 2013 and 2015 Amazon's sales skyrocketed and Amazon decided to accelerate two key processes: (1) vertical integration (which we have already discussed); (2) automation.

2.3.1. *Genesis and effects of automation in Amazon's FCs*

Vertical integration and quantitative growth came along with qualitative transformations in the labour process. First, in the FCs, where Amazon scaled up from digitalisation to automation. Second, in the last mile, where Amazon built a dense network of intermediate facilities (cross-dock hubs, sortation centres, and delivery stations) and subcontracted dozens of thousands of last-mile drivers, extended algorithmic management.

In the FCs, automation brought about a "third-generation" labour process. Automation at Amazon is intrinsically associated with the introduction of AGV (Automatic Guided Vehicle) robots into Amazon's fulfilment network. The story of Amazon's AGVs started in 2012, when the company purchased Kiva System, a Massachusetts-based robotics start-up. At that time, Kiva was a renowned actor in the warehouse industry. Kiva supplied many companies with its AGVs, including big retailers such as Gap, Staples, Walgreen, Zappos and Quidsi, which were all Amazon's competitors in their respective product segments. To these clients, Kiva offered a new solution for warehousing. Instead of having pickers dashing through the warehouse for miles a day to pick items from shelves, Kiva's technology made the robots shuttle the shelves to the pickers' workstations, thus reducing dead times and increasing productivity. The robots would also allow to pack shelves together like cars in rush-hour traffic, as they no longer needed aisle space for humans. The greater density of shelf space meant more capacity and a wider better selection of products stored in each facility.

In short, there were good reasons for Amazon to buy, lease or rent Kiva's AGV. However, Amazon decided to directly purchase Kiva, for \$775 million, in early 2012. There were two reasons that explain this choice. First, Amazon did not want to become dependent on a third-party technology. Kiva's AGVs had proven effective in retail. At Amazon they were expected to help the company to speed delivery and solve the difficulty in filling and tracking orders, as growth accelerated (*The New*

York Times 2012). In the long run, this would allow to trim costs and pay out the investment⁵². In the short term, the introduction of these robots was expensive, as it required to redesign all the fulfilment process. If such an investment was worth to be made, then Amazon could find it more interesting to seize the entire company instead of simply become a client, thereby entrusting its future to another company. Furthermore, taking possession of Kiva, would have lent Amazon a considerable power on all retailer which already depended on those AGVs. Indeed, a few years later, in 2015, Amazon rebranded the company as Amazon Robotics and announced it would discontinue support for existing owner of Kiva robots, thus leaving those companies with obsolete technology and unharmed *vis-à-vis* Amazon's exclusive comparative advantage⁵³.

Amazon's AGV were initially orange robot about 30cm high and weighing around 130 kg. A robot could lift storage shelves (called "pods") of up to 750 pounds/340 Kg. Through years, Amazon would improve its technology and release new models. Today Amazon produced its AGVs in two factories in Massachusetts with a production capacity of up to 330.000 robots every year (*El Confidencial* 2022).

The introduction of robots was not an easy task for Amazon since existing (*legacy*) warehouses had been designed for workers who combed the aisles and plucked item off the shelves. It was premature (and unfeasible) to switch its US network of 80 warehouses on the new robotic technology. In the short term, the most rapid solution to the need of increasing the network remained its new second-generation warehouses. But in the medium term, Amazon had to accelerate the construction of new facilities in order to deploy its new technology. Thus, Amazon started immediately a program of integration and experimentation of its new AGVs. In May 2014, Bezos told investors at Amazon's annual meeting that the planned to deploy 10.000 Kiva robots by year-end, instead of 1.400. During summer 2014, in a 1,2-million-square-foot warehouse in central California, Amazon's engineers replaced four floors of fixed shelving with the AGVs (*The Wall Street Journal Online* 2014). By the end of the year, it was reported that Amazon had outfitted warehouses in California, Kentucky and Texas (*Ibidem*). By September 2016, Amazon had deployed 30.000 AGVs. Since 2015, the company

⁵² According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the rollout of robots "could help pare 20% to 40% off the \$3,50 to \$3,75 cost of fulfilling a typical order" (*The Wall Street Journal Online* 2013), i.e. saving \$400 million to \$900 million a year in fulfilment costs by reducing the number of times a product was "touched". Amazon fulfilment cost had risen annually since 2009 and consumed 12,3% of net sales in the first nine months of 2014, up from 84% for all of 2009. In October Amazon posted its biggest quarterly loss in 14 years amid rising fulfilment costs, which jumped 30% to \$2,6 billion in the third quarter (*The Wall Street Journal Online* 2014).

⁵³ As reported by the US Congress' investigation in Digital Markets, prior to the acquisition "many of [Kiva's] customers had invested a sunk cost of \$4 million to \$6 million per warehouse in order to make use of Kiva's technologies. Kiva had promised to keep shipping its technology to non-Amazon customers—regardless of whether they competed with Amazon—but in 2015, Amazon rebranded the company as Amazon Robotics and announced it would stop servicing other firms. Amazon stated that retailers seeking to use Kiva's robots would need to use Amazon Services to fulfill orders with Amazon's technology in Amazon's warehouses" (Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial, and Administrative Law of the Committee on The Judiciary of the House of Representatives 2020, 266).

brought the technology overseas and began opening third-generation warehouses in the UK. The following year was the time of Italy, Spain and Germany where Amazon opened several robotic warehouses from scratch.

Table 5 – Amazon’s Robotic FCs in Europe (author’s elaboration)

FC CODE	DATE OPENING	FC CODE	DATE OPENING
UK		PL	
MAN1	2016	LCJ2	2019
DSA6	2022	WRO5	2019
EMA1	2019	LCJ3/LCJ4	2020
EMA2	2021	KTW3	2021
LTN4	2015	POZ2	2021
LCY2	2017	SZZ1	2017
LCY3	2021	IT	
MAN2	2017	BGY1	2022
MAN3	2018	BLQ1	2020
MME1	2020	FCO1	2017
MME2	2020	MXP6	2021
BRS1	2019	PSR2	2022
BRS2	2021	TRN1	2017
DE		ES	
FRA7	2018	BCN1	2017
HAM2	2017	BCN4	2023
BRE4	2021	MAD7	2021
DUS4	2019	MAD9	2020
LEJ5	2021	RMU1	2022
MUC3	2011	VLC1	2022
NUE1	2022	SVQ1	2020
PAD1	2020	FR	
SCN2	2022	ETZ2	2021
CZ		ORY4	2019
BRQ2	2023		

By the end of 2017, Amazon had more than 100.000 robots in action around the world (*The New York Times* 2017a). By 2019, Amazon was reported to have 200.000 AGVs, and all European countries where Amazon had a logistic foothold got at least one third-generation FC⁵⁴. According to Amazon, “robotics fulfilment centers [...] account[ed] for more than 50 of its roughly 175 centers worldwide”, reported again the NYT in July 2019 (*The New York Times* 2019b). By September 2022, robots were over 500 thousand, as reported by *Vox* and *The New York Times* (Del Rey 2022; Sisson 2022). A robotics engineer that I interviewed, and who worked on the opening of several Amazon FCs in France and the UK between 2020 and 2022, explained that there can be up to 2.100 AGV robots in an Amazon plant⁵⁵. From these figures we could try to estimate the number of Amazon’s FCs equipped with Kiva technology. If we divide the total estimated number of robots in 2022 (500.000 robots) by 2.100 (the estimated number of robots per FC), we can estimate that 125 FCs (out of the 250 estimated⁵⁶) were equipped with Kiva robots by the end of 2022⁵⁷.

In robotic FCs, commodities are stored on up to five floors. The largest part of the floor is enclosed. Inside the enclosure there are up to a couple of thousand AGVs (*bots*) and several thousand pods, where commodities are stored. When an order is entered into the Kiva informatic system, the software locates the closest automated guided vehicle to the item and directs it to retrieve it. When the AGV reaches the pod assigned by the algorithm, it slides underneath the pod and lifts it off the ground using a corkscrew action. The continuous movement of AGVs is controlled by algorithms through QR-codes printed on the floor⁵⁸. Each drive unit has a sensor that prevents it from colliding with others. Access to the enclosure is restricted to maintenance, problem solving and troubleshooting workers. While robots circulate through the floor, pickers and stowers stands in their workstations adjacent to the enclosure. The workstation is equipped with a screen, scanners, and racks where totes are placed. An opening in the fence allows the worker to access the pod brought there by the AGV. In the workstation, the screen displays the image, name, barcode and location of the item to pick. To increase the picking speed, a spotlight illuminates the specific bin where the item is located; the picker finds it on the shelf, scans it and puts it in a tote, which is then put on a conveyor system and directed to the packing department. The process is reversed in the case of stowing: the stower stands at the

⁵⁴ Except for Czech Republic, where a robotic FC is expected to open through 2023.

⁵⁵ This interview was carried out during a separate research project, whose results are accessible (Cirillo et al. 2022; 2023).

⁵⁶ According to the logistics specialised online magazine MWPVL.com.

⁵⁷ Deploying robots required constant investment in innovation in order to improve hardware and software of its AGVs. Thus, Amazon opened several R&D hubs in Germany and Italy, working on computer vision, machine learning and robotics for Amazon’s supply chain and logistics arm.

⁵⁸ The movement of AGVs is described in such a poetic way on the pages of the Financial Times: “An industrial dance takes place every day and night on the floor of Amazon’s huge warehouse in Manchester. Tall upright shelves waltz in and out of each other’s paths and around stationary storage units, weaving backwards, forwards or sideways without touching. Performing the graceful movements is an unassuming troupe: squat orange machines on wheels and just 16 inches tall, which slot underneath and carry their loads in a geometric choreography” (*Financial Times* 2017).

workstation (equipped with a rack for totes loaded with items to stow); the AGV carries the pod; the stower scans the item and stow it in the bin on the pod. A camera equipped with artificial intelligence software recognises the location in which the item was stored.



Figure 29 – Picking/Stowing Workstation in an Amazon Robotic FCs (Italy, 2023)

In terms of control of informational and physical fluxes, AGVs' movements are controlled and centralised. A unique Warehouse Management System connects the single AGVs to the website, in order to have real-time transmission of registered orders and inventory updates. This system governs the entire Amazon network in Europe in order to enable standardised and synchronous storage management. The information technology is provided by Amazon's IT division and servers are hosted by Amazon Web Services (AWS), another element of vertical integration.

* * *

What is the impact of AGVs on the organisation of work? Their role is not simply auxiliary since they allow all operations relating to storage and picking processes.

First, AGV brings a dramatic increase in productivity. Drawing on interviews with workers and managers, I estimate that picking productivity is increased by 300%, stow by 25%. The difference is explained by the fact that the downtime represented by a picker walking from a shelf to another is now compressed by the movement of robots; stow instead benefits less from this because such a downtime is significantly inferior. This also explains the difference in productivity across legacy and

robotic FCs. We do not have exhaustive data, but those coming from my French fieldwork show a significant increment in productivity in robotic FCs (ETZ2 and ORY4) (Figure 30).

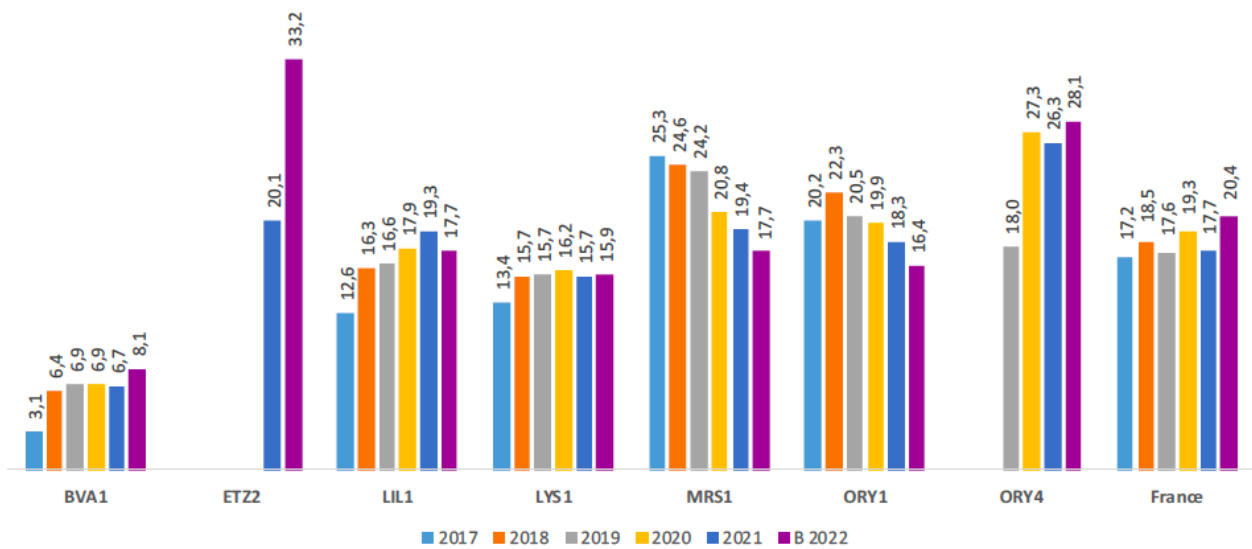


Figure 30 – Hourly productivity rate in French FCs (thousand units/hour)

Source: Internal Report. Reading: Robotic FCs (ETZ2; ORY4) have superior rates than the remaining “Legacy” FCs (BVA1; LIL1; LYS1; MRS1; ORY1)

AGVs contribute to the reshuffling of the pick and stow tasks, leading to the introduction of new jobs, such as that of Amnesty Responder (maintenance worker) or that for technical robotics maintenance. With regard to pick and stow, AGVs, as we saw, move pods between pick and stow workstations across the robotic floor. Pickers and stowers do not control the movements of the AGVs, which are centrally managed by the Warehouse Management System. When the operation of pick or stow is completed, the AGVs move the pod away to another pick or stow workstation. Amnesty Responder is a new position introduced for troubleshooting on the robotic floor, which is a fenced area off limits to human operators. Only specific positions have authorised access, and only for maintenance tasks. The Amnesty Responder initially intervenes when one or more AGVs stop – this human intervention is allowed when an item falls down from the storage unit to the floor. The AGV sensor detects an obstacle in its path and stops, emitting an alarm. The Amnesty Responder receives the alert on their digital tool and is trained and allowed to enter the floor, certifies the problem and tries to fix it (collecting the fallen object and resetting the AGVs). Sometimes the problem is more complicated, and the maintenance team is expected to intervene. In each case, workers entering the robotic floor are equipped with a special vest which projects a magnetic cone detected by the AGVs. Amnesty Responders are few and fulfil a support function.

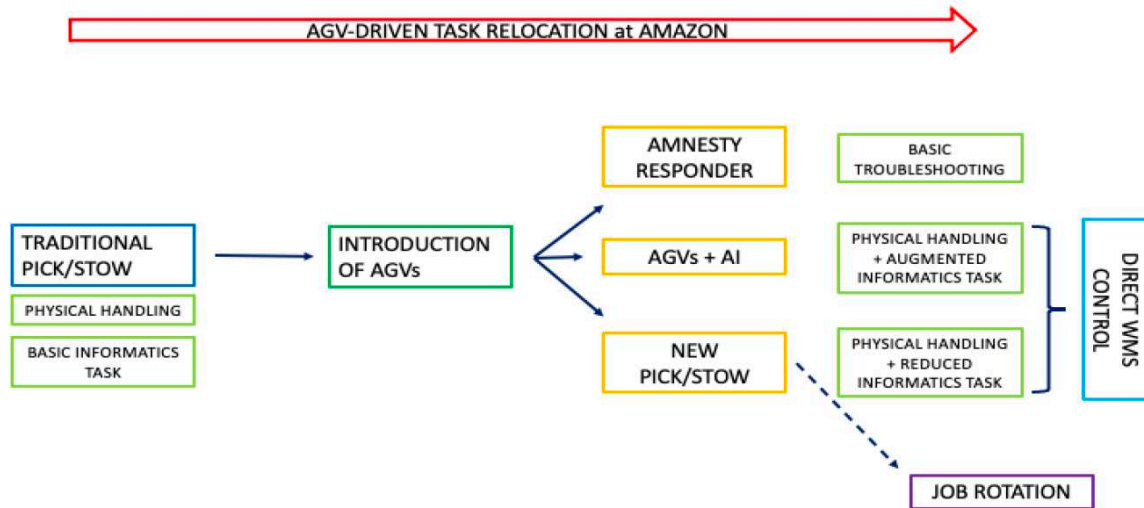


Figure 31 – Task relocation of pick/stow tasks in Robotic FCs (author’s elaboration)

Not only Amazon workers are unable to intervene on AGVs (except for the Amnesty Responder and the maintenance team) but the AGVs radically reduce their autonomy in setting their working rhythms. Workers appear to be more at the service of AGVs, which, on top of that, are centrally managed by a Warehouse Management System that operates at continental level. The low level of autonomy was explicitly illustrated by the HR Manager when we asked him if they produced formalised job descriptions. The answer was negative and confirmed the further incorporation of workers skills into Amazon’s machinery.

For us, the [unique] role is that of warehouse worker. Given the low level of complexity of each of these tasks, there is no particular requirement associated with the indication of a job description because the autonomy is really low in relation to the decision-making possibility. Really low because the whole process is absolutely guided step by step for the worker and then makes it really simple, so we do not have precise job descriptions. We can see if we have something, but I don't think so.

Fieldwork Quote 1 – HR Manager of an Italian robotic site, February 2021

From management’s point of view, AGVs are seen as part of a wider set of instruments aimed at improving human and social relations between workers and management:

Our technology, which is clearly based on the safety of the workers coming before the [benefit of] organisation, aims to facilitate the relationship between the boss and the operator, the boss and the team, by means of command and recognition mechanisms and feedback that somehow improve quality.

Fieldwork Quote 2 – HR Manager of an Italian robotic site, February 2021

However, comparing the new-generation to old-generation sites (such as ORY1 and MXP5, where I run my participant observation), changes brought about by AGVs can have consequences on pace of work and safety. With the introduction of AGVs, pickers and stowers no longer walk from one shelf to another to pick and store articles. This brings some benefits in terms of safety, as there are no longer dozens of workers moving carts within the same area. Among the safety improvements: (i) the risk of accidents and collisions is reduced (although not eliminated, as transportation activities with pallet trucks remain); (ii) workers do not have to walk for miles during shift work; (iii) reduction of accidents due to workers trying to stow or pick items too high up on the shelves since the AGV-assisted process allows a small stepladder for each workstation (at the old generation sites workers can use stools, which avoid overreaching but have higher risks of falling).

That said, there are also new risks potentially appearing. For instance, standing in the same workstation for hours is not a zero risk for safety. Moreover, the fact that workers no longer walk deprives them of the control on rhythms because they do not control the arrival of AGVs and this can bring work-pace intensification. Of course, the implementation of job rotation schemes might attenuate these sort of risks – as stressed by the safety manager we interviewed. Workers confirmed to us that job rotation is widely applied, depending on the production needs, of course. Usually, one half of the worker’s shift is spent picking and another half stowing (or on other tasks such as packing). With the introduction of AGVs, pick and pack tasks become much more similar. This was confirmed by one of the operations managers that I interviewed, who said that “picking is the reverse engineering of stowing”⁵⁹. Packing is very similar to picking and stowing in terms of movements required by workers. In this context, the benefits of job rotation for ergonomic risks should be assessed in light of this a flattening of tasks.

2.3.2. *Automation in a neo-fordist perspective: the prolongation of digitalisation*

The new AGV-equipped labour process was deeply affected by the introduction of this automation technology. However, the (partially) automated labour process was a prolongation of the previous digitalised labour process rather than a break from it. In other words, digitalisation was the *conditio sine qua non* of automation.

This is proved by the evolution of Amazon’s labour process. At the turn of the millennium, the company attempted a direct leap to automation, but it failed roundly. On the one hand, the logistic model adopted, which was inspired to Walmart turned out to be unsuitable for Amazon e-commerce business. The solution was a withdrawal from automation and a massive development of algorithms.

⁵⁹ Operation Manager of an Italian Robotic Site, February 2021. This interview was carried out during a separate research project, whose results are accessible (Cirillo et al. 2022; 2023).

Digitalisation (and proceduralisation) superseded a failed attempt of automation and, at the same time, paved the way for renewed automation fifteen years later. Another key element was the introduction of conveyors. Digitalisation led to the centralisation of control over almost the entire workflow and inventory. The consequence was a real-time connection between the shop floor and the website. Centralisation enhanced managerial control over workers, whose jobs were significantly deskilled. Conveyors allowed the mechanisation of tasks considered as “non-value added⁶⁰” such as the movement of commodities throughout the warehouse. Productivity grew and downtime was squeezed, even it could not be totally compressed in the case of certain crucial jobs such as picking.

The digitalisation laid the groundwork for a more solid wave of automation in the mid of the 2010s. At the business level, automation was driven by the FBA program. FBA required Amazon (1) to extend direct control over the entire distribution chain; (2) to scale up logistic capacity in order to keep the pace of sales. The former goal was secured through vertical integration; the latter, through automation. AGVs were at the core of Amazon’s strategy for automation. We saw that robots replaced those “non-value added” activities that former digitalisation had not incorporated yet. Picking was the most affected job since the entire activity of walking, a source of major downtime, was eventually integrated into the machines. Productivity soared and digitalisation resulted greatly consolidated, thereby increasing monitoring over work activities. Jobs such as stowing, picking and packing became much more homogeneous in terms of tasks, thus increasing flexibility in the training and the allocation of the workforce. Boost in productivity and Amazon’s size consolidated its monopoly position in the e-commerce and made it a looming competitor for the giants of the traditional retail sector.

However, rather than merely replacing human work, robots subdued it to tighter control. Amazon’s AGVs were replacing a simple and repetitive process in logistics, perhaps the most elementary: walking. Instead of marching through aisles, pickers and stowers, were assigned to fixed workstation where they received the shelves, at a pace of several dozen per hour. AGVs bring the shelves automatically, so workers saw their control on working rhythms dramatically reduced to the advantage of algorithms, i.e. of management⁶¹. Management, in turn, saw its power control getting even more concentrated upstream, a tendency that had been prompted by digitalisation in the early 2000s, and that automation extended. As (1) work remained central in the execution of tasks, and (2) productivity was for a great deal a matter of larger capacity and speed in processing items, then

⁶⁰ This is a term used by Amazon management during interviews.

⁶¹ Packing was the job whose tasks were the least affected by robots. The main impact came from the acceleration of upstream operations.

efficiency gains could not come without work intensification, which in turn increased risks of injuries⁶². In addition, the homogenisation of tasks implied further deskilling⁶³.

In this respect, findings are consistent with the most recent literature on automation in the warehousing industry, which emphasises the qualitative impact on working conditions (namely work intensification and deskilling) and the entanglement with algorithmic management and digitalisation (Gutelius and Theodore 2019; Cirillo et al. 2023); logistics aside, the importance of digitalisation and standardisation, including its priority over sheer automation, combined with the reduction of workers' autonomy, have been confirmed by studies in automotive firms under "Industry 4.0" restructuring⁶⁴:

Indeed, more than a simple substitution of tasks by means of automation, our results suggest that the introduction of I4.0 artefacts has produced a general increase in workers' intervention authority on the work process in terms of discretionary decision making, and therefore augmenting the variability and intensity of task execution. However, we record a lack of similar increase in terms of autonomy of workers, especially regarding the possibility of establishing own rules with organisational and procedural routines. Instead, standardisation of an increasing number of executed tasks is becoming more and more prevalent: while operators previously used to enjoy the possibility of autonomously define e.g. the manner and order of execution of a given procedure entailing the use of manual tools, nowadays the widespread adoption of digital tools typically requires tasks to be performed according to a unique admissible combination of steps, otherwise errors are raised. To sum up, among our pivotal adopters, while the push towards sheer automation is weak, significant effort has been devoted to the implementation of digitalisation and interconnection of production equipment (Cirillo et al. 2021).

Likewise, in their studies in the automotive industry under Industry 4.0 implementation, Butollo and co-authors (2017) emphasise strong continuities with previous paradigms of industrial organization such as the lean production principle, and a significant increase in the importance of intralogistics, combined with a corresponding increase in employment. These shifts are also changing the nature of industrial work. In addition to assembly work and machine operation, new requirement profiles are emerging that are based on low qualifications and rapid familiarization. They refer to this scenario as the "Amazonisation" of industrial work due to structural similarities to the online retail sector.

Finally, evidence of deskilling, work intensification and growing algorithmic control at Amazon confirms the findings of the literature on "digital taylorism" (Nachtwey and Staab 2015;

⁶² A recent journalistic investigation of injury rates at Amazon warehouses from The Center for Investigative Reporting's *Reveal* found that robotic FCs reported more injuries than legacy FCs (*Center for Investigative Reporting* 2019).

⁶³ Although new jobs, such as the amnesty responder were created. However, at least in Italy, where I could carry on close investigation, the job is not remunerated at a higher rate (Cirillo et al. 2022).

⁶⁴ For a critical review of the notion of Industry 4.0 as a "disruptive" and discontinuous paradigm, see (Butollo and Staab 2019).

Altenried 2020; Butollo et al. 2018) and neo-taylorism (Amossé and Coutrot 2008; 2011; Gautié, Jaehrling, and Perez 2020) that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

However, something more than simple taylorism unfolds in Amazon's warehouses, a prolongation of it. This prolongation can be appreciated if we follow the analysis proposed by Aglietta in his landmark work on fordism (Aglietta 1976). It is well-known that in Aglietta's and, more broadly in the regulationist perspective, fordism is a macro-economic accumulation regime based on the "institutionalisation of the economic class struggle", the "formation of a social consumption norm", something that taylorism alone lacked. Yet, according to Aglietta, fordism had also a micro-foundation in the transformation of the labour process:

Fordism is thus the principle of *an articulation between process of production and mode of consumption*, which constitutes the mass production that is the specific content of the universalization of wage-labour. [...] The characteristic labour process of Fordism is semiautomatic assembly-line production. This particular type of labour process was established in the United States from the 1920s onwards, especially for mass consumer goods produced in long production runs, and was subsequently extended upstream to the production of standardized intermediate components for the manufacture of these means of consumption (Aglietta 1976, 96–97, my translation).

In the same pages, Aglietta makes explicit reference to vertical integration, as complementary to a certain kind of labour process:

The establishment of one and the same type of labour process was a powerful force for the vertical integration of production processes and a material support for the transmission of local mutations in the productive forces between the two departments of production (Aglietta 1976, 96–97, my translation).

In the labour process, continues Aglietta, fordism took up the principles of taylorism and put them more effectively into practice, to obtain an even greater intensification of labour:

Fordism further developed the mechanization of labour, increased the intensity of work, radicalised the separation between manual and mental labour, rigorously subjected workers to the law of accumulation and turned scientific progress against them as a power serving the uniform expansion of value. The decisive influence of Fordism can be seen in the accumulation of capital in general by the break in the pace of development of the rate of surplus-value after the First World War, which we have already remarked. Fordism deepened Taylorism in the labour process by the application of two complementary principles (Aglietta 1976, 96–97, my translation).

These principles were, (1) the integration of the different segments of the labour process by a *system of conveyors and handling devices* ensuring the movement of the materials to be transformed and their arrival at the appropriate machine tools. Amazon carried on this integration already in its second-generation labour process. This first principle, according to Aglietta, “represented a mutation of the forces of production that considerably lowered the time taken for the transfer and manipulation of objects that were often heavy and difficult to move, or else corrosive and dangerous to handle. The system was similarly responsible for a major saving of labour-power and a notable increase in the organic composition of capital”; (2) the fixing of workers to jobs whose positions were “rigorously determined by the configuration of the machine system”, which correspond to the shift from traditional picking/stowing, where workers move at their discretion through the aisles in order to reach the items to process, to the robot-assisted picking/stowing, where the worker is fixed in the workstation. The consequences indicated by Aglietta are the same I illustrated in Amazon’s robotic FCs:

The individual worker thus lost all control over his work rhythm. The continuous linear flow prohibited the formation of buffer stocks between jobs and subjected the collective rhythm to the uniform movement of the machine system. In this mode of organisation, workers are unable to put up any individual resistance to the imposition of the output norm, since job autonomy has been totally abolished. It thus became possible to simplify tasks yet further by fragmenting cycles of motion into mere repetition of a few elementary movements. This simplification, planned in engineering departments which were themselves subject to the division of labour, was pursued through a continuous amelioration of assembly-line performance, modifying machine types, inventing new positions and jobs, altering manufacturing and assembly plans (Aglietta 1976, 98, my translation).

Eventually, as it is well-known, the fordist accumulation regime entered a structural crisis because of the disfunction of its own mechanisms of macro-economic adjustment⁶⁵. Yet the roots of the crisis,

⁶⁵ Or at least, this is the argument of regulationist economists. According to these interpretations, factors were two: on the one hand, the exhaustion of technological innovation (Coriat 1995; Bowles, Gordon, and Weisskopf 1986; Boyer and Saillard 1995); on the other hand, in the wake of the polish economist Michal Kalecky (Kalecki 1943), the erosion of employers’ power in the labour market and the labour process due to full employment and raising workplace militancy. A broader argument on the exhaustion of the fordist technological paradigm is formulated by Aglietta (1976), Lipietz (Lipietz 1986) and Boyer (Boyer 1987), and it is key in Regulationists’ interpretation of the crisis of the 1970s, but it is criticized by Political Marxists such as Brenner and Glick (1991, 98–105). For Brenner in particular the crisis in profitability was not the consequence but the cause of the productivity crisis, and the crisis of profitability was not the result of workers pressures, but the inter-capitalist international competition (R. Brenner 2006). For a clear response to Brenner’s arguments, in defence of the Regulationist interpretation, see Arrighi (2008, 121–30).

Aglietta reminds, had grown within the labour process itself⁶⁶. Thus, firms embraced neo-fordism⁶⁷ as an organisational model designed to meet the crisis while safeguarding the reproduction of the labour (“wage”) relation. In first place, neo-fordism aimed at the further socialisation of work under capitalist control, provoking a recomposition of tasks which nurtured post-fordist rhetoric about the emancipation of work (it is remarkable that Aglietta writes this in the mid-1970s):

Neo-Fordism, like Fordism itself, is based on an organising principle of the forces of production dictated by the needs of capitalist management of the work collective. The new complex of productive forces is automatic production control or automation; the principle of work organisation now in embryo is known as the recomposition of tasks. The combination of these two lines of development has unleashed the most shameless propaganda about the liberation of man in work (Aglietta 1976, 101–2, my translation).

In second place, neo-fordism introduced mechanisms for real-time control, allowed by new technologies and practices:

The new principle of work organisation is that of a totally integrated system in which production operations properly so called, as well as measurement and handling of information, react upon one another as elements in a single process, conceived in advance and organized in its totality, rather than in successive and separate steps of an empirical process of heterogeneous phases. An organisation of this kind is made possible by the systematic application of the principle of feedback to the functioning machine tools. The basis of the entire system is thus the ability to *construct machines that control their own operations* (Aglietta 1976, 101–2, my translation).

According to Aglietta, this refoundation of the Fordist model requires three conditions that are also central in Amazon’s labour process: (1) “a scientific and no longer merely empirical knowledge of each phase in the production process”, based on the circular flow of information, a key element of Amazon’s labour process since the second phase; (2) “a complete reconstruction of the production unit according to entirely new plans for the circulation of products, a complete redefinition of production norms, job positions and changes in both the nature of the responsibilities and the identity of those responsible for the course of production”, a process that in Amazon started already in the Phase II, but intensified with automation in Phase III; (3) finally, “the dual advances of electronics in the treatment of information and capacity to programme systems on the one hand, and in the

⁶⁶ The emphasis that Aglietta puts on the transformations in the labour process is generally quite neglected by commentators and subsequent developers of the regulationist approach. For Aglietta, the internal factors of crisis of the fordist labour process were (1) the difficulty in distributing time equally: “not all workers have a cycle of movements of the same durations”; (2) “the effects of intensification of labour on the mental and physical equilibrium of the workers”, which results in high levels of absenteeism, rise in accidents and declining quality of output; (3) “the abolition of any perceptible tie between the collective output of the workforce and the expenditure of energy by the individual worker”.

⁶⁷ A term first coined by Christian Palloix (Palloix 1976a).

production of instruments of measurement and control for diverse production processes on the other”, which corresponds in Amazon to the digitalisation and proceduralisation established in Phase II and consolidated in Phase III.

The automation drive at Amazon prolongates the effect of algorithmic management in terms of efficiency, flexibility and centralisation. In terms of efficiency, precision of activities such as pick and stow, already present in Phase II, is increased in Phase III thanks to robots and to the introduction of artificial-intelligence equipment, thus reducing also the need of specific skills. Borrowing the words from Aglietta’s description of neo-fordism:

The functioning of the machine is then completely freed from the motor and sensory limits of the human operator. Precision is improved, production time sharply reduced, and above all, the time taken to prepare the machine system for different conditions of use can be reduced from several hours to a few minutes, while completely eliminating the need for skilled personnel (Aglietta 1976, 104–5, my translation).

For what concerns skills, the recomposition of tasks drove by automation in the Phase III, as we saw, brings about their homogenisation, which in turns becomes is a source of flexibility for the company, since workers can be moved from a task to another (namely, from pick to stow and vice versa) with more rapidity. In the words of Aglietta, automation bring a flattening of skills and tasks. Jobs become mor homogenous and this allows polyvalence. Also, managerial functions, including monitoring of workers, relies less on workers’ commitment and more on technical coercion (see Part II for a discussion of this process in Amazon’s workplace):

Since it is no longer necessary to individualise jobs, and since the ending of manual operation of the machines makes tasks objectively homogeneous, it is easy to switch workers around, adding some and taking away others, and in this way reduce to a considerable extent the problems posed by absenteeism. The number of foremen, quality controllers and other supervisory staff is also sharply reduced. The engineering department, on the other hand, is expanded. [...] *The workers are no longer subjected to a constraint of personal obedience, but rather to the collective constraint of the production process.* The various different experiments now being made in the labour process should be assessed by the criterion of whether or not they betoken new relations in production. In this respect, job rotation and job enrichment are simply the ultimate extensions of the principles of fordism and taylorism. A certain polyvalence on the part of the operatives results, not because they become more skilled, but on the contrary because the division of labour has pushed the process of de-skilling to a maximum, by stripping work of all its specific characteristics. It would be a serious mistake, therefore, to interpret the multiplication of tasks within a single job position as a backward step. On the contrary, it is the collectivisation of work in the form of abstract labour that creates the uniformity permitting this multiplication which is in no way the revival of the kind of qualitative content characteristic of a craft (Aglietta 1976, 105–7, my translation).

We will see in Part II of this thesis that the incorporation of direct coercion into digital and automation technologies leads to the socialisation of coercion into the labour process itself (technical coercion), although workplace direct analysis will also reveal that managers continue exerting an important role of direct surveillance in enforcing technical coercion (Chapters 4 and 6).

Finally, the increase of centralisation at Amazon corresponds to the description made by Aglietta of centralisation unfolding under a neo-fordist labour process. There are two aspects that are emphasised by Aglietta. One is that new automatic equipment (in the case of Amazon: digital devices, artificial intelligence, and robots) “is very costly in terms of fixed capital, centralises production enormously, and only becomes worthwhile from the capitalist point of view if very high levels of output can be regularly maintained”. Another one is the capacity to use this *centralisation* of control (and the proceduralisation/standardisation of processes) as a tool for *de-concentration* of fixed capital thereby dispersing working class power⁶⁸:

far more advanced centralisation of production becomes compatible with a geographical decentralisation of the operative units. [...] A far greater flexibility in the installation of production units allows it to break up large working-class concentrations and create an environment that minimises convergence of struggles at the point of production (Aglietta 1976, 106, my translation).

The global dispersion of Amazon network ensured by the real time interconnection of the logistic nodes between each other and between the nodes and the website – i.e. the overlapping of a digital and physical infrastructure – not only allows the company to run its e-commerce business but creates redundancy. Redundancy in turns protects business continuity from disruption on the distribution chain, especially labour unrest, a threat that has been looming on the company since the transition from the initial start-up labour process to the algorithmic and, subsequently, the neo-fordist one⁶⁹.

The comparison between Aglietta’s theorisation of the fordist and neo-fordism labour process and evidence from the analysis of Amazon labour process is summarised in the following table (Table 6).

⁶⁸ The co-existence of centralisation and de-concentration has been conceptualised in different forms and with different words since the 1990s, sometimes using the same word for the opposite concept. Bennet Harrison (1997), for instance, coined the expression “concentration without centralisation”, referring to the process of outsourcing in networked firms, where dominant firms managed to keep power through the value chains (concentration) while formally fragmenting it (centralisation). Bellofiore, Garibaldi and Halevi (2011), instead, reverse the terms – “centralisation without concentration” – but refer to the same process. In the case of Amazon, I talk about centralisation and de-concentration, because I considerate semantically clearer. What is important to stress, however, is that, differently from both Harrison and Bellofiore and co-authors, Amazon is a case of de-concentration co-existing with vertical integrations. The de-concentration is geographical, but the FCs scattered across the world belong to the same company.

⁶⁹ For a discussion on redundancy and the lack of classic “choke points” in Amazon network, see Vgontzas (Vgontzas 2020) and Goldmann (2023). In fact, Amazon *does* have chokepoints, but they are not the FCs for there are hundreds of FCs from which Amazon can supply its distribution network. Amazon’s chokepoints are located in the Sortation Centers, because they are much less, a few dozens, and most of the commodities shipped from must pass through SCs in order to reach the delivery stations, so a single SC whose workforce is on strike is less likely to be easily bypassed.

Table 6 – Fordist and neo-fordist elements in Amazon’s labour process

<i>Aglietta’s Paradigm</i>	<i>Key Elements</i>		<i>Correspondent elements in Amazon’s labour process</i>
Fordist	Vertical integration		Vertical integration (Phases II and III)
	Full deployment of taylorism via:	Conveyor system	Conveyor system (Phases II and III)
		Fixed workstations controlled by machines and no longer by worker initiative	AGVs workstation (Phase III)
Neo-fordist	Automation:	“Scientific knowledge” of processes and planning, based on circular flow of information thanks to electronics and information technologies	Digitalisation (Phases II and III)
		Complete redefinition of production norms and job positions	Polyvalence and task relocation with AGVs (Phase III)
		Job recomposition, de-skilling	Job recomposition and de-skilling (Phases II and III)
		Personal obedience of the worker replaced by “collective constraint of the production process” as main mechanism of worker domination	Increase of technical coercion (Phases II and III)
	Centralisation and de-concentration		

Aglietta’s definition is not very systematic and relatively old. However, it allows us to grasp the pattern of development of Amazon. First, it insists on the idea of continuity between taylorism, fordism and neo-fordism. Fordism supersedes taylorism, and it is in turn prolonged by neo-fordism. The underlying tendency is that of an intensification of control, task homogenisation and increasing flexibility. A second salient aspect is the connection between the fordist/neo-fordist labour process and the broader organisational model of firm, which adopts vertical integration and thanks to the new technologies in the workplace can de-concentrate its production it, while keep control centralised. Finally, Aglietta’s description takes into account the role of planning: vertical integration, centralisation of control and increase of volumes extend the margins of planification for the firm: sales can be at least in part forecast, warehouses are immense buffering, and the algorithmic management of flows allows the balancing of stocks across the network. In this respect, Amazon’s organisation of flows transcends the typical just-in-time model: orders are fulfilled on demand, but

this is affordable in so far inventory is constantly monitored and balanced according to planification⁷⁰. It is this combination of planification and flexibility, based on a fordist organisation that allows Amazon to fully deploy its platform business of intermediation.

⁷⁰ For a further reflection on the role of algorithms in planification, see the essay of Phillips and Rozworski (2019).

2.4. *Conclusion of Part I*

The main argument of Part 1 is that Amazon's plat-fordist labour process constitutes an outcome of Amazon's monopoly strategy and, at the same time, its most important support.

Chapter 1 showed the role of logistics in Amazon's economic model. Logistics and vertical integration are essential for Amazon to unfold its full-fledged platform business and to Amazon's digital monopoly. If at the beginning it was not clear for Amazon's executives whether to invest in their own logistics infrastructure (following Ebay's approach), since the mid of the 2000s the decision was taken and Amazon first expanded its network horizontally, then vertically. The parallel development of Amazon's platform (Third-party sales, FBA) and cloud (AWS) businesses created complementarities that enhanced the economic viability of the model. Amazon's case of "successful" hybridisation of on the one hand, a platform paradigm (typical of the so-called "New spirit of capitalism") with, on the other hand, logistic vertical integration (typical of Fordism and the old "industrialised" spirit of capitalism) represent a specific paradigm that we can call plat-fordism. In this respects the readings of authors that emphasises value capture based on data monopoly (C. Durand 2020; 2022; Coveri, Cozza, and Guarascio 2022; Rikap 2022; 2023) do not emphasise enough the importance of the logistics infrastructure for the generation and viability of these.

Chapter 2 focused on the evolution of labour process in Amazon's logistic network, namely in its warehouses. Three phases of development are identified: a first start-up stage (1995-2004), where the labour process is relatively disorganised and uncertainly defined (it corresponds to the phase in which Amazon's economic model was still uncertain): Amazon tries to apply Walmart organisation in its warehouse, but it turns out to be a failure. The second phase (2005-2014) corresponds to a more consistent approach, in which the company abandons any attempt of automation and focuses more on digitalisation: the combination of digitalisation (use of algorithms and software) with task fragmentation, increases control over workers and reduces their autonomy: digital Taylorism is established. The third-generation labour process, which emerged approximately in 2015, is characterised by the successful introduction, under new conditions (technological innovation, a labour process already digitalised and larger economies of scale), of automation. Combining empirical analysis of the transformation of the labour process under automation, with a reading of Aglietta's work on Fordist labour process (Aglietta 1976), we can define this phase as neo-Fordist, which completes the re-fordisation of the firm's structure that I examined in Chapter I.

The analysis of the labour process that I carried out here present the advantage of connecting the workplace to the profit strategy of the firm, illustrating the co-evolution of both. At the same time this analysis is still incomplete. Most studies on Amazon and, more broadly on digital taylorism and algorithmic management, do not consider the co-evolution of the labour process and the profit

strategy of the firm. At Amazon, this co-evolution is critical to understand the turning points and change in the labour process. The intensification of working rhythms and of monitoring is not the natural result of technological innovation, but of the evolution of Amazon business model.

There is a limit, however, in the analysis carried on so far. In Amazon plat-fordist labour process, algorithmic technologies and automation magnify control and monitoring on labour at an unprecedented level. In this respect, my analysis is consistent with most of the literature on digital taylorism and algorithmic management. Algorithmic management “resembles a panopticon, which creates asymmetries and amplifies managerial control of the labour process” (Krzywdzinski, Schneiß, and Sperling 2024, 2). This is the result of an analysis carried on from the point of view of capital, where the technical aspect of the labour process is overemphasised, while the social relations in the workplace remained obscured.

In particular, I have not yet approached the broader problem of production politics as theorised by Burawoy. The eliciting of worker effort and the extraction of value cannot be taken for granted. The role of coercion must be considered, as well as that of resistance and the impact that this has on the labour process. In sum, class relations at work must be analysed through a more comprehensive theoretical framework. In the next part, drawing on a revision of Burawoy’s framework, I will consider the problem of the mobilisation of worker effort and, the specular issue of the demobilisation of worker collective action in Amazon workplace.

Part II

II. Rethinking production politics through the lens of Amazon

You may have noticed that to endure years in here takes toughness.

Amazon worker in Italy

The mobilisation of worker effort is a constant problem of class relations in the point of production, and an object of study in economic and sociological theory.

The capitalist-worker relationship is based on an exchange between effort on the part of the worker and compensation on the part of the capitalist. The problem is that such a relationship is inherently uncertain. As elaborated by Bowles (1985) and Bowles and Gintis (1990; 1998, 36–39), building on the earlier works of Alchian and Demsetz (1972), Shapiro and Stiglitz (1984), Akerlof and Yellen (1986), Williamson (1985), and others, employers deal with a problem of “extraction of labour effort” from workers – getting workers to work harder than they want to do spontaneously – since the labour contract is neither complete nor costlessly enforceable. In economic literature, this problem raises the issue of “efficiency wages”: employers face a trade-off between spending more money on improving the effectiveness of monitoring or paying higher employment rents. Similarly, labour process theorists argue that capital faces a control imperative i.e., the need to “translate labour power into labour”, i.e., to elicit labour effort in order to secure profitable production (Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1979a; R. Edwards 1979; P. Thompson 1990; Burawoy and Wright 1990). By the same token, neo-regulationists have highlighted the need of employers to recruit a workforce whose, volume, quality and price correspond to the needs of the firm, and whose implication at work must be assured and secured (Coutrot 1998; Boyer and Freyssenet 2000).

To secure power on the labour process (a power whose purpose is to secure surplus value), capitalists have developed different forms of control. One of the most influential frameworks was developed by Braverman: according to him, Taylorism, or “scientific management”, had nothing of “scientific” (see also Noble 1978). With the transition to monopoly capitalism, Braverman argues: management’s concern was not primarily to identify the best way to do work in general (i.e., to maximize efficiency) but “to answer the specific problem of how best to control alienated labour – that is to say, labour that is bought and sold” (Braverman 1974, 90). How did they manage to secure their control on workers? According to Braverman, first, by expropriating workers of their skills and

determining the tasks individuals must undertake, and then, by directing their effort through the working day to make sure that these tasks were completed⁷¹.

Braverman's account was hugely influential, and it is still so today. However, early on his framework inspired various critiques, especially concerning his emphasis on the hold that management would be able to exert on workers (A. L. Friedman 1977b; R. Edwards 1978; Burawoy 1978; 1979a; Littler and Salaman 1982). At the base of these critiques there was a common remark: Braverman and the first-wave labour process theory (see for instance, Zimbalist 1979; Clawson 1980) shared a strain of functionalism. Taylorism "derived[d] entirely from the inner logic of valorisation"; it was presented as ruthless initiative of capital able to establish management's power, while "the possibility that worker action could restrain or modify the use of technology [was] not considered" (R. Price 1984, 93)⁷². Likewise, most analysis of digital Taylorism, including of Amazon, stress the augmentation of managerial control enabled by new digital technologies, thus reproducing a certain functionalism and technological determinism.

Soon after the release of *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, scholars proposed to transcend the limits they attributed to Braverman's approach. First, Andrew Friedman showed that management's tight control could coexist with conditions of relative autonomy, suggesting that Braverman was oversimplifying the dichotomy between autonomy and control. Friedman distinguished direct control and responsible autonomy. Direct controls corresponded to Braverman's process of deskilling, whereas responsible autonomy attached workers to the interests of capital by allowing them limited job control. In the early period of industrial capitalism, responsible autonomy was a legacy of the past and took the form of craft control, whereas under monopoly capitalism, it was a self-conscious managerial strategy to pre-empt worker resistance (A. L. Friedman 1977b). We will see that the notion of responsible autonomy will be relevant in analysing the first phase of the labour process in Amazon's warehouses at the global level and especially in the case studies I examined in France and Italy.

⁷¹ In this respect, Braverman was joined by the economist Stephen Marglin and the historian David Montgomery. These Marxist authors argued that the division of labour with detail workers responsible only for a single task, within a rigid authority hierarchy where managers monopolise conception and planning, was technically unnecessary (Braverman 1974; Marglin 1974; Montgomery 1979). Marglin (1974) famously argued that capitalist management does not play any productive role: the division of labour was not a matter of fostering efficiency but to shield control and secure profits. In response to Marglin, the historian David Landes (1986) countered that the strategy of increasing profit by decreasing prices via the use of semi-skilled labor was the motive behind centralization of production and economies of scale in the first place.

⁷² For a defence of Braverman against his earliest critics, see the interventions of Dan Clawson (1980), Craig Littler (1982) and Peter Armstrong (1988). For a summary of the debate on Braverman's and the first wave of labour process theory see (Elbaum et al. 1979; R. Price 1984; Meiksins 1994; P. Thompson and Smith 2000; Bouquin 2010). Furthermore, Braverman's thesis about deskilling has been early on questioned: "Nor can the period of advanced capitalism be reduced to the consolidation of deskilling. New skills are continually created and do not disappear as rapidly as Braverman suggests" (Burawoy 1983, 589). For salient works on the question of skills and deskilling in the labour process, see also Friedmann 1950; Mallet 1969; Sorge 1983; Kern and Schumann 1984; Streeck 2011.

Then, Richard Edwards elaborated a more dialectic relation between capital and labour. Forms of control were not the result of capital's unilateral action, but the outcome of class conflict at the point of production. Thus, he traced the development of control in the modern industrial workplace through three modes: (1) from 1880, when firms were generally small and markets competitive, management exerted *simple control*, enacted through direct, hierarchical, and arbitrary supervision. (2) At the turn of the century, the growth of large-scale industry made simple control difficult to enact. After a series of unsuccessful experiments, capital sought to regulate work through continuous flow production augmented by Taylorism: control was incorporated into technology and *technical control* emerged. (3) This mode of control generated its own forms of struggle and since 1945, *bureaucratic control* became dominant. Relationships between superiors and subordinates were governed by formal rules and procedures associated with impersonal bureaucratic administrative structures.

Edward's conceptualisation of control had the advantage of providing alternative models of control and to include workers' resistance and autonomy in his framework⁷³. However, his framework proposed linear models of control that: (1) fell prey to the "panacea fallacy" i.e., the assumption that capital seeks and finds control strategies that provide self-contained solutions to its problems; (2) implied a rigid periodisation in which a supposedly primitive stage such as direct control is superseded by more sophisticated forms of control. The period of early capitalism was neither the haven of the craft workers, as Braverman implied, nor confined to simple control, as Edwards maintained. Nor could the period of advanced capitalism be reduced to the consolidation of deskilling. Evidence suggests that the three forms of control complement each other rather than distinct and disposed in a linear succession (Littler and Salaman 1982; P. K. Edwards 1989; Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Sturdy, Fleming, and Delbridge 2010; Fana, Massimo, and Moro 2022). Furthermore, Edwards' framework was produced at the heyday of industrial capitalism. Therefore, it did not consider other forms of control typical of other sectors. For instance, the social control of customers in the service economy (Fuller and Smith 1991; Sturdy, Grugulis, and Willmott 2002; Korczynski 2003; Maugeri 2006; see also Hochschild's concept of 'emotional labor' 1983; Wharton 1996)⁷⁴.

⁷³ In a following formulation, Edwards and other scholars situated the development of the three forms of labour control in three social structures of accumulation corresponding to long swings in the US economy (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982).

⁷⁴ To the control exerted by managers through customers, we could add the one through the scrutiny of peer workers (Moro and Rinaldini 2020).

II.1) Bringing politics back in digital taylorism. Burawoy and the politics of production

A landmarking critique to Braverman came from the research of Michael Burawoy (Burawoy 1978; 1979a; 1979b; 1983; 1985). Burawoy's theory of "production politics" is anti-dogmatic neo-Marxist approach underpinned by an accurate ethnography of the labour process in the monopoly sector of US manufacturing, which Burawoy later extended to the socialist planned economy (Burawoy and Lukács 1992). It is also the most accomplished attempt in sociology of work to develop a theoretical framework capable to account for class relations in the workplace, and especially for the apparent acquiescing of workers to their own exploitation in the capitalist work process.

Burawoy makes a step further in the critique of Braverman's framework. Braverman starts from the assumption that the interests of capital and labour are opposed. This assumption, according to Burawoy, "leads to serious misunderstandings over the nature of the capitalist control if only because it provides an excuse to ignore the ideological terrain where interests are organised" (Burawoy 1978, 257). Burawoy draws on Gramsci to stress that control and coercion are not the only mechanisms allowing capitalist to elicit and secure worker effort. The relations of production are seen as a relation of domination in which the dominated "consent" to its subordination.

In the capitalist labour process, worker effort must not only be secured but also "obscured". The obscuring of effort is made possible by the reproduction of consent. What matters, is that surplus value is not visible – for it is incorporated into the production process – and mediated by consciousness. The capitalist mode of production is not just the production of things but simultaneously the production of social relations and also the production of *ideas about those relations*. The roots of capitalist control on work are to be investigated in day-to-day adaptations of workers, whereby they create their own ideological effects that become focal elements in the operations of capitalist control.

It is from this anti-determinist and "constructivist" turn that Burawoy elaborates his notion of "politics of production" and of "factory regime"⁷⁵. For Burawoy,

⁷⁵ The notion of factory regimes has a clear "fordist" flavour, although Burawoy made the theoretical effort of generalising it enough to make it a comprehensive notion of capitalist-labour relations in the place of production. The notion it has been subsequently revisited by different authors. Wood prefers the term of "workplace regime", even if he does not introduce major change to their theoretical meaning (Wood 2020). Expanding from Burawoy's notion, theorists of Labour Control Regimes (LCR) "place[d] emphasis on relationships outside workplaces, which include the spheres of social reproduction, consumption, exchange and circulation" – something that Burawoy (but also the French regulationists) had theoretically admitted, precisely because of his structuralist approach, but that he had insufficiently examined. The LCR approach, instead, tries "to unveil how the process of exploitation requires a far wider control matrix than that contained within the walls of the workplace. By significantly broadening the lens through which we look at production, LCR [...] shows the relevance of social reproductive realms and relations in moulding control in specific locales" (Baglioni and Mezzadri 2020, 119). In this respect, the LCR provide a more comprehensive framework for the study of non-fordist labour regimes especially the informal sector and global value chains (Jonas 1996; Nichols et al. 2004; Baglioni and Mezzadri 2020; Baglioni et al. 2022; Bagnardi 2023). For my study of production politics at Amazon, a bureaucratised

the process of production is not confined to the labor process [...]. The process of production also includes *political apparatuses* which reproduce those relations of the labor process through the regulation of struggles. I call these apparatuses the *factory regime* and the associated struggles the *politics of production* or simply *production politics* (Burawoy 1983, 587).

Factory regimes are situated at the intersection of the sphere of market and that of the state; different configurations of these two spheres produce different factory regimes, associated to a specific labour process.

Burawoy elaborates two ideal-typical forms of factory regimes under capitalism: *market despotic* and *hegemonic*⁷⁶. Like Edwards, Burawoy proposes a periodisation: first, “despotic” and then “hegemonic” regimes⁷⁷. The essential distinction between these two regimes was the role played by coercion and consent in the labour process. Under despotism capitalists would secure surplus value through coercion (i.e. speed up, firing, wage cutting, close supervision). However, such a labour regime would make the exploitative relation between labour and capital evident to workers and generates tensions and conflicts which have the potential of challenging the relations of production. Therefore, under the hegemonic stage, which emerges with monopoly capitalism, capitalists would accomplish the obscuring requirement by replacing coercion with consent-producing measures in the labour process, typical of the hegemonic regimes. With the greater resources afforded by monopolistic positions, capitalists offer workers limited autonomy within production by relaxing production standards and supervision, creating internal job ladders, and instituting collective-bargaining systems. In the hegemonic regime identified by Burawoy, the sources of consent are three: the making out, the internal state and the internal labour market.

II.1.a) *Making out*

Making out was the most original element, on which Burawoy puts particular emphasis. Making out, or the constitution of work as a game, whose rules were understood and accepted by operators,

plat-fordist firm, the original definition of factory regime, limited to the analysis of the point of production remain suitable. Yet, I will use indifferently the term of factory, labour or workplace regime.

⁷⁶ Variations in particular types of regime are also identified (Burawoy 1985, chap. 2).

⁷⁷ The concept of hegemony, was forged by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci during the 1920s and 1930s in his *Prisons Notebooks* (Gramsci 1975; 1992). It is not a systematic theory but a rather fragmented reflection, dispersed throughout the *Quaderni*, in an attempt to understand the rise of Fascism through a revisited Marxist analysis, in which the power of ideas was key to understand class domination in its various forms (Bates 1975; Cospito 2004). “The foundation of a ruling class”, he wrote, “is equivalent to the creation of a *Weltanschauung*”, and not to the simple rule of force (Gramsci 1975, Quaderno 7, §33). Gramsci’s theory of hegemony has been crucial not only for the renewal of Western Marxism but also a source of inspiration for “New Right” thinkers such as Alain De Benoist. In social science, it has known a particular success not only in labour process theory, thanks essentially to the work of Michael Burawoy, but also in political economy (Aglietta 1976; Arrighi 1994), political anthropology (J. C. Scott 1985; 1990; Guha 1992), and international relations (e.g. R. W. Cox 1987; Keohane 1984; Gill 1993; Nye 2004; Vacca et al. 2010).

auxiliary workers and shop-floor supervisors alike, was a piecework game. The goal was to make an acceptable percentage output, not higher than 140 percent and not lower than 125 percent. As later summarised by Burawoy:

constituting work as a game is common in many workplaces because it counters ennui and arduousness, it makes time pass quickly, enabling workers to endure otherwise meaningless work. There were good psychological reasons to participate in such a game, but, just as important, the social order pressured everyone into playing the same game with more or less the same rules. We continually evaluated each other as to how well we were playing the game. It was difficult to opt out without also being ostracized (Burawoy 2012, 193)

“There are few work contexts”, Burawoy contends, “in which labourers do not construct games”; “Even on the assembly line”, he reminds, workers manage to carve out space for themselves in which to introduce uncertainty and to exercise a minimal control and enjoy relative satisfaction (Burawoy 1985, 37). This is indeed a common place in organisational and work sociology. While, as stressed by certain authors, informal practices such as games are considered somewhat of a “relief” from exploitation for workers (Barnard 1938; Roy 1952a; 1953; 1959; Blau 1955; Baldamus 1961; see also, Knights 1990), games also have, according to other authors, “negative” effects, especially since they can undermine efficiency (Mayo 1933; Homans 1950; Crozier 1963)⁷⁸. Burawoy, criticises both perspectives for being narrowly focused on the *marginal* effects of games, namely on the impact on output. Games are in fact a mechanism of stabilisation of managerial power:

I wish to take a different approach, in which games will be examined as providing the ideological preconditions for the obscuring and securing of surplus. [...] participation in games has the effect of concealing relations of production while coordinating the interests of workers and management. [...] The very act of playing a game produces and reproduces consent to the rules and to the desirability of certain outcomes. Thus, one cannot play chess and at the same time question the rules and objectives. Playing the game generates the legitimacy of the conditions that define its rules and objectives. [...] *the day-to-day adaptations of workers create their own ideological effects that become focal elements in the operation of capitalist control* (Burawoy 1985, 38–39, emphasis in original).

In other words, according to Burawoy games create the informal routines underpinning workers consent (or its avatar: “capitalist control”). According to him, what matters about production games

⁷⁸ Interestingly, Burawoy signals that “in a similar vein, even if from a different theoretical perspective”, Marxists such as O’Connor converge in considering games as an expression of class struggle over labour time (O’Connor 1975). We will see in Chapter 4 how this form of struggle emerges openly in the French Amazon workplace, while in the Italian case (Chapter 5) it does not spark open conflict.

is not so much whether they restrict input or give workers relative satisfaction; what matters for him is that by playing the game, workers accept and becomes incapable to see their own exploitation, thereby becoming “accomplices” of capitalist control on the labour process (Burawoy 1985, 10).

II.1.b) The internal state

Games are crucial and perhaps the most original elements of Burawoy’s theorisation of consent-making in the workplace. Yet, Burawoy identifies two other sources of consent which, we will see, are particularly important also to understand production politics at Amazon: the internal state and the internal labour market. Influenced by the French structuralist Marxism of the 1970s, Burawoy argued that theories of the state developed by Althusser (1965; 1969) and Poulantzas (1974; 1975) – which in turn drew on Gramsci’s thought – could be applied to the internal workings of the factory. The internal state was “a set of institutions that organize, transform or repress struggle over the relations in production at the level of the enterprise” (Burawoy 1979a, 110). This was by no means a new phenomenon but, according to Burawoy, it took on a radically new role under *monopoly* capitalism:

Under competitive capitalism, except where craft organized existed, the regulation of relations in production was largely carried out by the despotic overseer. The relationship between management and labor was modelled on master-servant laws. With the rise of the large corporation and trade unionism, the institutions of the internal state have become disentangled from the managerial direction of the labor process and embodied in grievance procedures and collective bargaining. The emerging internal state protects the managerial prerogative to fashion and direct the labor process by imposing constraints on managerial direction and by endowing workers with rights as well as obligations (Burawoy 1979a, 110).

Collective bargaining favoured the concrete coordination of the interests of capital and labour, thus providing the material basis for hegemony. How? On the one hand, Burawoy explains, collective bargaining “*displaces conflict*” away from the shop-floor, thus preventing work disruption; on the other hand, it “*reconstitute conflict*” in a framework of negotiation. “In reorganizing conflict in this way”, Burawoy concludes, “collective bargaining generates a common interest between union and company, based on the survival and growth of the enterprise” (Burawoy 1979a, 115). Burawoy does not deny that collective bargaining is embedded in class struggle, but he stresses that this struggle revolves around “marginal changes”, while “capitalist relations of ownership and control become the object of consent” (Burawoy 1979a, 115).

Looking back to the initial discussion on the limits of algorithmic management and digital taylorism literature – where digital-enabled monitoring seems to be the only mechanism of labour control – we can see how, Burawoy masterfully introduces the important dimension of production politics thus giving much more depth to the analysis of the labour process. (The problem, as we will

see, is that the consent-enhancing virtue of the internal state remains undemonstrated – or at least this consent is limited to union officials).

Collective bargaining is the *locus* of union politics *par excellence*. Even if this dimension of Burawoy’s research has tended to be neglected compared to the attention given to games, unions play a crucial role in the process of consent-making, and Burawoy is quite clear on the role of unions in supporting the internal state:

The transformation of the internal state from its despotic to its hegemonic form rests on a *limited participation* by representatives of labor in the government of industry. The trade union must be sufficiently strong and responsive to labor in order to command the allegiance of its members and yet not sufficiently strong to present a challenge to management prerogatives in the organization and control of the labor process. Changes since 1945, slight though they have been, suggest, if anything, that *worker support of the union is stronger, while the union’s challenge to management is weaker* (Burawoy 1979a, 110, emphasis added).

Burawoy clearly portrays the “social democratic”, or fordist, compromise described at the global level by scholars of different political and theoretical traditions (Selznick 1969; Habermas 1973; Aglietta 1976; Pizzorno 1978; Przeworski 1985). The class compromise at the top of political exchange translates at the workplace level in the development of routines that institutionalise class conflict, thereby enhance social peace:

Everyday life under the internal state inserts the labourer into the political process as an industrial citizen with a set of contractually defined rights and obligations, together with a commitment to a more tenuous “social contract”. This commitment to the enterprise finds its material expression, first, in the rewards for seniority, such as the pension scheme, supplementary unemployment benefits, bumping rights, and so on, and, second, in the grievance machinery, which is designed to guarantee equality of treatment and “industrial justice.” (Burawoy 1979a, 113)

In this context, the union act as an “umpire”, on the one hand “protecting the rights of industrial citizens”; on the other hand, “overseeing the punishment of offenders against contractual obligations”. This implies a certain *separation* between representatives and represented in union politics, a quite classic topic in the debate on the so-called union “bureaucratisation” (Webb 1920; Castoriadis 1959; Sabel 1981; Kelly and Heery 1994; Voss and Sherman 2000; Fox-Hodess 2020). Even if Burawoy does not put it in these terms, he precisely observed such a dynamic of separation in the shop-floor:

In its day-to-day dealings with the rank and file, the union leadership plays an individualizing role [...] The [union] meeting becomes a safety valve for the release of accumulating frustration on the shop floor, at least for the 6 to 9 percent of members who attend. [...] In their day-to-day activities, union officials referee and enforce the rules embodied in the contract and in such customary practices as making out. Their enthusiasm to protect the rules stems in part from their role in bargaining for, and agreeing to, changes in these rules very three years. [...] Complaints by workers about particular shop stewards or other union officials revolve around whether they are discriminatory in their handling of grievances. Thus, one of the most explosive issues concerned the racial bias of the union executive. (Over one-third of the membership is black, but the entire union executive group is white). In other words, ritual and sometimes quite deliberate and even violent condemnation of shop stewards, grievancemen, etc. only reinforces the normative assumptions of industrial government, namely, that everyone is equal before the law. The interests served by the “law” were never explored, let alone questioned (Burawoy 1979a, 114).

II.1.c) The internal labour market

The third source of consent indicated by Burawoy, which is also very important in my analysis of Amazon production politics, is the *internal labour market*. This device:

reinforced the individualizing effects of the internal state. It gave workers the opportunity to bid on other jobs within the factory, jobs that were then allocated on the basis of seniority and experience. This internal labour market gave individual workers power and leverage against management. If workers did not like their job or their supervisor they could bid on and then move to an alternative job. Workers, who somehow made themselves indispensable to their foremen, could wield considerable power. Like the internal state, the internal labour market constituted workers as individuals and, through rewards based on seniority, tied their interest to capital. If it gave workers some power on the shop floor, it also cultivated their loyalty since moving to another firm would put them at the bottom of the seniority ladder. Workers had another interest, therefore, in the success – profitability – of their enterprise, even at their own expense as happened when in the 1980s workers entered into concession bargaining just to keep their jobs (Burawoy 2012, 193).

The theory of the internal labour market (ILM) arose from the pioneering studies institutionalist economists, geographers and urban scholars (Doeringer 1969; Bluestone 1970; Bonacich 1972; for an overview, see Storper and Walker 1983; Fligstein and Fernandez 1988). Since the 1950s, socio-economic studies on firms and employment have shown that labour markets are not smooth surfaces where supply and demand match at an optimum point (Kerr 1954; Doeringer 1969; Doeringer and Piore 1971; 1985; Bluestone 1970; Bonacich 1972; Gordon 1974). Instead, they are fragmented in a series of discrete segments of jobs between which there is little or no mobility. The “core” of an industry (or a firm) is dominated by employers with a high degree of market power⁷⁹. Those

⁷⁹ Although in different veins, theorists of the internalisation of labour market insisted on the link with the emergence of the large firm. Some scholars give more emphasis to stable versus unstable product markets (Piore 1979), while others to

employers generate sufficient profits to offer relatively higher pay, stability of employment, prospects for advancement, and a system of formalised rules. The “periphery” of the economy, instead, would contrast in every respect with the core: labour intensive technologies, competitive markets, and, consequently, too little employers’ margins for paying high wages, precarious employment, poorer working conditions, opacity of rules, and so on⁸⁰.

There is, however, another aspect of labour market dualisation and internalisation which is relevant for our analysis. While most of the scholars mentioned above tend to treat ILM strictly as a matter of internal efficiency, typically linked to information costs, training, and turnover⁸¹, others, especially Marxist but not only, make systematic reference to the class character of these efficiency considerations (Fligstein and Fernandez 1988; Wright 2000), and emphasise the ways in which ILMs are instigated by employers to divide the working class and weaken unions (Burawoy 1979a; Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982)⁸². Departing from the classic definitions of internal labour market (Doeringer and Piore 1971; Harrison 1972), and building on Edwards’ (1975) – according to which ILMs serve not only to allocate manpower but also to establish labour control – Burawoy emphasises the ideological consequences of ILMs as a device that masks and secures the extraction of surplus:

What is of importance, here is *not* the contrast between internal and external labour markets but their commonality. Competition is by no means eliminated by the internalization of labor market, as Doeringer and Piore, imply, but rather takes on a new form, regulated by different sets of constraints and rules [...] reproducing “possessive individualism” at the point of production (Burawoy 1979a, 96).

In sum, for Burawoy, the ILM has important politico-ideological consequences, but he also recognises that these ideological effects do not imply any isolation from market pressures. Pushing this observation to its logical conclusion, we should consider that the ILM reproduce not only what Burawoy calls “consent”, but also the economic *coercion* of capitalist class relations.

monopolistic versus competitive firms (R. Edwards 1975; A. L. Friedman 1977a; 1977b), but the approach is the same: to correlate labour market segments with distinct sectors of the economy.

⁸⁰ Obviously, workers are not randomly distributed across primary and secondary segments but rather “join” each segment according to a structure of constraints based on gender, race, citizenship, age, and education, which in turn are reinforced by the division of labour.

⁸¹ This critique is raised by Fligstein and Fernandez (1988) and by Wright (2000), although the former also critique Marxist perspectives, while the latter adopt an analytical Marxist approach.

⁸² This does not mean that unions are fierce opposants of labour market segmentation. Quite the contrary, unions have participated to the co-construction of internal labour markets, especially in national systems with low coverage of sectoral collective bargaining (Segrestin 1975; Thurow 1975; Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982).

II.2) *Toward a new framework for production politics*

Since its presentation (Burawoy 1978; 1979a) the theoretical framework elaborated by Burawoy has enjoyed enormous influence in labour process theory and sociology of work, not only in the US but also in Europe and the Global South. Burawoy's framework, however, faces a series of shortcomings that deserve to be examined, and that requires a revision of his comprehensive framework in order to understand the reality of production politics at Amazon and, to a certain extent, in contemporary capitalism.

The first question to be analysed concerns conflict, which in Burawoy's framework tends to be neglected. Burawoy's, as most of the second-wave labour process theorists (Edwards, Friedman etc.), criticises Braverman for "treat[ing] workers as passively incorporated within a division of labor organized from above" (Giddens 1981, 193). In fact, also Burawoy adopt such a view. Although he describes class struggle at the shopfloor and at the bargaining table, Burawoy sees it as facilitating the development of practices and institutions that win worker consent and ultimately consolidate capitalist domination (for this critique, see, Gartman 1983; Clawson and Fantasia 1983). As Burawoy states it in a provocative way, "class struggle was not the gravedigger of capitalism but its savior" (Burawoy 1979a, 195).

Prisoner of his structuralist approach, he does not recognise that the same institutions and practices that promote consent – and which are a by-product of struggles, as he admits – can also turn into a driver of conflict (see for instance, Montgomery 1979, 155–56; Fantasia 1988, 114–15; Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). Symmetrically, Burawoy seems to neglect that the same institutions that underpin hegemony and consent can, under new conditions, support despotism and coercion. Let's consider, for instance, the internal state and the internal labour market. The role of the institutions of collective bargaining evolves at the variations of the broader balance of power in class relations. After *Manufacturing Consent*, whose argument on the stability of hegemony was challenged by the crisis of the post-war compromise and capitalist restructuring, Burawoy introduced a third, somehow hybrid, factory regime, which he called "hegemonic despotism" (Burawoy 1983; 1985):

advanced capitalist states have responded by carving out arenas in which labor is stripped of the powers embodied in hegemonic regimes [...] the interests of capital and labor continue to be concretely coordinated, but whereas before labor was granted concessions on the basis of the expansion of profits, now labor makes concessions on the basis of the relative profitability of one capitalist vis-à-vis another (Burawoy 1983, 602–3).

Burawoy elaborated the concept of hegemonic despotism to account for the shift in the balance of power between capital and labour that was taking place in the 1980s. This concept was particularly interesting also because it stressed how the new despotism rested on the remnants of the previous hegemonic regime. For example, collective bargaining and union cooptation – that in the post-war period had embodied the class compromise – were not wiped away, but simply reorganised. They now provided the institutional infrastructure for a wave of concessionary bargaining. In this respect, Burawoy anticipated the discussion on “institutional conversion” and “plasticity”, which would later be raised in the debate on the transformations of Western political economies (Streeck and Thelen 2005b; Baccaro and Howell 2017). Tellingly, in the definition of hegemonic despotism, the notions of coercion and consent were no longer mentioned, precisely because Burawoy was making an attempt to overcome that dichotomy.

In sum, the mechanisms that Burawoy once considered as specific of hegemonic regimes – the internal state and the internal labour market – turned into pillars of a new despotism (a form of economic coercion that deserves to be examined carefully in the case of Amazon). The coordination of the interests of capital and labour grounded in the dependence of employees on the continuity of business seems in turn a common feature of all factory regimes, whether hegemonic or despotic.

The problem is that by recognising so, they disprove the heuristic usefulness of this couple of notions. If consent and coercion always co-exist, how can there be a hegemonic vs a despotic regime? Both they would be based on a combination of coercion and consent.

We can make the same case for the idea of making out. Burawoy argues that by participating to this “games”, workers implicitly consent to their exploitation and even become active perpetrators of its reproduction. In fact, looking at the findings presented by Burawoy, this effect appears as announced rather than demonstrated. Further, Burawoy recognises that informal practices such as making out are common to *all* organisational setting. So, why should we consider a specificity of the hegemonic? Finally, Burawoy describes making out as a “spontaneous” response of workers to the production quota imposed by management, and that local management (shop-floor supervisors) tolerates it since, according to Burawoy, management sees in these practices the source of worker consent. It is an interesting interpretation, since it shows how in practice local management can settle with informal behaviours in order to domesticate potential conflict (Vidal 2022). We could add that in this way local management is able to carve out space of autonomy from top management, an hypothesis that is raised not only by labour process students but also in the literature on managerial practices in transnational companies (Almond and Ferner 2006; Ferner, Quintanilla, and Sánchez-Runde 2006). Burawoy’s argument, however, becomes circular: making out is a source of consent because management tolerates it, and management tolerates because it is a source of consent.

On top of that, we must keep in mind that organisational misbehaviour is not an intrinsic source of consent. Knights, for instance, understands the making out described by Burawoy as one among many possible responses to social isolation and erosion of dignity experienced by workers under the capitalist labour process. Here is no reason to consider all informal practices as pillars of consent (Knights 1990, 312), quite the contrary. Informal practices are often a space of resistance and antagonism, even though, because of the concrete power relations, such opposition rarely takes an open form (J. C. Scott 1985; 1990; Bouquin 2008). At the same time, informal practices can also pave the way for the reproduction of coercion rather than consent. For instance, as we will see in Amazon workplace, the contradictory pressures, coming from management, forces workers to break safety rules in order to comply with productivity targets, thereby exposing workers to the arbitrary reprisal (Chapters 5 and 6).

The second main limit is that Burawoy's periodisation presents a reductionist and determinist flaw. The despotic and the hegemonic regimes are presented by Burawoy as based on a different combination of coercion and consent: coercion underpinning the despotic regime, consent at the foundation of the hegemonic regime. Now, one could hardly argue that in fact consent is a negligible element in *any* factory regime: even serfdom needed a form of legitimacy and consent to reproduce itself. Conversely, hegemonic regimes rely also on various forms of coercion. In later works, Burawoy did not ignore this argument and clarified that in advanced capitalism, hegemonic and despotic regimes can coexist (see for instance Burawoy 1983, 590; Burawoy and Wright 1990, 259)⁸³.

Yet, in general, Burawoy deliberately put emphasis either on coercion or consent in order to distinguish, respectively, despotism and hegemony. This is particularly salient in *Manufacturing Consent* (1979). In this work, Burawoy proposes a sophisticated analysis of the mechanisms of consent-building, but he delivers no comparable analysis of the mechanisms of coercion-building. If coercion remains a fundamental element of class relations at the point of production, we could raise

⁸³ In fact, in the theorisation of Burawoy (but also of Friedman and Edwards) the hegemonic regime (or, respectively, in *responsible autonomy* and under *bureaucratic control*) overlaps *de facto* with the large vertically integrated monopoly firm, while the despotic regime belongs to the competitive or the informal sector, i.e. a "backward" socio-economic configuration. Behind this implicit equation there is a sort of evolutionist assumption according to which only large firm would reach a level of sophistication so high to guarantee a hegemonic arrangement, while "backward" or "peripheral" sectors of the (world-)economy are considered unable to reproduce consent⁸³. Recent research on the informal economy, however, has showed that "hegemonic" regime can be reproduced also in the informal sectors (Bagnardi 2022; 2023) or in the competitive service sector (Sallaz 2015; Wood 2020; Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova 2022), especially in a "post-fordist" (or "profit-led") mode of regulation (or "growth model") which narrows the margins for "hegemonic" arrangements at the local level (Baccaro and Howell 2017; Baccaro, Blyth, and Pontusson 2022). Furthermore, the case of Amazon, where, we will see, an hegemonic regime based on consent is very far from being realised, shows how under the current phase of post-fordist (or neo-liberal) capitalism the monopoly sector is no longer associated with hegemony and consent.

the question of why one should take it for granted thus renouncing to dissect the mechanisms of its reproduction.

Further, Burawoy claims that, quoting Gramsci, “hegemony [is] protected by the armour of coercion” (Burawoy 2012, 194), i.e. that the use of coercion was limited to repress workers’ open violations of the rules. In practice, that meant that, in the monopoly and unionised sector, management could no longer hire and fire at will, so it had to “manufacture” consent. However, such a claim artificially separates the two: in fact, it is precisely the constant and implicit threat of coercion that secures “consent”.

What is arguable, in fact, is Burawoy’s definition of consent *as opposed* to coercion. By opposing coercion and consent, Burawoy and most of labour process analysis neglects that *no* relation of domination can be reproduced without consent (or, in other words, without “legitimacy”). Defining a labour regime as despotic – i.e. a regime based on coercion – hides more than it reveals, since the question remains open of whether such a coercive system can be reproduced. The only reasonable answer, using Burawoy’s concepts, is to admit that also the most coercive labour regime is underpinned by any form of consent. Burawoy and his epigones eventually admit that coercion and consent co-exist in fact within the same relation of domination.

Furthermore – and here we question the core of Burawoy’s framework – consent is something difficult to define theoretically and to operationalise. Indeed, the very idea of consent, implying workers are “accomplices” of their own exploitation, is replete with normative preconceptions and, above all, is difficult to be operationalised. Behind the notion of hegemony there is the implicit assumption that the ideological incorporation of the subordinate groups will necessarily diminish social conflict and, in a circular movement, that the (apparent) absence of conflict is the prove of the ideological incorporation of the dominated.

II.3) Beyond hegemony. Coercion and resistance at the base of relations of domination

The work of the political anthropologist James Scott has shed new light and attention on the phenomenon of resistance of subordinated groups (J. C. Scott 1985; 1990). Scott radically puts under question the idea of hegemony, i.e. that subordinated groups are in fact “relative quiescent” and “not directly coerced [...] explain[ing] the anomaly by reference to a dominant or hegemonic ideology” (J. C. Scott 1990, 71)⁸⁴. Scott shows that consent is an apparent ingredient of the relations of domination even in the most coercive settings. At the same time, he argues, manifold kinds of

⁸⁴ Scott highlights how such a position is common to Marxist as well as non-Marxist approaches, from pluralists such as Robert Dahl (J. C. Scott 1990, 71) to structural-functionalists such as Talcott Parson (1990, 86).

resistance survive behind formal submission and ceremonial consent. According to Scott, dominated actors constantly express hidden forms of opposition and resistance to domination:

By itself, the fact that social criticism remains ideologically limited can never, I am convinced, justify the conclusion that the group which makes that criticism is prevented by a hegemonic ideology from consciously formulating a more far-reaching critique. To conclude that slaves, serfs, peasants, untouchables, and other subordinate groups are ethically submissive merely because their protests and claims conform to the proprieties of the dominant class they are challenging would be a serious analytical error (J. C. Scott 1990, 92).

In this perspective, coercion and consent are not framed as two poles of a continuum, differently from the analytical framework of factory regimes. They are rather *moving targets*, changing their meaning according to the point of view that the observers adopt and to the relative meanings that actors can assign to them:

The subordinate classes to be found at the base of what we historically call revolutionary movements are typically seeking goals well within their understanding of the ruling ideology. “Falsely conscious” subjects are quite capable, it seems, of taking revolutionary action. [...] The seductiveness of theories of hegemony and false consciousness thus depends in large part on the strategic appearances that elites and subordinates alike ordinarily insert into the public transcript (J. C. Scott 1990, 78, 89).

Thus, for instance, making out is not a source of consent as much as “worker misbehaviour” is not necessarily a source of resistance. In Chapters 5 and 6, for instance, we will find forms of informal horizontal cooperation among certain workers connected by links of friendship or ethnicity, that is cyclically repressed by management but never eradicated. However, managerial repression does not mean necessarily that the repressed practices can be considered as a form of worker resistance. We will see that this (mis)behaviour actually breaks the horizontal solidarity between the whole team of workers. Conversely, games do not automatically translate into a veil that obscures efforts. Quite the contrary:

“[...] practices such as gamification or responsabilisation are real but workers do not always buy into their assumptions as they can see that the rules of such games are rigged or ultimately not beneficial to their interests”. (P. Thompson 2024)⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Burawoy also seems to recognise it, in a footnote: “Of course, workers see through such manipulation, just as they recognize that in seeking relative satisfaction they are adapting and accommodating to the coerciveness of industrial work. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno put it with reference to the culture industry: ‘The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and to use its products even though they see through them’ (*The*

But why resistance tends to remain hidden while consent is more likely to take the centre of the stage? The reason is that in a relation of domination, the dominant and the dominated groups both find convenience in hiding conflict and emphasising harmony:

The most obvious reason why notions of ideological incorporation should find such resonance in the historical record is simply that domination, as we have seen, produces an official transcript that provides convincing evidence of willing, even enthusiastic complicity. In ordinary circumstances subordinates have a vested interest in avoiding any explicit display of insubordination. They also, of course, always have a practical interest in resistance-in minimizing the exactions, labor, and humiliations to which they are subject. The reconciliation of these two objectives that seem at cross-purposes is typically achieved by pursuing precisely those forms of resistance that avoid any open confrontation with the structures of authority being resisted. [...] It is for this reason that the official transcript of relations between the dominant and subordinate is filled with formulas of subservience, euphemisms, and uncontested claims to status and legitimacy (J. C. Scott 1990, 86–87).

We will see for instance, how Amazon workers tend to produce their own narrative of their work experience according to their need to denounce but also to defend their dignity and respectability, i.e. not to devalue their social conditions (see also II.5).

Another argument of the thesis of consent is that consent is built through the routines of everyday life. The demonstration is that conflicts, being usually infrequent, are not the norm but the exception rare. Amazon workers, for example, are not permanently on strike, despite the difficult working condition they suffer from, and the relatively low pay unstable employment they endure (depending on whether they are permanent or temps). Yet, this is by no means an indicator of consent.

Borrowing from Scott:

By itself, the fact that social criticism remains ideologically limited can never, I am convinced, justify the conclusion that the group which makes that criticism is prevented by a hegemonic ideology from consciously formulating a more far-reaching critique. [...] The fact is that the public representations of claims by subordinate even in situations of conflict, groups, nearly always have a strategic or dialogic dimension that influences the form they take (J. C. Scott 1990, 92).

In fact, workers develop their forms of resistance *strategically*. Resistances can take different forms. According to Ackroyd and Thompson (1999), there are four directions that “misbehaviour” can take, arising from four areas of contention: (1) disagreement over the appropriation of work; (2) over the

Dialectic of Enlightenment, New York 1972, p. 167)” (Burawoy 1985, 74). However, it does not develop this point, which in fact undermines his definition and use of the concept of consent.

appropriation of the materials used in work; (3) over the appropriation of time spent on work; (4) over the extent to which employees identify with their work activity and employers, or more simply, the appropriation of worker identity.

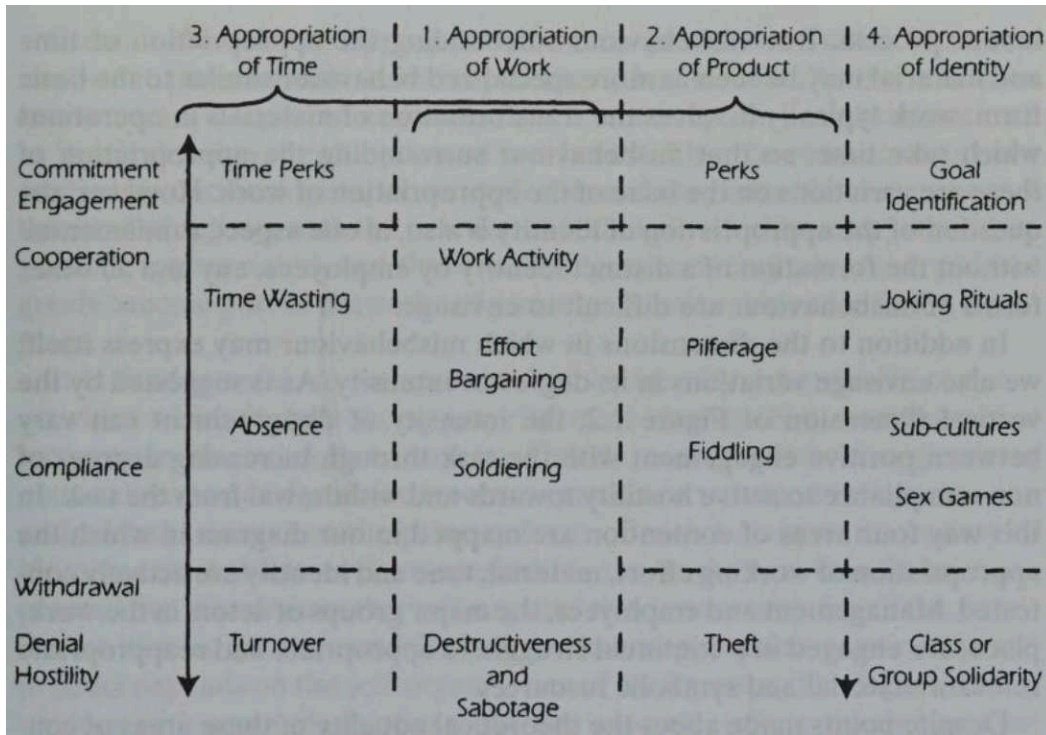


Figure 32 – Dimensions of misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999, 25)

The fact that coercion and consent or, conversely, resistance and conflict, are *moving target*, depends on the different resources and constraints that workers found in the workplace. In the words of Scott, “the public representations of claims by subordinate *even in situations of conflict*, groups, nearly always have a strategic or dialogic dimension that influences the form they take” (J. C. Scott 1990, 92).

II.4) Mobilisation and demobilisation in the capitalist labour process

To understand the problem of the dialectic between resistance and power in the work relation, I propose to go beyond the limits of the dichotomy coercion-consent, which does not help us in understanding the nature of class relations at the point of production.

The capitalist labour process is based essentially on coercion and control. As theorised by Burawoy, the nature of this coercion is not simply political, i.e. based on state apparatuses, as in the feudal mode of production, but *economic*. In the capitalist mode of production, workers are dispossessed of access to their own means of production and have no other *choice* but to *sell* their

labour power to a capitalist in return for a wage i.e., surplus is appropriated by capitalists through *economic* means (Burawoy 1978; 1979a). In this respect, even Burawoy agrees with Braverman on the coercive foundation of the labour process:

Labor power has become a commodity. Its uses are no longer organized according to the needs and desires of those who sell it, but rather according to the needs of its purchasers, who are, primarily, employers seeking to expand the value of their capital. And it is the special and permanent interest of these purchasers to cheapen this commodity (Braverman 1974, 57).

[Under capitalism] workers are dispossessed of access to their own means of production. For reasons of survival they have no alternative but to sell their labor power to a capitalist in return for a wage with which they can then purchase their means of existence (Burawoy 1978, 259–60).

Labour relations are therefore based on this structural unbalance but they are also inherently uncertain and contentious (Bowles 1985; Bowles and Gintis 1990) and on the “structured antagonism” between workers and capitalists (P. K. Edwards 1986; Atzeni 2010). Employers deal with a problem of “extraction of labour effort” from workers – getting workers to work harder than they want to do spontaneously – since the labour contract is neither complete nor costlessly enforceable. This is a problem common to all capitalist labour regimes, whether “despotic”, “hegemonic” or any other hybrid form. In front of this problem, employers’ behaviour can not be explained through categories such as consent. As showed by Scott, looking for consent in relations of domination is a serious analytical error (J. C. Scott 1990, 92). The problem can be better grasped by using the notion of mobilisation. Employers need to translate labour power into labour, in other words to *mobilise* the workers.

Mobilisation can be achieved through different means. In certain contexts, e.g. monopoly sector under fordism, by offering an “efficiency wages” (Akerlof and Yellen 1986; Williamson 1985) or by fostering workers commitment in the labour process, e.g. in the case of “responsible autonomy” (A. L. Friedman 1977a; 1977b). In others, especially in the current context of high unemployment and neoliberalisation by increasing coercion, either in the labour market by increasing the industrial reserve army (*economic coercion*), or directly in the labour process by increasing monitoring or reducing self-latitude in task execution (*technical coercion*). These two forms of coercion can be intertwined. The problem of relying in coercion as a mean of mobilisation of worker effort is that it also increases conflict in the workplace. This is not per se a sufficient condition for open labour unrest and worker collective action. However, in order to prevent this possibility, employers and managers adopt a variety of strategies to de-mobilise workers’ collective action. Demobilisation is the other side of mobilisation, and it is achieved in the workplace by the same means: on the one hand by

increasing margins of autonomy to the workers or by making material concessions; on the other hand, by increasing coercion.

In the next chapters, I will analyse production politics in Amazon workplace and in particular the mechanisms of mobilisation of worker effort and demobilisation of worker collective action. The analysis is based on a comparative ethnography of the workplace. The ethnography is composed by a comparative participant observation that I carried out in a French and an Italian warehouse. Participant observation is then “extended” through time and through space thanks to interviews and document analysis (Burawoy 1998). This allowed me in a first moment to locate the labour process and labour regimes into the wider trajectory of transformation of the firm’s profit strategy and of its adaptation to the local context. In a second time, to compare them in the two countries.

II.5) Can the Amazonian speak? Methodological reflections about the speech of Amazon workers

With respect to the extension of ethnography through time, the use of retrospective interviews can raise some methodological issues that can not be ignored and that, on the contrary, are worth to be discusses.

Workers I interviewed during my fieldwork in France and Italy were aware of the symbolic meaning of being employees of a company such Amazon. Some of them had already delivered interviews to journalists or other scholars and were accustomed to mediatic attention, precisely because Amazon’s reputation attracted mediatic, scientific and political attention. Workers know they do not work for *any* company, and speaking about Amazon not only raises the question of the reputation of their employer but also affected the way their own reputation is built. Interviewed as Amazon workers, respondents were “interpellated” in the Althusserian term i.e., assigned to a precise identity of a manual workers prone to symbolic and economic power of a company and devoid of a specific agency. Implicitly (but constantly) required to position him/herself with regard to the image of the company. In other words, working for Amazon triggers a mechanism of identification with the company, even in the case of workers who disapprove the way how the company and the workplace is run. This implies that when the Amazon workers discuss about their own employer on the one hand they can develop a stern critique, on the other hand they need to find some positive meaning that justify their involvement in a company that is more and more under the scrutiny of social critique. In this respect, in the way how workers face this dilemma another expression of what Bourdieu called the “twofold truth of labour” (Bourdieu 1996; see also, Burawoy 2012). As Bourdieu noticed:

[...] labour can be understood in its objectively twofold truth only if one performs the second reversal needed in order to break with the scholastic error of failing to include in the theory the 'subjective' truth with which it was necessary to break, in a first paradoxal reversal, in order to construct the object of analysis. The objectification that was necessary to constitute wage labour in its objective truth has masked the fact which, as Marx himself indicates, only becomes the objective truth in certain exceptional labour situations: the investment in labour, and therefore miscognition of the objective truth of labour as exploitation, which leads people to find an extrinsic profit in labour, irreducible to simple monetary income, is part of the real conditions of the performance of labour, and of exploitation (Bourdieu 1996, 89).

Labour's twofold nature operates not only the activity of work but also on how workers discuss about their work. Any worker (or manager, or unionist or any other responder) who answers to my question, as any participant to ethnographic interviews (Beaud 1996), tends to:

Make oneself the ideologist of one's own life, through the selection of a few significant events with a view to elucidating an overall purpose and through the creation of causal or final links between them which will make them coherent (Bourdieu 1986, 62).

In the anecdotes and accounts that I collected throughout my fieldwork, the account of practices turned out to be retrospectively and unavoidably biased. Thus, workers tended to idealise social relations at the beginning of their experience in contrast with the working conditions that they found in the successive phases. In their account the problem that emerged was the increasing distance between them and managers and between them and their peers, both due to the expansion of Amazon and of its workforce, which in these accounts led to the break of the initial community. The veteran Amazon worker saw increasing competition from peers and growing indifference from supervisors. This was the subjective result of reflects structural changes that appear less in these accounts: labour process, market growth. These changes also influenced the reputation of the company. When they started, Amazon had a relatively favourable reputation because of the innovation of its business model. Since around the mid 2010s, the brand started frequently associated to efficiency but also to deplorable working conditions, tax avoidance issues and allegations of monopoly behaviour. Workers I Interviewed were well aware of this shift in the reputational effect of the company, which reflected on their self-perception as workers.

Therefore, to stress their disapproval for the situation and also to distance themselves from the deteriorated reputation of the company, interviewed workers delivered such a description of the first years. One of them, for instance, said that she was proud to work for Amazon. At the time of the interview, she was not anymore. However, by criticizing the Amazon of today, in which she stays almost "in spite of herself", the worker appreciates the Amazon of yesterday, the one in which she

entered (and not the one in which she found themselves today) and that she contributed to build, when everything appeared at her arm's length. In other words, workers' contempt for working conditions at Amazon today did not necessarily turn into a disapproval of the whole company. In this respect, managerial ideological work proved effective. However, saving the memory of the company was a way to protect their identity of a company in which they had invested their professional life and that was not giving anymore the symbolic (as well as the economic) dividends that they expected. In this way the workers were able to criticize the company while claiming to be loyal to it, to its original spirit while defending their identity against the implicit devaluation of being an Amazon "associate". As a result, Amazon senior workers that I interviewed tended to develop a double *refoulement* of their "belonging" to Amazon. The first, as we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, operates by producing a retrospective narrative in which the Amazon of the origins was something radically different from the Amazon of the present days; in this way they managed to distance themselves from the devalued image of contemporary Amazon and justifying their "membership" in the name of what the company once was in the past. The second strategy, that we will see especially in Chapters 5 and 6, is to represent their contemporary condition of Amazon workers as "better" than those of a common logistics worker: "*c'est pire ailleurs*", it is usually remarked by Amazonians in France; "*fuori è peggio*", Italian colleagues admit. In this way the workers try to master their representation – including against the miserabilist narratives that the institutionalised producers of knowledge such as journalist and researcher can elaborate. The result, however, is also a spontaneous form of demobilisation. Furthermore, we will see (in Part III) that in the Italian case, unlike the French one, unions can participate to this mechanism.

How to deal with such a corpus of ethnographic interviews in which the researcher's quest for a mythical "objective" reality remains irremediably obstructed by the necessity for the responder to master his/her own *recit*? I faced three extreme options: on the one hand, a radically constructivist approach that considered ethnographic interviews as a mere self-representation of the responder, unable to deliver any data that goes beyond the specific situation of the interview; on the other hand a radically positivistic orientation that dismiss ethnography as a valid source of scientific knowledge because of its lack of experimental value; a radically naïve option which considered the material collected as natural and taken for granted, oblivious of the need to read the responder's discourse "against the grain", on the background of the social context in which the responder is located and in which the interview takes place. Thus, I opted for a mediation between the two options: first, I consider interviews statements a way for the responder (and also for the interviewer) to talk about the world while talking about themselves and to talk about themselves while talking about the world; this allowed me to analyse the subjective elements of the interviews; second, where possible, I compared

and triangulated my sources: I compared workers interviews one with each other, and then workers interviews with managers' or unionists' interviews; I then situated the material drawn on interviews with written sources, press articles and "official" dataset. It is from the coherences and the incoherences between the different recites and between those and "objective" data that I could unfold my research hypothesis.

For example, my argument on the transformation of the labour politics in Amazon's French and Italian workplaces, is that there was a transition from a start-up labour regime – characterised by a certain degree of worker autonomy in the labour process, direct and personal relations between managers and workers and workers commitment actively sought through practices of employee involvement – to a algorithmic and bureaucratic labour regime characterised by standardisation and routinisation of work, increasing coercion, a deterioration of worker commitment, and increasing possibilities of labour unrest which management tried to prevent by de-mobilising the workforce. Since I could not investigate the start-up labour regime, I relied mainly on the memories of senior Amazon employees. Their accounts were extremely interesting and rich, but I could not prevent myself from questioning their sharp narratives that oppose the good old times with a gloomy present. Was I giving too much credit to such a sharp account? Thus, where I could, I triangulated. I compared their declaration with those of management, which confirmed a turning point in labour relations; I compared with written sources that confirmed a transformation in the labour process. This does refrain me from considering the subjective dimension of my interviews, which, I hope, helped me thicken my analysis of the past and the present of work at Amazon.

3. The start-up labour regime in France (2000-2009)

In 2000, Amazon established business and operation in France. From the US, it exported its reputation of a disruptive and innovative internet company. In France, Amazon was expected to find a difficult context: a militant working-class union, strong regulation, the legacy of a deep institutionalisation of social and economic actors. In fact, studying the first phase of Amazon in France (2000-2007), I found out a completely different scenario. Workers appeared to be loyal and involved at work, the company engaged in collective bargaining with unions, and unions capable to establish variegated forms of presence in the company. In a labour process which was not very standardised, compared to the contemporary American blueprint, management achieved its goal of extracting worker effort by mobilising the workforce through responsible autonomy. This *start-up labour regime* would last for almost a decade, but eventually it became dysfunctional. The progressive growth of the warehouse, the standardisation of the labour process and the change in the labour composition would lead to the crisis of this labour regime, between 2007 and 2009.

Methodological note

This chapter presents a workplace history of Amazon's subsidiary in France during the first decade of the XXI century, focused on the transformation of the labour process in its main FC (ORY1), and its connection with, on the one hand, the company's profit strategy and, on the other hand, the local socio-economic conditions. From a methodological point of view, this research endeavour faced a series of challenges and limitations, especially access to sources and data collection.

Given the relatively long time-distance from that period, many oral sources were no longer available or reachable. However, I was able to get in touch with key informants, both workers and managers, who were present in the warehouse at the very beginning of operations. Excerpts that I will present in this chapter come from repeated interviews with three veteran workers that were hired at Amazon in the first years of operation (2000-2003). Those workers lived the slow transformation of Amazon workplace and constitute the bulk of my sources for this period, and I will rely on their accounts to reconstruct the initial labour regime. However, these accounts must not be considered as mere source of data, but also as vectors of workers' representations of themselves, built during their working experience at Amazon (see par. II.5). Another key group of informants were the first site manager of the site, whom I interviewed two times, and the first HR manager of the plant whom I

interviewed once. These interviews were also repeated and lasted more than one hour each. They allowed me to multiply the points of observation and made my findings more robust and diverse.

Furthermore, like in the case of French workers, these representations are assembled retrospectively, as five, six, or seven years had elapsed between their first day at Amazon and the day I met them for an interview. The method of this chapter is not to take these representations for granted, but to read them against the grains: disassembling them, connect the pieces with secondary sources (national and local press, internal documents, interviews with external factors such as local politicians and entrepreneurs), comparing to the French case study, and finally recompose the picture by having in mind the global transformation of the company that was taking place in the period under study.

Finally, I was able to collect enough written sources of different kinds – public administrators’ reports, local and national press, internal documents of the company and collective agreement – to complete my oral sources. As I will do also for the following chapters, these sources will be use not only to “triangulate” (Ayoub, Wallace, and Zepeda-Millan 2014), i.e. to complete sources by multiplying the methods of collection, but also, where possible, to reflect on the genesis of these documents and to consider them as supports of social practices and interactions (Lomba 2008).

3.1. Settling in France

At the turn of the century, Amazon was undergoing its restructuring in the US, in order to face its organisational problems and to survive the dotcom burst. Amazon was facing also the first labour unrests caused by the reorganisation and by the consequent degradation of working conditions.

At the same time, Amazon started its overseas expansion, especially in Europe, where the e-commerce market was still in its infancy. In 1998, Amazon had set up one FC in England and one in Germany. France would follow shortly after, but in a less favourable context. The French newspaper *Le Monde*, noticed that in Europe, i.e. in Germany and the UK, Amazon was already a dominant player, while in France the company faced the competition of already-established actors such as Fnac, Alapage or CDiscount (*Le Monde* 2000a). Finally, during the summer of 2000, Amazon launched its French website and opened its first French FC. The facility was located at Boigny-sur-Bionne, a small suburb in the north-east outskirts of Orleans, less than two hours far from Paris by truck.

3.1.1. Amazon in Orleans’ logistics region

At the time, Orleans and its region hosted one of the most important logistics districts in France, favoured by a strategic geographical position: at the crossroads of the North-South and East-West axes of France and very close to the “Greater Paris” (Région Centre 2010; 2012; 2013; 2014). The

arrival of Amazon in Orleans corresponded to an acceleration of the logistics development in the area, as illustrated by the measures of the construction of new logistics facilities in the region:

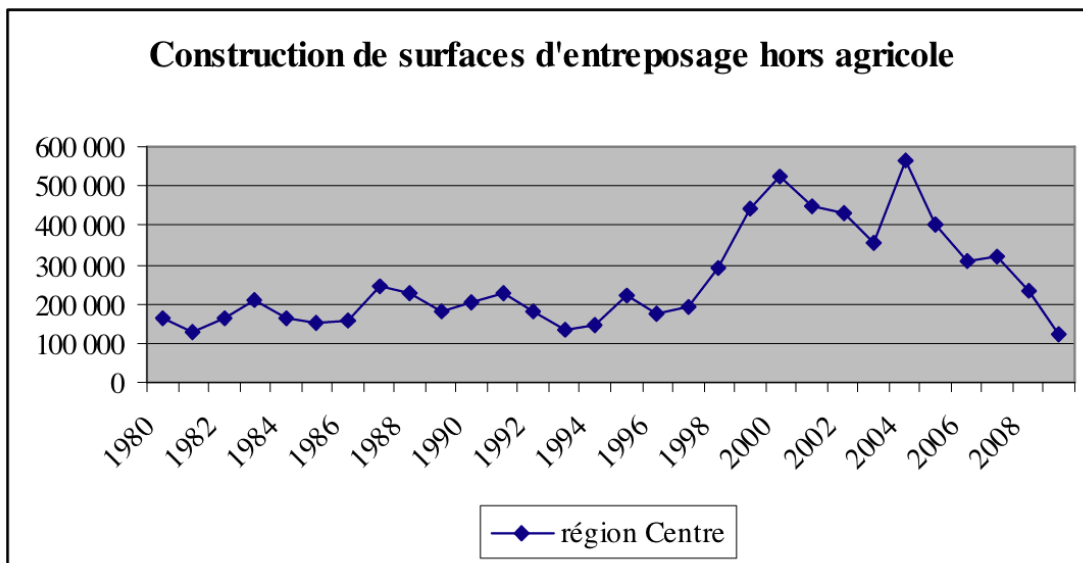
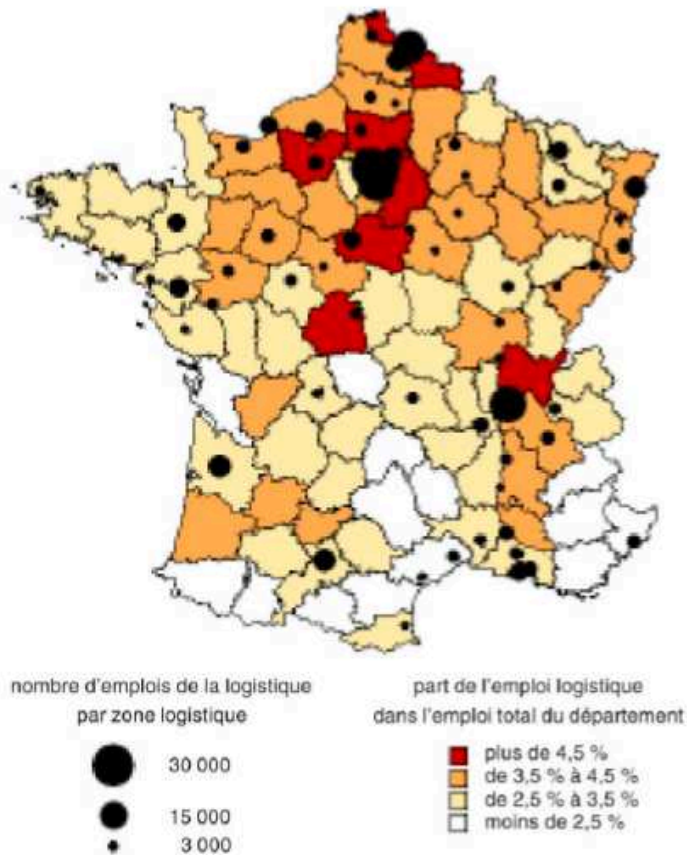


Figure 33 – Warehouse construction in the Centre region from 1980 to 2009
(Région Centre 2010)

The logistics expansion of the late 1990s was intended by local authorities and developers as a “natural” outcome of Orleans’ geographical position and a fortunate opportunity for a region hit by manufacturing decline. Orleans’ position in the international road network was a powerful argument for estate investors, as well as by local government. Sometimes presented as the “natural barycentre” of France, the city and the department started claiming a “logistic” identity in order to attract further investors. The University of Orleans developed its training in logistics by creating professional masters and undergraduate degrees (Gaborieau 2016b). The logistic development resulted in specific configuration of the local labour market, where the share of the workforce employed in logistics professions⁸⁶ over the total employed workforce was among the highest (over 4,5%):

⁸⁶ For an analysis of the labour market of the logistics sector in France see (Gaborieau 2016b).

Répartition des emplois logistiques en France



Source : Mariotte Henri, 2007, *op.cit.* INSEE-DADS 2004

Figure 34 – The geography of logistics jobs in France in the 2000s (Gaborieau 2016b)

3.1.2. Amazon workers in the start-up labour regime

There, Amazon recruited its first warehouse workers who were also those who set up the warehouse. Was there any possibility to track them and ask them help to reconstitute the history of Amazon workplace in that period? At the time of my fieldwork, almost twenty years later, the vast majority of this early employees had quit the company leaving no trace to follow. There were very few chances to find them unless some of them had remained in the company. Finally, through the intermediation of the national CFDT federation of commerce, I managed to get in touch with the CFDT union section of the plant and, unexpectedly I found out that two of the members were the “ethnographic remnants” that I had looking for. These interviews were later followed by others with the former general manager of the site (2000-2007), the former HR director (2000-2013) and a former white-collar HR assistant that worked in the site. This second group of interviews was carried one at the very end of my fieldwork, when I finally managed to find and get in touch with the former general

manager, P.H. I found and got in touch with him via the LinkedIn platform. He had started his career in 1993 as a warehouse manager for Danzas, an important logistics firm later absorbed by the German DHL. While working for Danzas, in the Orleans area, as he recounted, he had been “haunted” and recruited by Amazon France to run its first warehouse in Boigny. After leaving Amazon in 2007 he started a career as a logistics consultant and by the time of the interview, he was retired. He provided an extremely precious account of the first years of Amazon workplace, which I combined with the interviews with senior Amazon employees. He then put me in touch with the former HR director of the site, E.T.. This retired woman, had started her career as a HR director at Rexel, a French company specialised in the distribution of electrical, heating, lighting and plumbing equipment. In January 2001, right after the opening of the Boigny’s facility, she was hired by P.H. as HR director and kept her place until the end of 2013, when she left and was replaced by another manager, who never answered by invitation on LinkedIn. E.T. instead accepted an interview contributed to shed light on labour relations in the site during the early period. This manager, in turn allowed me to get in touch with her former assistant, Julie, who had also quitted Amazon by the time of the interview. The point of view of this last employee was also interesting because she was a non-unionised white-collar workers in ORY1.

Instead, it is not by chance that Nadine and Valérie were both union members and that they had been union delegates in the past. Union involvement is associated with longer tenure in a firm, and it was probably one of the reasons that explain the permanence of these persons at Amazon. The rest of the interviewees who were in the company during the first ten years (the former site director, the former HR director and the former HR assistant), had left Amazon many years before the interview and, unsurprisingly, they were not union members. The interviewees of the first group, instead, were two women, Nadine and Valérie (fictious names), who had joined Amazon between 2000 and 2001 and were still working for Amazon as warehouse workers. Their social characteristics echoes the sociography made by Gaborieau of the local labour market in the logistics areas of the region (Gaborieau 2016b, 38). At the time of our meetings (which occurred three times in person and then continued individually by phone between summer 2018 and summer 2022), they were in their forties, both with children; they had joined Amazon in their twenties. Nadine was from the area, Valérie from the north-west of France. Like the majority of their colleagues, before joining Amazon they had worked in a variety of jobs and sectors, from commerce to associations. None had been a union member before. They had no previous experience in the logistics sector, but knew that the logistics district of the Orleans area could offer relatively secure jobs:

I’m from Le Mans. Afterwards, I left Le Mans to work for a while, and to change sectors a bit, and I went to the Paris region. And in the Paris region I met the father of my children and then I came to the Loiret for

work because I knew that it was a logistics centre and in relation to the jobs I was doing, I was in catering, I didn't want to continue in that field. And I'd been told that... there was someone who worked in a temp agency who said to me "there's a warehouse that's going to open...". So, I sent my application to the agency that was recruiting and that's it...

Fieldwork Quote 3 – Nadine, Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, July 2018

Indeed, when Amazon arrived in France in the early 2000s, the company was by no means well-known as it would be few years later:

Author: Wasn't Amazon known back then?

Worker: Not known at all. So, we talked about it, with my husband. The day I signed up for a temp job, they told me "Look, there's a temp job there, you can go". And that was it, it was very easy and very simple... unlike today!

Fieldwork Quote 4 – Valérie, Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

Furthermore, Amazon did not appear as a simple logistic company. The conventional image of Amazon that the press vehiculated was that of a start-up. In the press, the "American cyberlibrary" was described as a fresh start-up, on offspring of the North-American internet economy (*Le Monde* 2000a; *Le Monde* 2000b). Even the first generation of Amazon workers was impressed by Amazon's way of cast itself, of the way how work was organised and the way how the relations with the employees was built. As recalled by senior workers, there was something of exotic and exciting in a company who was landing in France from the US to bring about the revolution of internet consumption. A company that continuously boasted about its "world" catalogue and its technologically advanced logistics operation. During an interview, an Amazon senior worker recalls that she had decided to remain in Orleans, and she was looking for a job. To her, Amazon offered more than a job i.e., an unusual and fascinating professional opportunity:

Worker 1: So that's it... I... Well, it was personal... I wanted to stay in the region. So, I had no idea. It was something I liked because it was completely new for me. Don't forget! Amazon was something new for the employees of Boigny. It was computers, it was online sales.

Worker 2: Yeah!

Worker 1: This was one of the first companies to sell online!

Worker 2: That's it! It was thrilling!

Worker 1: We were young, now... I was twenty years younger, and I wanted to know all about it! It was something out of the ordinary, it was... and I'll tell you the truth, in 2000 I wasn't ashamed to say when I

was outside that I worked at Amazon. For me, it was a good thing, I was proud of what I was doing. Today, instead, I say it with a whisper.

Fieldwork Quote 5 – Nadine and Valérie, Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

However far was the new economy to a French unemployed woman, workers could have the impression to be actors of a broader cultural and economic movement. The fact that Amazon was coming from the most “advanced” capitalist country, added pride to the feeling of workers involved, also in respect to the more working environment that one could expect to find in a more conventional firm. Of course, candidates knew that they were going to work for a logistics company, but not just *any* logistics company. Such a myth would be durable along the years. Another worker, who was hired later, in 2011 at Orleans, described the context in which he joined the company: “I went to Amazon to spend winter in the warm”, he said to me, meaning that Amazon was offering two things: a way to pay his electricity bills and a workplace where working conditions were “decent” (something represented by the fact that Amazon’s warehouse was equipped with air conditioning that kept the workspace relatively warm, something which was not granted in the rest of the logistics industry)⁸⁷. Single, aged of almost 40 years, son of schoolteachers and himself a former student in humanities in a French provincial university, he had previously worked as a children educator and as a musician in a band. At that time, he was looking for job to have an income for the next six months. He was not in search of a long-term job solution in the logistics sector. He chose Amazon, “who was hiring a lot” (Amazon was expanding its logistics capacity in the area as well as in other French regions⁸⁸). For someone holding a certain cultural capital, the perspective of working for an “advanced” company, although it was clear that it offered monotonous and tiring warehouse work, could offer a justification, beyond the mere economic necessity, to “send a CV to the temporary work agency”. In the same period, Amazon France was inaugurating its fourth FC in Lille (LIL1), and the national press reported a general enthusiasm toward Amazon’s arrival, including among workers: “*C’est Internet, c’est américain, ça paraît ‘cool’*”, summarised a job centre supervisor describing, from her point of view, the expectations of many unemployed candidates vis-à-vis a job at Amazon (*Le Monde 2012b*).

The senior workers that we mentioned above also emphasised that, since the launch, Amazon facility offered more than decent working conditions (represented by the presence of air conditioning inside the warehouse), especially if they compared to the rest of the logistics industry:

⁸⁷ Amazon worker and union delegate for SUD, Man, French, ca. 40 years old, 10 years seniority, ORY1 interview, February 2018.

⁸⁸ See Chapter 5.

We had heating in winter. In warehouses like this, there's never heating in winter. Never. Instead, at Amazon, we had heating in the winter, air conditioning in the summer, in a warehouse that's not normally there. People usually get hot to death under the metal sheets in ordinary warehouses. This site, instead, the Amazon site I mean, was clean, very, very clean.

Fieldwork Quote 6 – Valérie, Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

Another point that deserves to be noticed is the fact that many Amazon warehouse workers had in fact no previous experience in the logistics sector. The logistics industry in France, is traditionally a very masculine sector, not only in terms of workers – 80% of blue-collar jobs are held by men – but also concerning work practices (Rivoal 2019; 2021)⁸⁹. As stressed by Gaborieau, online retailing “is relatively different from traditional mass retailing, [as it] also employs a large number of women in its warehouses [...]. This seems to be due to a recruitment method that is very different from that used in food retail warehouses” (Gaborieau 2016b, 38). To launch its operations, Amazon did not restrict its hiring pool to the logistics workforce, and this implied also the recruitment of many women, as recounted by employees and managers. The massive presence of a feminine workforce meant a lot for some early Amazon female recruits:

Oh yes... There's also something very important, which is no longer valid today, as we were very small at the time. When Amazon opened, over 50% of us were women. Today, equality between men and women is very rare. What's more, we've gone back down, haven't we? [she asks to her colleague].

Fieldwork Quote 7 – Valérie, Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

In the retrospective gaze of these woman, the fact that “more than 50%” of the workforce was female distinguished Amazon from an ordinary logistics employer. To her eyes, Amazon's image benefited from the association to a series of features that are conventionally associated with female work: care, prevision and “benevolent” (*bienveillant*) relations between workers and with management (Hochschild 1983). The interviewee continues and, with an argument typically used by actors to account for a certain division of labour, explains that the recruitment of a relatively more feminised workforce was due to the “light” nature of tasks and the small dimensions of handled objects:

⁸⁹ As stressed by Rivoal, the traditional sexual division of labour is even tending to become more pronounced, particularly in blue-collar and white-collar jobs, in contrast to the general trend towards a slow but effective feminisation of highly masculinised workplaces (Rivoal 2019). Some logistics sub-sectors do employ a majority of women – in textiles, electronic components and pharmaceuticals, for example (Lomba 2010) – and this is systematically associated with low pay policies, limiting bonuses and overtime.

Because there wasn't a lot of handling in fact. We shipped CDs, the books, DVDs, right?

Fieldwork Quote 8 – Nadine, Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

The same concept was expressed by the former general manager of the site, although he did not confirm the numbers given by the employee:

We had, I think, a relatively good... I can't remember the figures... But a good balance between men and women. Because the advantage, particularly with the products we were doing at the time - books, DVDs, CDs - was that there wasn't really a weight problem. So yes, the men ended up unloading the lorries or loading the big rolls and so on... We put them there more because it was a bit more physical. Women did a very good job at order picking and packing and were often even better than men overall. In fact, the best order-pickers and packers were often women rather than men

Fieldwork Quote 9 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

These spontaneous representations reproduce the conventions that the main tasks accomplished by workers in Amazon warehouses were more suitable with supposedly female characteristics (handling small objects, carefully registering operations in inventory, etc.).

In fact, these explanations seem more an ex-post justification than a relevant explanation of women presence in the workplace. In another point of the interviewee, the manager gave another more prosaic, and perhaps more relevant explanation of the particular social composition of the workforce. The matter was not so much to recruit women instead men, he said, but just to recruit the amount of workforce needed. In order to do so, no specific restriction was given to recruiters, resulting in a quite divers workplace:

We recruited all sorts, in fact... all sorts we took on. We really didn't have any... constraints in relation to that. It's true that it was quite a young group. We had an average age of 23-24 because there was no... There was no qualification to be an associate, in fact there was no qualification required. So, in fact, we ended up with a very broad sample of people. And as we had a few people - I remember because there are some who are still at Amazon in France - who came, who were 35, 40 years old at the time, ladies who had been... Ladies in particular, I remember, but even guys in fact. These were people who'd had various careers, working class careers, and who'd wandered from a job to another for a while. And they applied and got in. But we'll say yes, we did have quite a few young people, it's true, because what was also interesting for the people was to think they could evolve, it could be nice from that point of view, but in any case, there was no desire on Amazon's part to take on more men, more women, more of this.

Fieldwork Quote 10 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

In fact, it would be equally naïf to take such a statement for granted. It is necessary to put it in the perspective of Amazon's profit strategy at that time.

Amazon's recruiting approach in this early period was coherent with the concept of a firm that strived to be very good in logistics while stressing its identity of internet company. Furthermore, hiring workers with no special skills in warehousing reveals that the company already had an organisation of work standardised and fragmented enough. In this way, *most* of the jobs were already deskilled⁹⁰. Finally, hiring people with social properties that did not match with the dominant representation of the warehouse worker, allowed the company to tap from a broader employment pool. Consequently, such a policy allowed the company to rely on a workforce that did not have a strong professional identity thus preventing workers from easily coalesce and develop horizontal solidarity. In addition, new employees would have more chances to develop a feeling of gratefulness for being given the opportunity to get a full-time permanent job in a company with a good reputation.

This was particularly true not only for women, but, later, also for other vulnerable social categories such as immigrants and racialised people. Amazon proudly claims to favour social diversity and tolerance within its workplace, a rhetoric that was consonant with Amazon's meritocratic ethos and typical of conventional HR management among US multinational companies and in many platforms of the gig economy (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Abdelnour and Bernard 2018; Bernard 2020). The ambiguous occupational identity of Amazon workers was made explicit by workers of other logistics companies in the Orleans area who told us that the use to call the company *la maison des fous* ("a psychiatric asylum"). This expression reveals the reputation of Amazon among the workers of the local logistics district: anyone could work for Amazon, even someone who has never put a foot in a warehouse (which is in part confirmed by how easy it is for journalists and researcher to be hired in Amazon FCs all over the world); Amazon workers were not real "logistics people"⁹¹. Furthermore, Amazon is made unique in the area for its "American" ideology, for the vocabulary used by managers, for the employment relations practices imported from the US. Nothing to do with the "real" logistics work in the rest of the area, where work is done by men, usually holding a forklift engine licence, and where the discredited reputation of logistics work contributes to shape a common, although weak, occupational identity (Benvegnù 2018).

The occupational identity of Amazon workers, instead, seems to be reducible to the fact of *belonging* to a company, and not to a specific occupational group. It was Amazon itself who built this

⁹⁰ Even if a minority of jobs, such as problem solving or team leading (see Chapter 1), was relatively more specialised, and it was their existence that persuaded the workers about the possibility of improving their position in the hierarchy.

⁹¹ Fieldwork Journal, July 2018. A similar expression was reported as used in reference to Amazon by logistics workers in the area of Orleans (Gaborieau 2016a).

reputation of a *sui generis* company. As we saw in Chapter 1, since the beginning of its activity, Amazon presented itself as an internet company rather than an industrialised logistics firm, although its business was based on logistics; its workers were called “associates” and asked to “have fun” and “make history” at work, they were not considered as conventional logistics employee, even if in fact they performed logistics tasks.

To be sure, such an image would progressively get eroded as far as Amazon’s start-up labour regime entered a phase of “normalisation”, with an increasingly taylorised labour process and the dramatic expansion of its logistics workforce (with a growing presence of male and migrant workers, indeed), while press and academic research revealed the importance of its logistics not only in France, but at the international level. For the first years, however, the open policy of recruitment allowed the mobilisation of the workforce by contributing to a labour regime based on responsible autonomy.

3.1.3. *The launch of operation in France: recruiting and setting up work processes*

Amazon launched its website in August 2000. Between 1999 and Spring 2001, Amazon organised its overseas corporate structure on a national base: there was no European transnational structure; every national subsidiary had an autonomous hierarchy, as illustrated by the general manager of the site:

We didn’t have a functional organisation, but we did have a national organisation by country. When we built France, I was hired by... So, there were a few Americans at the beginning, but my first boss was in Paris, meaning that I reported to Paris. I wasn’t reporting to the US at all, which is what happened six months later... Well, in fact not in the US. I reported to someone in the UK, but in fact for the first year, until February 2001 or March 2001, the organisations were national. So, I was a warehouse manager and then there was a supply chain and purchasing senior manager in Paris who reported to the CEO for France.

Fieldwork Quote 11 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

For what concerns the French subsidiary, Amazon recruited its managerial core during 1999. At the head of Amazon France there was the young Denis Terrien, a manager in his thirties with previous experience in the consulting industry (McKinsey) and in the service and retail sector (Pizza Hut and Brico, a do-it-yourself retail company). He was supported by a group of other young managers such as Cécile Moulard from Vivendi, who was in charge of marketing at Amazon; Frederic Donnette, a former IT executive at Victoire Multimedia, got a similar role at Amazon; Jean-Marc Folliet, a former FNAC executive, entered Amazon with supervision on music and media catalogue; Vincent Marty, the former director of the Centre for Export of French Book, at Amazon was in charge of operations. Given the conditions in which Amazon entered the French market (see Chapter 1),

these executives were in charge of creating the French subsidiary from scratch: establishing marketing relationships, introducing the brand in France, elaborating and adapting the website contents and the catalogue, locating and setting up the warehouse infrastructure. Since the beginning of 2000, the group worked under the supervision of Diego Piacentini, Amazon's group vice-president and head of international development (who had joined the company in February, after leaving Apple). At the beginning, Amazon France's headquarter was set in Guyancourt, in the South-West periphery of the Greater Paris and one hour and a half far from Boigny by car. The warehouse in Boigny was not built from scratch. The building was leased from the owner, the US printing machines manufacturer Lexmark, who added two more loading bays to fit the needs of Amazon.

At the direction of the warehouse, the company chose Philippe Hemard, a logistics manager already based in Orleans, where he had directed the local warehouse of Danzas, one of the most ancient logistics companies in the world (in 2000 acquired by Deutsche Post and renamed DHL Global Forwarding).

The setting up of operations was done under the direct supervision of Amazon's teams sent from the US, called "away teams":

We held the project meetings with the few people who had already been hired locally, plus the American team that had been sent to help us, because they didn't have a European structure. In fact, the US, the US operations, had sent two or three Americans to help us set up the Amazon systems, particularly the warehouse, and so on. So, in fact we called them "Away Teams", but they were directly from the US because there was no European structure, there was England and Germany, but they were new and we didn't have any relations at that time, so we worked directly with the US.

Fieldwork Quote 12 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

Under Hemard's supervision, the company hired a bunch of managers and few dozens of full-time permanent workers. Initially, managers were 4 and they became 6 at the end of 2001. At the very beginning workers were hired through temporary staff agencies but just "as an initial filter", as explained by the former GM of the site:

We didn't work much with temporary staff... well, not in the way it works today... we really wanted to, and that's always been the case for Amazon for a long time, especially during a period of business development when there are concerns about a drop in activity. Growth was in triple figures, so... we were doing a lot. That's why we very quickly recruited human resources, because we had to organise that, but recruitment was done directly, so we sometimes used temporary staff to do the initial filtering, etc., but with clear contracts: people spent two months on temporary contracts and then they were promoted to permanent staff, etc. [...] It was a real challenge. [...] We didn't use temporary staff for temporary recruitment...

Fieldwork Quote 13 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

Amazon did not use agency work to adjust to volumes fluctuations, since, as explained by the manager, the steady growth allowed to absorb all the agency workers into the permanent workforce. The perspectives on job security were so optimistic that even workers with agency contracts hesitated to get a permanent job, as they did not want to renounce to the end-of-assignment bonus (10% of the total gross wage), which is awarded to agency workers when an assignment is terminated – as provided by French labour law:

In fact, after a couple of months the HR called me in her office and told me: “Listen, things are going great, you get along with the team etc... we are hiring, so I propose to take a CDI (fixed-term direct contract) with Amazon”. It was great, but in fact I was not sure, because in this way I was losing the end-of-mission bonus [*indemnité de fin de mission*]... So, I bought time for a couple of weeks... but then I understand that I had to make my choice: the HR director called me back and made me understand that either I signed a CDI or I had to quit, but I could not continue with an agency contract... So, I signed... and I am still here!

Fieldwork Quote 14 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

As far as the activity of the warehouse developed, the number of workers increased (according to management, there were up to 90-100 employees in the warehouse by the end of 2000). The company also started soon to develop an internal labour market. On the one hand, it used temporary staff agencies to recruit from the external labour market; on the other hand, an internal HR function was opened in 2001 and management developed an embryonic internal labour market for new vacant, often more specialised, positions that were progressively opened. As explained by management, temp agencies only had the role of recruiting the workforce, which was rapidly absorbed by Amazon with a direct open-ended contract. The use of seasonal agency work, which is today the norm for Amazon, had not been introduced yet. Furthermore, the steady (even if moderate, as we will see in this period) expansion of the volumes allowed management to open new positions, for which permanent employees could apply:

We had contracts with temporary employment agencies saying, “We’ll let you have them for two or three months so that you can pay for the recruitment”, but after that we took them on. With the agencies, we had contracts like that that allowed us to recruit people, and, at the same time, we put jobs directly on the market, so people [could apply].

Fieldwork Quote 15 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

The first task of Amazon workers was the retrofitting of the warehouse and the installation of the Amazon's system of fulfilment. As emphasised by interviewee workers, the warehouse had to be set up, from shelves to the informatic system, which of course, was provided by the company.

Amazon wasn't created, let's say [She means the warehouse, *author's note*]. The warehouse was established in the old Lexmark plant in Boigny. Inside, there were several small cells. They opened them all up and there was a big floor. And then they implanted... Well, as my colleague said, the employees assembled the shelves.

Fieldwork Quote 16 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

While workers were installing equipment, other workers received the first loads of commodities and record it into the inventory system. By August 2000, the warehouse was officially ready for start “fulfilling” (i.e., preparing and shipping) the orders placed by customers on the *amazon.fr* website.



Figure 35 – A view of Amazon warehouse in Boigny in March 2001
(Le Journal Du Net 2001)

3.1.4. *A pre-taylorised labour process*

Compared to today, the organisation of work in the warehouse appears quite primitive. Today's warehouses are characterised not only by a very high level of digitalisation and, more recently, automatization of work processes, but also by a division of work much more advanced than in the early 2000s. The size of the building was also impressively tiny compared to today's giant

warehouses: 10.000 m² vs 185.000 of the currently largest Amazon France's FC in Metz (opened in 2021). The building was relatively small even if compared to the shiny new RNO1 FC the company had just opened in Fernley, Nevada (54.000 m², containing over than a million types of items; see, *The New York Times* 1999) or the UK and the German sites Amazon had opened in 1999 (which together they measured about 64.000 m²; see, Amazon.com, Inc. 1999a). These modest dimensions, indeed, corresponded to the small size of the French e-commerce market at the time. However, at that time, the primitive Amazon's warehouse, the first in France, was considered as state-of-the-art by experts, journalist and, as we saw, by workers themselves.

In this initial phase, the organisation of stock did not completely follow “random storage”, the celebrated principle that dominates today Amazon's warehouses. First, each category was stored in a special zone; second, management planned to gather and locate item according to the rotation rate – a zone for fast rotation goods, a zone for slow rotation goods – as soon as sale statistics would be available.

The warehouse was connected to the rest of Amazon transatlantic network and to suppliers. Twice per day, it received a load of books and less regularly of CDs. Every single item was extracted from the load, inspected to verify its good conditions, and registered in the informatic system. Damaged items were rejected, sent back to suppliers and replaced as soon as possible. Once registered into the inventory, the items were loaded on silver carts (which were also barcoded). The carts were pushed to the shelves and items stocked randomly, wherever the worker find a space. Also, this step of the workflow was registered informatically. This allowed the inventory on the website to be constantly updated.



Figure 36 – A cart for stow in the French FC ORY1

During the first phase, these carts were used also for picking. Special carts for picking (see Figure 24) were introduced only in the second phase

(Journal du Geek 2012).

When an order was placed by a customer, it was transferred to the warehouse. At the very beginning, the picking process was not fully digitalised. Differently from what was already in place in the US, and that would be subsequently introduced also in France during the following years, storage was not randomised. Book, CD and DVD copies of the same title were stored together in a specific zone. Shelves were formed by multiple cases, called “bins”, each labelled with a barcode, which workers had to scan when stowing or picking an item. It was still a “primitive” system, because only partially digitalised: each worker was assigned a zone of picking, a silver cart and a printed list containing the items to be picked⁹². The list was produced and printed by a service called “Collate”. Each list was attached to an empty silver cart. Otherwise, the list could be put in a document tray, according to the priority and to the courier⁹³:

Worker 2: The Collecting department, they'd get out the checklists for the order pickers. And they put them in folders (*bannettes*). There were several folders, each for different degrees of urgency. Chronopost was urgent, so if it was Chronopost, they put in the "Chronopost" folder, and when we arrived, as pickers, we saw that it was urgent: Chronopost. So, we took it, folded our checklist and we had the quantity, the item.

Worker 1: And the name of the item!

Worker 2: That's it.

Worker 1: Because at the moment, don't forget, it's essentially books, CDs, DVDs and VHS, so obviously the titles, you see, weren't number something so... It was a clear title: "Martine à la ferme".

Fieldwork Quote 17 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

In such a system of picking, workers had a certain self-latitude. They selected the list according to the priority. Once the list chosen, they could also establish the order of picking, provided that they picked in the assigned zone. It is important to notice that, differently from the more standardised system that was introduced later, this process implied a certain level of autonomy in the execution of tasks, which in turn required the active involvement of the worker in the pursuit of the goals set by management. Once the list was completed, the cart, whether full or not, was pushed to a collecting (“Re-bin”) area, where items were assembled, in case of orders with multiple purchases:

⁹² In the following two years, management would introduce the random storage principle. One of the advantages of random storage was the increase in speed of stowing and picking; the condition that granted such efficiency was the informatisation of the workflow so as any item could be immediately located and retrieved. The centralisation of list-making also led to an expansion of the picking zones, because items contained in the virtual lists were now located in a more random position and workers had to cover a larger area.

⁹³ Amazon farmed out shipment and delivery to four couriers: La Poste, Chronopost, UPS and DHL. Depending on the customer's location and the delivery time demanded, 24 or 48 h, Amazon France assigned the delivery to the available operator. Chronopost and La Poste oversaw most of the French deliveries. UPS and DHL were in charge mainly of international shipments (*LSA Conso* 2000).

No, we put it on the cart and all the items on the cart went to the re-biner, they had a code to type in which was on the list, they typed in this code and one by one they passed the items underneath the barcode-reader and when one was missing the computer beeped at the end, so you looked at your screen and the screen told you which book was missing. So, you had to go round your cart, you looked at everything to see if it was the picker - and sometimes it was the picker - and that was it.

Fieldwork Quote 18 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018



**Figure 37 – Re-bin work process in the ORY1 site⁹⁴
(Journal du Net 2011)**

We can see from this excerpt of interview that workers accomplished not only physical tasks but were also asked to interact with computers in order to check the quality of inventory. Workers were trained to follow standard procedures (for example, in case of missing items), interpret the basic acoustic and visual signals produced by computers, and even master basic informatic languages (in interface) to insert data into the system. We will see that with the growth of the company and the continuous restructuring of operations, this latitude would get more and more narrow.

After the reassembling, multiple orders and single orders were sent to the packing tables. Pack was already at that time a physical and repetitive task, a typical assembly-chain job. To describe it, a worker used the image of the marmot that packs chocolate made famous by a popular chocolate producer⁹⁵:

⁹⁴ The picture dates back to 2011, but interviewed workers confirmed that such a process was substantially the same already in the couple of years that followed the opening of the warehouse.

⁹⁵ In this commercial, a hiker reaches a solitary tiny chalet in the Alps. He looks inside through the window, and a small and nice chocolate bars factory appears to him. With a playful music in the background, a young blond mountain girl stirs chocolate into a pot, a cow activates wood-made machinery, and a marmot stands next to a conveyor belt and packs a bar every second.

After that, we had the same position as today, which has never changed, the Re-bin, right? And then, after the Re-bin, we went straight to Packing, on the chain. And there, tac-tac, our little marmot and, tac, the parcel was on its way to shipment!

Fieldwork Quote 19 -Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

The organisation of outbound flows that we have just described, and especially of picking and packing, was not to last very long. In the US, as we saw in Chapter 2, picking had already been reorganised in order to increase productivity and handle a higher number of orders. Workers were equipped with handset scanners and assigned a rigid picking-list. Items to be picked appeared on the screen of the handset one at a time, so as the worker had no choice but to follow the list item after item.

In fact, the introduction of these micro-computers reflected a broader process of centralisation of control that, as we saw in Chapter 2, had already taken place in the US. In the new system, the lists were no longer prepared and printed by the collecting service. They became virtual: the informatic system transmitted them automatically to workers' scanners and, in reverse, the scanners transmitted immediately to the central system information that the item had been picked. Thus, there was no need for pickers to come back to the collecting area in order to get a new list (on the other hand, they would have to do so when the cart was full, in order to leave it to the re-bin area and collect an empty one). Down-time was reduced, but also workers autonomy in taking informal breaks. In reverse, there was no need for workers at the collecting area to wait for the pickers to have the information that the item had been picked. Most of the tasks were progressively gathered under the direct control of the computer system and therefore they could be monitored on real time. The centralisation of list-making also led to an expansion of the picking zones. Since items contained in the virtual lists were now located in a more random position workers had to walk more in order to reach the article. Within the following year, also the French sites would introduce this form of picking, which would remain the standard way until the introduction of new AGV-equipped FCs since the late 2010s. A similar process concerned pack, which would become much more proceduralised and monitored.

Despite this process of digital innovation, automation, as we have already seen in Chapter 1, did not follow immediately. Most of the tasks of warehouse workers remained physical: loading and unloading boxes, extracting and handling commodities, storing, picking and packing items, packaging. The presence of machinery was relatively unimportant. Such a technological "backwardness" of the French FCs was probably due by the small size of the French market. Only when growth started accelerating, the company moved the warehouse.

These machines did not replace the most labour-intensive tasks such as picking, stowing, and packing. These tasks would then remain practically unchanged until the introduction of the first AGV robots during the second half of the 2010s. In other words, despite the low level of mechanisation, the digitalisation of work processes was already at state-of-the-art level. As we saw, most of workers' physical acts were associated to informational tasks: workers were not simply asked to handle and move commodities, but to register most of these physical steps into the informatic system in order to track the circulation of commodities within the warehouse. Consequently, worker tasks were already constantly tracked. Already in this early phase, work in Amazon warehouses appears thus physical and increasingly governed and monitored through digital devices.

However, in the recounts made by workers, the whole experience of work was not reduced to monitoring and physical efforts. Of course, these elements were already present. Workers had to respect productivity and quality standards: handling and packing items as fast as possible with the least number of inventory errors. At the same time, management demanded workers to operate in the respect of safety rules so as to reduce the number of accidents and injuries. Productivity, quality, and safety rules were formalised in unilateral bonus concessions (see par. 3.2). They were reminded during briefings and enforced by monitoring and by regular updates that management gave to workers to remind the bout productivity and other rules (the so-called "feedback"). Although to a lesser extent than the following phase, work was already proceduralised and repetitive. For example, in an excerpt quoted above (Fieldwork Quote 19), a worker compared the packing task to the "marmot who packed chocolate" made popular by a commercial released by a famous chocolate producer. By the same token, many other warehouse tasks described by workers, from receiving to re-bin, from stowing to picking, were largely repetitive.

On the other hand, the fact that physical tasks were rapidly informatised was felt by workers as a sign of modernity. The growing "reputational effect" of Amazon's brand – a smart, internet company with great ambitions – made more valuable and interesting their work. Furthermore, looking closer at work, workers were not simply required to work mechanically: recruits were trained to check the quality of inventory and to judge it by themselves, according to certain policy guidelines. To be sure, these guidelines were constraining workers to follow formalised criteria and if they assessed that an item was damaged or missing, there were procedures to treat missing or damaged items⁹⁶. Yet the possibility of establishing whether an item was added margins of self-discretion to a job that, otherwise, would have been too monotonous for workers and underexploited for the company. Assigning workers with informational tasks and a limited self-discretion allowed management to take

⁹⁶ Self-discretion was even more evident for a special category of warehouse workers, called "problem solver". A solver was precisely in charge of dealing with these inventory issues.

advantage not only of the worker physical effort but also of his cognitive capacity. In spite of this, according to interviews with workers, it seems that the digitalisation was experienced by employees more as a driver of work re-skilling, however meagre, than a vector of tight monitoring and surveillance

Worker 2: I liked it because it was completely new to me. Don't forget! Amazon was something new for the employees of Boigny. It was computers, it was online sales...

[...]

Worker 1: In the beginning, the atmosphere of discovery was palpable. Everyone was learning and growing at the same time. There was no difference between departments, because everyone did everything, and there were only a few of us. So, it wasn't a question of productivity, but of looking out for orders and sending them off! That was at the very beginning. And after that, for years, the atmosphere was always very good, until we stopped growing. From then on, the focus was clearly on productivity.

Fieldwork Quote 20 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

Already before the official opening of Amazon France, people in the warehouse were working at full speed under the pressure of the headquarters to set the facility ready by the end of August. This objective was presented to the workers as a mission. Workers had been recruited to build the warehouse from scratch, and the success of Amazon depended on the respect of the schedule that they had been assigned. In the discourse of management and in the spirit of the launch of Amazon activities in France, failure to meet the objective would have meant directly the end of the mission: the closing of the warehouse and the termination of workers' and management' jobs. In this respect, the few dozens of workers formed a cohesive group with local managers as their destinies appeared to be tightly joint. Furthermore, this excerpt emphasises the absence of a clear division of labour between departments, which allowed workers to enrich their work instead of being assigned to a narrow set of repetitive fragmented tasks, as it will be the case in the following phase.

3.1.5. *The slow growth of Amazon in France and its consequences on production politics*

Even though Amazon was able to open the warehouse on time, it would fail to meet the optimist expectations for its first year of activity:

Amazon thought that in three or four months we'd be more or less on a par with the UK or Germany, but we weren't at all. The competitive market was different in France and we were simply lagging behind.

Fieldwork Quote 21 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

Was France a tough terrain for Amazon? There is no data available giving a portrait of the e-commerce market in the early 2000s, especially for what concerns market share. To be sure, Amazon failed to enter the French market by the main entrance, i.e. acquiring an already-consolidated group – as it was the case in UK and Germany. In France, Amazon tried to follow the textbook, but it failed to take over Alapage, which fell in the hands of France Telecom, therefore the Seattle-based company had to build its own inventory, its own network of suppliers, and as in any country, its own logistics operations. The French market was occupied at least in part by local players such as France Telecom or Fnac (*Le Monde* 2001a) and old-style mail order companies. On top of these local constraints, the timing of the implantation was not good. While, in UK and Germany Amazon had managed to consolidate its growth, the burst of the dotcom in 2000 forced the company to abruptly freeze its growth. The French subsidiary, still in its very infancy, was harmed by the drastic shift.

In Spring 2001, the gloomy atmosphere at Amazon did not pass unnoticed. The French newspapers remarked the hardship of Amazon's French subsidiaries and the removal of top management:

Heads are falling faster and faster at the top of Internet companies. Less than ten months after the launch of the Amazon.fr website, the French subsidiary of the American e-commerce giant announced the resignation of its CEO on 14 May. Amazon.fr is not disclosing any figures. The only indicators available are the audience studies carried out by specialist institutes: MMXI and NetValue, which are based on the number of visitors to the site, both rank Amazon's French shop third among French e-commerce sites, well behind the other two "cyber-libraries", Fnac.com and Alapage. For his part, Georges Aoun believes that his predecessor's departure comes as no surprise: "Denis devoted two years of his life to establishing the Amazon brand in France. Now he wants to take on another professional challenge." As for the future, the new CEO is sticking to his guns: "We're going to continue our efforts to satisfy the end customer as much as possible, who is the only judge of a company's success." One thing is certain: the end-of-year festive season, a period of intense activity, promises to be crucial. The time has already come for the e-commerce giants to make sharp decisions. Amazon.com has already made 1.300 redundancies in the United States to finally break even at the end of the year. Bertelsmann has just announced that it is to integrate its BOL e-bookshop into its book clubs. BOL-France, the 50-50 subsidiary of Vivendi and Bertelsmann, which has never really made a breakthrough, could join the traditional mail-order firm France Loisirs.

(*L'Express* 2001, my translation)

Eight months after its launch in France, Amazon.fr, the online retailer of cultural products, has lost its CEO, Denis Terrien. He has been replaced by his thirty-year-old deputy, Georges Aoun. At the beginning of March, the marketing director and communications director resigned. These departures reflect the growing power of Amazon.com's international CEO, Diego Piacentini, who is increasingly in charge of the three European subsidiaries (Great Britain, Germany and France). They also point to the difficulties experienced by the American online bookseller in establishing itself in France, where it is up against the number one,

fnac.com, the Fnac website. On Tuesday, German giant Bertelsmann decided not to float its online bookseller BOL, Amazon.com's main European competitor.

(*Le Monde* 2001a, my translation)

The crisis was twofold: national and international. While Amazon struggled to consolidate its position in the French market, Amazon was dealing with the crisis of the dotcom bubble, the crash of its market capitalisation and the growing scepticism of observers and investors about the viability of its business model. The response, as we saw in Part 1, was a global operation of restructuring launched between the end of 2000 and the beginning of 2001. An operation which included the “rationalisation” of subsidiaries, with the removal of national top management from the management of operations and its replacement by a common European structure under the supervision of Piacentini, Amazon Vice President for International business and former Apple's top executive. This was going to have an impact on employment in Europe, where Piacentini executed the shutdown of the European call centre based in the Hague (Stone 2013), that Amazon had precipitously opened in the previous years and that now was to be cut in the context of the process of global restructuring and centralisation: 250 employees were fired.

In France, workers in the warehouse were worried about the future of the company and, more prosaically, about their jobs, as reported by the management:

There was a lot, especially in December and January, because people who came to work were young people, but also not so young people, or at least people who had already been through redundancy plans in companies and were saying to themselves, this job looks good, but how will it last? “Now we're hearing so many things”, they told me, and so on. “Is Amazon going to survive?”, “Are we sure that it's going to survive?”. And I'd say, “Well, of course it will. Amazon pays you every month anyway, don't worry about it, the company has money. There's no question today of doing any such thing. Is that OK?”

Fieldwork Quote 22 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

The initial French “fiasco” did not lead to the closing of the warehouse. It was the HQ in Guyancourt who paid the price of the restructuring. Since the European structure started covering most of their tasks, the headquarter workforce shrunk. In July 2004, Amazon France confirmed plans to cut jobs in its French headquarter and to centralise some of its operations in the US and the UK. Some staff at the HQ were either transferred to other sites nearer Paris, offered alternative positions in the UK subsidiary (or elsewhere) or given a redundancy package (*Le Monde* 2004). The announce was made in June, when the company had already reduced its head office's workforce by 50 persons (*Le Monde*

2005). Between 2001 and 2007 the HQ workforce shrunk from over one hundred employees – mostly managers, white collars, and IT workers – to less than 10 in 2007⁹⁷.

The warehouse, instead, continued its operations and to hire workers, even if at a very moderate rhythm compared to the boom of the following decade: if the workforce had jumped from a few dozen to 80-90 employees between September and December 2000, by early 2007 it had grown just to 170 permanent employees (*Le Monde* 2007; *Les Echos* 2007)⁹⁸.

During the first years, workers reported, there was a feeling that Amazon was on the edge of the shutdown. A worker told that when she started, in September 2000, she was not even sure that she would get her first salary⁹⁹. The site's General Manager also reported that workers were worried and that he tried to calm them (Fieldwork Quote 22). Given their vulnerability in the labour market, it is understandable that workers cared about Amazon's success. At stake there was the security of their job in a context of precarity. Despite the relative stagnation of this period, Amazon kept on flexing its muscle. It stressed its ambitions of success and never stopped to evoke the possibility of professional improvement for workers that wanted to link their career to the company.

3.2. *Mobilising worker effort in a pre-taylorised labour process: symbolic and tangible remunerations*

We saw that during this first phase, Amazon goal was to effectively set up operations and to progressively increase its logistics capacity in France. The initial version of Amazon labour process was a sort of pre-taylorised one, in which workers were left with a certain margin of autonomy in the execution of tasks. The division of labour, workers reported, was still underdeveloped, and this ensured that employees could rotate between different tasks. At the same time, management gained flexibility in a moment when operations were still in a phase of adjustment to the specificities of the French context. Since processes were still in a phase of definition and given the relatively wide margins of autonomy of workers, securing workers commitment and mobilisation was vital for management. How was such a mobilisation obtained?

⁹⁷ Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023. He informed me that by 2005 the headquarter had moved from Guyancourt to an anonymous flat in the core of Paris. It was after 2007 that growth accelerated, and Amazon France opened a new headquarter in Clichy, in the North outskirts of Paris.

⁹⁸ For what concerns turnover, management reported that “it was not enough important to justify its measurement” (Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023).

⁹⁹ Former Amazon worker, HR assistant, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2022.

3.2.1. *Gamification and recreational practices*

First, management took care of enforcing cohesion and investment by *gamification* i.e., a broad set of principles and practices in the design of work processes, whose effect is double: on the one hand, to make work-related suffering – due to the intensity and repetition of effort – more tolerable; on the other hand, to influence the perception that workers had of their work: less a tiring and hetero-directed activity and more a leisure, a recreational activity. Even if the term gamification is relatively new (Woodcock and Johnson 2018)¹⁰⁰, sociologist and economists have been traditionally attentive to this phenomenon. Burawoy’s definition of making out (Burawoy 1979a), for instance, was landmarking, but other authors had previously focused on it (see, Making out

At Amazon, management was persuaded that effort and overtime work were more tolerable if the working environment was infused with a spirit of challenge and playfulness. Veteran workers seem to confirm the success of such a policy. For example, the worker that described the pack process by referring to the marmot in a tiny and nice chocolate factory in the mountains was clearly representing not only the repetitive nature of tasks but also hinting at a playful atmosphere at work (Fieldwork Quote 19). Like in the fantastic chocolate factory, in Amazon facilities music was played from woofers and loudspeakers. A worker could also suggest tracks or even bring their CDs from home, and if their colleagues agreed, the CDs was inserted in the stereo and the music played:

We worked with music upstairs. We always had music. We’d even find people asking to play personal CDs, they’d bring CDs with them! It was the kind of thing where everyone would say “yes, yes, put the CD on!”

Fieldwork Quote 23 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

It is important to notice that music is broadcast also today in the French site, but workers are no longer allowed to decide the play list. Amazon hires a professional to set up an internal, “radio” called Radio ORY1, from which popular tracks are broadcast during the entire shift. One of the interviewed senior workers reported that “at the very beginning, you could see people playing with a ball in the floor”¹⁰¹.

Following the practices adopted in the US, management used challenges and prizes to motivate workers and make them feel in a playful environment. Management stressed the importance of these activities:

¹⁰⁰ Woodcock and Johnson start from the definition of gamification as the application of game systems – competition, rewards, quantifying player/user behaviour – into non-game domains, such as work. However, they distinguish between two types of gamification: first, “gamification from above”, involving the optimization and rationalizing of work practices by management; and second, “gamification from below”, a form of active resistance against control at work (Woodcock and Johnson 2018). In the case of Amazon employment practices, we can talk about gamification from above. For what concerns gamification from below, I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 56 some forms of resistances in the workplace, although they are too dispersed and individualised to be considered real games.

¹⁰¹ Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, July 2018.

It was very interesting. There was also the start-up spirit, the fun, the work that was really present with, for example, the “Thirsty Thursday”, where every Thursday we stopped work for 1 hour and we'd have a coffee with cakes and a chat. We gave out a bit of top-down information a management-team meeting, but people could ask questions because that obviously helped to foster relationships and communication.

Fieldwork Quote 24 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

It is quite striking to notice that every week, for a whole hour, work was stopped to make the workers participate to a recreational gathering. As we will see in Chapters 5 and 6, today's recreational events, which kept the same name (“Have fun”) are organised every one or two quarter and barely last half an hour. This difference suggests how much in the initial phase, these rituals had a substantial function of worker mobilisation, while in the following phase they looked emptied of this original capacity. Another important point to stress is that, like showed by Burawoy, gamification also stimulated competition among workers, because individual workers could be awarded prizes such as “associate of the week”, when they overperformed their colleagues. As a prize, they could receive small gifts and gadgets, but, in no case, money was awarded.

Senior workers recount with enthusiasm these practices, which made them feel “lucky” and in a direct personal relationship with the general manager, “the boss” (*le chef*), which was a sort of workplace-replica of the CEO Jeff Bezos (Bezos is used to show up in Amazon's FCs and, for instance, to pick some items, in order to stage his participation to the work effort):

We did a lot of “[Have] Fun” too. It was great. In fact, you see what it is... recreational meetings and all that. There were the employees and then the boss... We were lucky enough to work in a nice environment,

Fieldwork Quote 25 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

I interrogate these workers about the meaning and function of these practices. They emphasised the fact that “everyone played the game”, contrarily to today when their show more scepticism and deception:

Worker: At Halloween [we organised] a fancy dress day... Then there was a convivial moment in the break room with... something to eat and drink, without alcohol but there were things to eat. A convivial moment like that.

Author: In your opinion, what was the point of organising, or importing, this type of practices to France?

Worker: It was about creating convivial moments. Between employees. Everyone took part at the time. Everyone played the game. After fifteen years, I must admit that I stopped taking part in fancy dress days because I see no point in it from my point of view. But at the beginning, it's true that a lot of people took

part. Most of them took part because it created a sense of competition. It was fun. It was a bit different and that's it.

Fieldwork Quote 26 - Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

What certain workers insisted on, along with management, was that Amazon was an ambitious company, striving to achieve always new goals. As I showed in Chapter 1, the company was tiny at that time, and struggled to conquer its space at least during the first 8-9 years. This fostered a sort of “outsider” ethos inside the company, which could be detected also in the French workplace. The workplace everyday life, in Seattle but as well as in Boigny, was infused with this typical start-up culture. In the following interview excerpts, this former HR assistant in the site of ORY1 reported how Amazon corporate culture was “different”, but she also mixes this feeling with the impression, already mentioned by the senior warehouse workers above (see, Fieldwork Quote 20, Fieldwork Quote 5), that everything was “new”, “to be built”, and therefore stimulating :

Author: And when you arrived, how did you...? What did you think of the working atmosphere?

Worker: Well, it was very good. It's dynamic, it was ‘American’, that’s all. There was a good atmosphere, and at the same time it was a family atmosphere. It was a bit like our baby Amazon in France with the initial team. So that’s it. Everything had to be created and we're a bit... The pioneering spirit was very, very strong.

Author: So, you're saying that it was the American way of doing things, right?

Worker: Well, they thought big. I think Americans always think big. They’re able to project themselves, perhaps more than most French people do. And Americans, everything is always “fantastic”, “amazing”, *voilà*. We don’t have the same state of mind, I mean Americans and French, and that’s it. It’s true that everything had to be built, so it was very interesting for me.

Fieldwork Quote 27 – Former Amazon worker, HR assistant, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2022

3.2.2. *Individualisation of workplace employment relations*

The construction of a playful and gamified atmosphere at work in the so-called new economy firm was an element that contributed also to prevent the formation of unions in the workplace. As we will see in the second part of this chapter and in Chapter 7, unions were unable to enter the workplace as independent actors. Management was able to protect an exclusive direct relationship with employees, excluding any union intermediation. In this respect, another important element recounted by workers was the proximity of local management. During the first two years at the Boigny-sur-Bionne facility, the warehouse general manager, Philippe Hemard, and the HR Director, E.T., directly recruited workers and constituted the team of veteran Amazonians at Boigny:

Worker 1: Well, [at the time there were] no tests, [just] a covering letter and CV. That's when we met E.T., the HR Director. We were also lucky enough to meet the boss, P.H.

Author: Because he was in Boigny, right?

Worker 2: Yes, because he was close. He had opened the site. He opened the Boigny site with E.T.

Fieldwork Quote 28 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

The general manager and the HR director were presented by these two workers – who, it is worthwhile to remind, would later become union delegate for the CFDT – as very close to the employees. Local management used to call the workers by their first name (and in return required to be called by their first name as well) and cultivated an informal environment at work. Sometimes the workers recount such an environment with a certain grotesque emphasis:

Worker 2: And very, very close to the employees.

Worker 1: Yes, yes!

Worker 2: A human being!

Worker 1: Yes!

Worker 2: You would never have known someone with so much... humanity!

Worker 1: Nothing to do with today!

Worker 2: He knew all the first names!

Worker 1: E.T. was one of the few HR managers I knew who knew all the employees' first and last names! She was one of the only ones!

Worker 2: At the time there were only 50 of us... [she adds not without sarcasm]

[Worker 1 gets annoyed by this comment]

Fieldwork Quote 29 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

Besides these overstatements¹⁰² – that are also the result of the retrospective gaze of these workers who compare “the good old times” with a grim and disappointing present – what emerges

¹⁰² When evoking the dominant mood in the workplace in the past, some workers indulged to this kind hyperbolism. They realised themselves that they exceeded in zeal. In an interview a worker was illustrating the various “privileges” conceded to workers and mentioned the fact that workers were allowed to smoke inside the warehouse:

Worker 1: We were also granted privileges, so-to-speak!

Worker 2: For smokers, the smoking room was inside the company! There was no room outside!!

Eventually, Worker 1 recognised that this was not an exceptional concession, given that the regulation on smoking in public spaces was much looser at the beginning of the millennium:

Worker 1: At the same time, we didn't have the same conditions as today. We were still allowed to smoke in public places.

Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

from these narratives is the proximity of the relationship between workers and managers. This kind of close relationship is based on an exchange: effort, devotion, and discipline from the workers' side; bonuses, individual recognition and paternalist benevolence from managers' side. Managerial concessions were unilateral and could be conceded individually to the single workers or collectively to the whole team. An example of individual benefit mentioned by a veteran worker was the help to find a house, a primitive form of company welfare. A worker explained to us that she moved to Orleans to work at Amazon and struggled to find a house. Local management provided this worker with help:

So... it was very... I'd say... So, at that time, there were no trade unions, but it was very close to the employees, in terms of mutual aid, you know... look at housing, for example! When someone arrived, for example, they were put in direct contact with... and they tried to find accommodation. They helped me too! I've got nothing to hide... my first accommodation... [...] Well, they put me in direct contact with the organisations in the region and, yes, I applied for and got accommodation.

Fieldwork Quote 30 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

Similarly, other workers recalled that management was attentive to individual problems:

It was very human... [she lowers her voice] If someone lost... a relative... you didn't even try to say "Can I take the day off?" You just went and saw the HR manager or the [site] director – That never happened to me! Honestly, it's fine! – but I know there are people to whom it's happened: - "I've lost someone", they said. "There's no problem...", they replied, "Take a day off... We'll deal with it later". They didn't even try to discuss it. They were looking after you: "Do you have enough leave?", they said, and didn't even raise the question, whether allowing you to take a day off.

Fieldwork Quote 31 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

A small "privilege" that management conceded to all employees during the first years was a sort of self-service collection of their purchase on Amazon's website. If a worker placed an order online, he could choose to collect its purchase directly at the warehouse:

Worker 1: You see, for example, a simple little thing. I'm thinking about this... At Boigny, when we were employees and we placed orders, instead of waiting for the order to be delivered to us, we had the right to collect the item from the warehouse even before we left in the evening. It was a little advantage, in fact! You see, it was little things like that that they put in place.

Worker 2: We felt like we were... at the centre of the company's life...

Worker 1: Favoured, yes!

Worker 2: And we were also given privileges in inverted commas!

Fieldwork Quote 32 - Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

This is an illustration of how workers enjoyed the fact of working for a dynamic company which put the employees “at the centre”. Workers felt to being awarded “privileges”. In fact, it is evident that such a benefit cost nothing to Amazon; it even represented a saving for the company, which cut the logistics cost of delivering its own employees. In return, management secured workers’ gratefulness and satisfaction for accessing to an “exclusive” advantage, reserved to those who belonged to the “house”, the “members” of a selected group. In addition, we can examine this memory on the background of the contemporary situation. Such a type of “benefits” despite economically meaningless remained in the memory of senior workers because it was opposed to the way how they feel treated today, in a giant bureaucratised company with millions of employees and where that original feeling of membership of belonging had faded away.

Symbolic remuneration was not all, however. At that time, Amazon was also ready to offer workers concrete reward for workers that proved to be committed with the company’s goals. A couple of years after the opening of the warehouse, management introduced tangible benefits, such as monetary bonuses based on the completion of productivity and quality goals. According to workers, this seemed to happen in a phase where Amazon’s sales expanded quickly and working rhythms started increasing at a constant rhythm, triggering also the first changes in the workplace, namely an expansion of the temporary workforce:

It had just started up in France. People weren't familiar with online sales in France. When it opened for the first two Christmases, yes, there was a lot of work, and as things went on, it got busier. In fact, we were taking on more and more temps!

Fieldwork Quote 33 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

In addition to these symbolic rewards, Amazon provided also some tangible elements. In order to keep the pace of orders and maintain the standards of productivity, quality and safety, management introduced a collective bonus. Depending on whether workers reached a certain target, they were awarded a medal (gold, silver, and bronze) and a monetary bonus:

Worker 1: They decided to introduce a bonus, with four or three criteria. There were...

Worker 2: Productivity.

Worker 1: The quality of work, the quality of the site; accidents at work; the productivity of the site; and the inventory, the accuracy of inventories.

Author: So, it was a collective bonus, right?

Worker 2: So, it was a collective bonus. In fact, you had to. There were levels: gold, silver, bronze.

Worker 1: If we were in gold, we all got the amount we were supposed to get. If we were in silver, it went down. If we were in bronze, that went down too. And the steps were. Here, for example, there were... Here, for example, every quarter the... elected representatives, the elected representatives, met with management to inform them of this rate. With the criteria that management gave, in fact, that the criteria... the percentages. For example, they arrived at a meeting and management said that for this quarter, there had to be just one work accident. For this quarter, productivity had to be 100%, for example. For this quarter, quality had to be 99.5. For this quarter, inventory accuracy had to be 98, for example. And if we achieved all that, we were golden, so we earned the amount that management had told us.

Fieldwork Quote 34 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

The value of the bonus changed over time. During the first years, the bonus could hit €300 for each quarter in which the productive unit met all the criteria. Workers that we interviewed appreciated such an initiative, but we will see that this bonus would later disappear for structural reasons.

For what concerns stock options, Amazon France imported this practice from the US since the start of its operation in the country¹⁰³, as reported by managers and workers:

In other words, we adapted, but with the same... orientation. For example, we introduced stock-options, even for people like order pickers in France, because it was cool. At Amazon, it was part of the culture that every employee should have a piece of the company and behave like a shareholder, meaning that they should also be interested in their success. So, we had to adapt it and find a solution. But it was done, and it wasn't easy! In France, zero people, zero workers received stock options of course, or shares in the company. There were schemes where employees could buy shares in the company through plans [*plan d'épargne salariale* and *participation aux bénéfices*, see below] I don't remember what they were called. These were schemes that had existed since the 90s including traditional companies. I remember, my father had one at Lafarge, he worked at Lafarge, he had one and yet he was behind a machine! But otherwise, giving stock options – that is to say really what is normally reserved for management, and senior management to be precise – in France, that was given to everyone, that was part of the culture that was brought in saying “But yes! We want to do it anyway!”

Fieldwork Quote 35 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

¹⁰³ Today, Amazon's French employees are still awarded restricted stock units, differently from the Italian colleagues, for instance, who never received stock options. In Germany, according to my local informants, Amazon employees have been receiving stock options until 2022. In 2023, the company unilaterally replaced stock options with a monetary bonus. Furthermore, there are rumours in the French subsidiary that the company will withdraw stock options by the beginning of summer.

There were stock options, shares that we could buy and sell in a single operation, and for which we didn't have to pay tax.

Fieldwork Quote 36 – Amazon senior worker, ORY1, man, ca. 50-years old, informal conversation, October 2019¹⁰⁴

Indeed, certain workers expressed scepticism about the use of stock-options. As reported by a former white-collar employee, the perspective of realising shareholder value was not very tangible:

Author: How did employees view stock options?

Worker: It wasn't very concrete at first. Because you had to wait several years. Today they're no longer stock options, they're a different formula and it's only to exercise them, to sell them more quickly. But at the time, you had to wait four years before you could acquire them. And because we didn't want them to be taxed too heavily, we had to wait a little longer to sell them. So, it's true that at the beginning, I think people thought it would never amount to anything. I didn't base my decision to join Amazon on that. It wasn't very concrete at first.

Author: And do you think that this sort of stock-options made workers more involved?

Worker: I don't know, I'm not convinced, but maybe more with the current formula where there's no longer this four-year wait before you can start selling something and then get money back in return. Now it's free shares, and for some time now they've been called stock options. Also, because the regulations have changed in France and so it's more concrete. I think that must make it an incentive.

Fieldwork Quote 37 – Former Amazon worker, HR assistant, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2022

The symbolic and economic benefits that management distributed to workers had in fact a very limited scope. For instance, management showed a remarkable rigidity when it came to more tangible and secure gains for workers. The archetypical issue on which management was adamantly opposed to make concessions was the “thirteenth” extra month pay:

So, there was something that struck us, every employee who knew E.T., the HR director of the site, she always said “As long as I will remain in this job, you will never get a 13th month” [she sniggers]. “It'll never be possible”, she used to say. And it's true that by the time the unions were formed and were able to negotiate a third month [in 2013-2014], she had gone... This made us, the old-timers, think again.

Fieldwork Quote 38 – Amazon worker and former CFTD union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

It took almost fifteen years – a long period during which the organisation of work and the social composition of the workforce changed deeply – and a strike to worker to obtain such an extra month

¹⁰⁴ This conversation took place in a pub, thanks to the intermediation of another Amazon worker. The workers was a man

pay, in the form of a bonus (2014). In this respect, management's hostility to any stable wage compensation increase would remain constant through time, in France as well as in the US. We will see in the next chapters that unions would find fierce managerial resistance when claiming permanent wage increase (see especially Chapter 8). This because the e-commerce remained a low-margin business and the company preferred to invest money into development, infrastructure, and equipment rather than on workers' pay. It would be only under extreme pressure that the company would make concessions.

However, at least in this period, managerial hostility to improve compensations rarely triggered industrial conflict. For example, the worker quoted above (Fieldwork Quote 38) presented the stern HR director's attitude as a sign of managerial coherence rather than a symbol of corporate greed. Amazon workers never embraced collective actions for better wages in this early period – also because wage grids were negotiated mostly at the sectoral bargaining round, and unions, as we will see, were almost totally absent from the workplace, so they could not negotiate company-level wage increase. Furthermore, during fieldwork I often heard for workers that a permanent and full-time job was already a blessing for them, and that anyway working conditions were affordable, because “*c'est pire ailleurs*” (“elsewhere it's worse”), these workers used to repeat. By these terms, workers referred to the narrow possibilities they had to improve their working and economic conditions by looking for a job elsewhere, whether in the logistics or in other sectors (commerce, services etc.). On the one hand, because Amazon's wage was aligned with the sectoral collective agreement, on top of which it added the symbolic and tangible benefits that we discussed above; on the other hand, because workers were precisely vulnerable in the labour market and could not expect to find better conditions with other employers. Instead, in a context of weak horizontal solidarity but rapid economic growth for the company, workers had at least the hope of improving their conditions through internal mobility, by accessing positions of team leader and even area manager, as the company's meritocratic rhetoric never ceased to stress.

* * *

In Amazon's employment relations, the individualised and direct worker-management relations were the absence of unions in the workplace, especially in the US. Along with its “Californian ideology”, Amazon exported to France its anti-union managerial culture.

Box 3 – Amazon's anti-union ideology

The corollary of Amazon corporate culture was a fierce anti-union stance in Amazon's conception of labour relations. Anti-union policies were a salient aspect of the tech industry in the mid-1990s (and they

still are so today). The Californian ideology celebrated individual success through “innovation”, “disruption” and “meritocracy”. Institutions such as collective bargaining, unions and labour law were obsolete constraints, obstructing any possibility of success for a company and even for the single employees. Indeed, over the previous decades, US employers had initiated an aggressive and successful anti-union campaign, assisted by “an extensive and sophisticated ‘union avoidance’ industry” (Logan 2006, 651; Lawler 1984; Peterson, Lee, and Finnegan 1992; Kleiner 2001; Fantasia and Voss 2004), and anti-union culture was a dominant element at Walmart (Lichtenstein 2008; Hocquelet 2014; 2016), one of the models that inspired Bezos. Walmart – who had been dealing with union organising campaigns since the late 1970s and had always managed to keep unions out of its stores – saw the unions as “third-party representatives” and unnecessary brokers of the direct relationship between employees and the company. Unions were depicted as an external stakeholder, an essentially corrupt and parasitical institutions, primarily concerned with union dues rather than on workers welfare (which were called “associates”) and the company’s success. On the contrary, Walmart claimed to sincerely care about its workers: “we are not anti-union; we are pro-associate” (Lichtenstein 2008, 1487). Amazon incorporated this traditional, almost retrogradely paternalistic, repertoire and augmented it with the libertarian and futuristic essence of its Californian ideology: unions were a relic of the past and a harmful constraint for innovation, a *bureaucratic* structure at odds with the *meritocratic* ethos of Amazon and other Silicon Valley firms. Their arrival to the workplace had to be averted in order to pursue Amazon’s *historical* mission. In practice, however, the union avoidance tactics that Amazon would adopt were much more conventional: anti-union consultancy firms and the classic repertoire of union busting. Indeed, the threat of union organising would loom on Amazon as soon as working conditions started degrading, first in the corporate offices, and then in the warehouses.

Another aspect that deserves to be emphasised is not only the influence of labour practices inspired to the so-called Californian ideology, but also other imported from more “conservative” firms such as Walmart¹⁰⁵. For its great capacity of organising an efficient logistics chain, Sam Walton was a model for Jeff Bezos and, as we saw, Amazon initially tried to apply Walmart’s model for its logistics network. Furthermore, as we saw, many of Amazon’s logistics executives at the beginning were former Walmart’s managers. These factors concurred in transferring Walmart’s labour philosophy and practices into Amazon’s workplace, especially in the warehouses. The consequence was blending of the pure platform spirit of the Californian ideology with the “Southerner” conservative spirit of Walmart.

Amazon’ anti-union’s ideology manifested not only in every-day-life in the workplace, but also during particular events such as organising attempts of the unions. In the US, this happened already during Fall 2000, when unions and NGO activist tried to organise discontent Amazon workers in the warehouse and in call centres. In this case, Amazon did not hesitate to deploy its repertoire of anti-union action. Visiting the Fernley FC in November 2000, Jeff Bezos gathered all employees and sharply spoke out against the unionisation drive, “I’m not concerned it will disrupt the holidays,” he said. “Everyone in this company is an owner. We don’t need unions in Amazon.com.” (*The New York Times* 2000b); Amazon’s internal website provided guidance to managers in search of “warning signs” of union’s recruiting activity;

¹⁰⁵ A vast literature exists on Walmart’s political economy (R. Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2006; Bonacich and Wilson 2006; C. Durand and Wrigley 2009; Gereffi and Christian 2009; Vidal 2012) and labour (Bonacich and Wilson 2005; A. Brenner, Eidlin, and Candaele 2006; Tilly 2006; Hocquelet 2014). The parallel between the two companies are evident but we do not have the space to develop it here. Other works focused on Walmart conservative corporate culture and its influence on labour practices (Vance and Scott 1992; Moreton 2006; 2007; Lichtenstein 2008).

management started holding mandatory (so-called “captive”) anti-union meetings, during which workers were told that they did not need a union and that they could rely on their relationship with management, without any intermediation. Furthermore, it was usually added, unions would have hampered the self-proclaimed “meritocratic” corporate culture introducing “bureaucratic” rigidities, seniority rules and, on top of that, workers would have been expected to pay the union for this (*The New York Times* 2000a). Finally, the decision to cut employment and shutdown the Seattle’s customer service contributed to thwart the attempt of unionisation the first challenge of US labour movement to the Internet economy. Such a radical response truncated any unionisation attempt for more than a decade in the US.

In December 2013, an US union would make a new attempt, with a very narrow scope, compared to the size reached by the company. The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW), affiliated to the AFL-CIO, filed a union election petition with the National Labor Relations Board on behalf of equipment maintenance and repair technicians working at the year-old Amazon FC in Middletown, Delaware. The workforce involved was narrow: the FC had 1.500 permanent employees, but the union petition concerned only 30 technicians¹⁰⁶. Furthermore, the union initiative was completely isolated from the rest of Amazon’s network. Only the latter were eligible to vote and, in case the union won, to be represented by the union. Eventually, in January 2014, the vote occurred but the union bid failed 21-6. IAMAW officials pointed at “intense pressures” from Amazon, which fought the unionisation efforts. Amazon rejoiced: “our employees have made it clear that they prefer a direct connection with Amazon” (*The Seattle Times* 2014; *Time* 2014). In its US stronghold, Amazon seemed to have full political control in the warehouses. By 2020, unions were absent from all Amazon’s workplaces in the US – apart from exceptional cases of unofficial workers’ self-organisation, dispersed in the US territory from Chicago to Sacramento (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2021; S. Cox 2022). The unionisation of Amazon’s workers in Staten Island broke Amazon’s resistance for the first time. Amazon’s anti-union practices almost suffocated unionising attempt. However, a few months later, by mobilising the same hard repertoire in a more favourable context in Alabama, Amazon thwarted another unionising attempt (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2021; McAlevev 2021; T. L. Lee et al. 2022). The Staten Island FC remains today the only unionised Amazon workplace in the US, thus confirming the inhospitality of this terrain to unions initiatives. A different context, more favourable to union action exists in Europe, especially in France and Italy, but also in Germany, and in chapters 6 and 7 I will show the specific strategies that Amazon adopts to demobilise workers’ collective action.

In France, veteran workers reported that at the very beginning employment relations developed without any union intermediation. An interviewed worker who later became union representative for the CFDT declared that “There were no trade unions, but it was very close to the employees, in terms of mutual aid” (see Fieldwork Quote 30). The former general manager even stated, with satisfaction of course, that workers *did not wish to have a union representing them*:

¹⁰⁶ Workers sought union representation over grievances about arbitrary job classifications, promotion and vacation policies.

The size of the company meant that it was compulsory to have a union presence. Except that in the warehouse, no one was unionised, and no one wanted to be unionised because the atmosphere was such that there were none with any union skills because, once again, there were a lot of young people and none of them had any affinity with the unions. Nevertheless, unfortunately, we were obliged to have a union presence.

Fieldwork Quote 39 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

This statement, of course, has to be referred to the specific social position of the responder. For instance, no worker among those I interviewed said that they did not want to unionise. But some, included worker that would eventually become CFDT members said that they did not feel such a need at the beginning.

Anyway, as we will see in the next section and, more extensively in Chapter 6, during the first years (2000-2009), Amazon was able to run its warehouse without any significant union interference in the labour process. This despite the fact that in France, the system of worker representation makes it very easy for established unions to enter a workplace.

Formally, unions were set up in the workplace already in 2002 and union-appointed delegates signed collective agreements with management. However, as showed by interviews with veteran workers, union presence went unnoticed in the workplace.

A first explanation of this were the specific conditions in the labour process. First, the number of employees was low enough to allow direct personal relations between managers and single workers. Furthermore, the organisation of work was only partially digitalised, and task fragmentation still had not achieved the advanced levels of the future years. As we saw, working condition were defined by interviewed worker as not hard as they would become later, and management expressed the same consideration. On top of that, workers that I interviewed reported that they enjoyed working in a company that portrayed itself as the avant-garde of the new economy and that seemed to offer them possibilities of professional growth. In general, interviewed workers did not criticised working conditions at Amazon during in this early period. However, we can make the hypothesis that if they were there, these discontent workers had left the company instead of promoting collective action¹⁰⁷. Borrowing from Hirschman, we could say that workers were more likely to opt for *exit* than for *voice* (Hirschman 1970)¹⁰⁸. To sum up, there were local conditions that prevented Amazon workers to form

¹⁰⁷ We will see in Chapter 5 that in the second phase, Amazon would promote worker turnover by means of a bonus given to workers who, after the holiday season decided to quit the company. This plan was called “The Offer” and it had been incorporated from Zappos after its acquisition by Amazon.

¹⁰⁸ I could not find data about turnover during this early period. I asked to management about it, but they reported that turnover in the warehouse was not important enough to justify that it would be even measured (Interview with former General Manager of the Boigny’s site).

unions in the very early years of the company and unions to organise workers in the warehouse. Looking at the external labour market, most of warehouse workers were vulnerable in the labour market and were happy to get a stable job.

For what concerned the internal labour market, it was still underdeveloped but in absence of any significant counterpower represented by unions, management had the last word on promotions and demotions – as it is also the even today, by the way (see Chapters 4 and 5). Thus, vulnerability in the external labour market was augmented with dependence on managerial discretion in the internal labour market. Nonetheless, these subalternity of the workers in front of management generated less feelings of hostility than of trust in the meritocratic spirit of the company. Thanks to the direct and personal relations that management established with single workers, to the system of bonuses and to the concession of small individual and collective privileges, management developed loyalty, discipline, and involvement among employees.

However, these were not the only factors that inhibited unions action in this early phase. In front of an unprecedented scenario, where unions had important institutional resources, at least on paper, Amazon management deployed a sophisticated strategy of compliance and cooptation of unions. The strategy was successful and secured management control not only in the labour process but also on unions.

3.3. *Dealing with labour institutions, between unilateralism and co-optation*

Interviewed veteran workers not only reported no union presence in the workplace during the first years. They also argued, tellingly, that, even without unions, a *modus vivendi* between workers and manager had been found in the daily life of the warehouse. The proof was that, they reported, an “agreement” had been signed. The agreement involved management and worker elected representatives, but no union. The interviewed workers stressed it with a certain irony:

Worker 2: In the end, it was a profit-sharing agreement without a trade union! There weren't any unions, frankly. So, in the end, sometimes even without unions...

Worker 1: And yeah!

Worker 2: With small companies that didn't have unions, things still worked! So they decided to introduce the four criteria.

Fieldwork Quote 40 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

The workers added that the “agreement” was periodically re-discussed between management and worker elected delegates. In fact, the “agreement” was not a formal deal stroke between

management and unions, but the adaptation at the local level of an international decision of the US management:

Manager: In fact, we had introduced a bonus system linked to performance, or productivity: it was safety-productivity-quality, so to speak.

Author: This was not an agreement. So, it was unilateral, right?

Manager: Yes, it wasn't an agreement. Yes, it was something else. It was called the Performance Reward Program, PRP, which was global throughout the world. It was one of the little variable bonuses that had been implemented to encourage people to deliver high performance. So, there was safety, there was productivity, there was quality, and maybe there was cost as well. I can't remember... there were four things, it seems to me. But in any case, yes, that was measured in terms of... So, we had lots of models because depending on the country [...] it was adapted in each country, but the program, you could say, existed everywhere. Then there were small adaptations. Some country for instance only had global objectives because individualisation was forbidden. [...] And in France too, but that was... Yes, you could say that it was a sort of "*prime d'intéressement*", but it was Amazon, really Amazon who decided that... performance bonus.

Fieldwork Quote 41 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

The decision to introduce this bonus was then unilateral, since Amazon in that period applied this program in every country. The program was the result of a unilateral and top-down concession. However, the programme had to be adapted to the French legal framework. In France, labour law already provided models frameworks for such a programme, so, the managers explain, the company adopted that framework. French law required that the parameters of the bonus and the targets were discussed with "worker representatives", whether elected by the employees or appointed by the unions. The site general manager of that period, however, stressed that the decision to introduce such a bonus was not taken at the French level, but it was part of a global corporate programme:

Author: And was this [the bonus programme] discussed with the staff representatives?

Manager: Yes, of course, it was part of the compensation package. But it's a program that Amazon implemented on its own in, it wasn't the employees who asked for it [...] and we adapted it to the French method, so that it would fit into a framework, and obviously one of the things we absolutely had to do was discuss it with the worker representatives, who obviously weren't going to be dumb by definition, given that we were adding money to their base salary.

Fieldwork Quote 42 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

It is not clear, whether, apart from "discussing" with the worker elected representatives, management was also open to workers requests (the manager merely talked about "discussing", not

“negotiating” or “bargaining”). Nor, at that point of the interview, it was clear who were the “worker representatives” mentioned by the manager and whether they were actually able to formulate a collective request, since this required a minimum level of collective organisation that was likely to be still absent in the workplace. Were they union delegates appointed by unions considered “representatives” by the workers? Were they just elected representatives with no union affiliation? Were they able to coordinate and represent workers’ interests?

In fact, despite both veteran workers and the former general manager seem to deny or, at least, minimise the existence of any union and collective agreement, we can argue with a certain confidence that a union existed already by 2002 and that it had signed a collective agreement at the plant level. In fact, according to the French law, an “*intéressement*” bonus can be introduced unilaterally by the employer only in firms with less than 50 employees, otherwise it must be negotiated by either worker representatives or union delegates appointed by the major unions (see Box 5). Now, we know that after one year of operations, the French subsidiary had already exceeded the threshold of 50 employees, and this is indirectly confirmed by the manager, who mentioned the presence of representatives. This implies in turn that the bonus was actually and formally enforced through a collective agreement with some worker representative, despite the manager seems to minimise the involvement of worker representatives (who, we will figure out later, were in fact delegates appointed by the union). After I made this point, the general manager admitted it:

It became an agreement eventually with the employees. But it wasn’t something that was ratified. Yes, it became an agreement because we could change it at any time, obviously. But it was... We present it, we say, “We’re going to draw up a new remuneration plan, bonus, performance bonus that you’re going to receive, here are the conditions”. Tacitly, for in the corporate world it works like that, it became an agreement, but a very local one. If you give something... It’s hard to withdraw it afterwards, obviously.

Fieldwork Quote 43 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

The global corporate programme of Amazon had been established at the transnational level, but its application had to respect the local rules, namely the involvement of worker representatives appointed by a union. There was also a material incentive for Amazon to comply with this rule, since tax break were awarded to employers who set up bonuses through collective agreements.

In sum, in this start-up phase, management deployed a set of employment practices aiming at fostering worker commitment in the labour process and to mobilise them as loyal members of the company. These practices were in part symbolic, such as games and direct relations with management, but also tangible, such as performance bonuses. This system of symbolic and economic remuneration seems to exclude, at least in the eyes of both workers and managers, any role for the

unions. In fact, despite interviewees largely omitted it (at least at the beginning), progressively many traces started leading to another reality, namely that unions and collective bargaining existed in Amazon's French workplace since the beginning. The bonus program based on performance, for instance, was a global program conceived by Amazon, but Amazon had to adapt it to the local specificities of the French context and law. French law required to negotiate it with some forms of worker representation which could be either elected or appointed by unions. We will see not only that both options occurred, but also that they occurred with the approval of management. Management did not limit itself to suffer from union presence but tried to master it. In the next section we will see, management was able to control unions and collective bargaining in a very craftly way.

3.3.1. *Adapting HR practices to French collective bargaining*

Besides the obscuring of union presence and collective bargaining, I progressively found evidence of the existence of collective bargaining activity between management and worker representatives, elected or appointed by unions, at least since early 2002. During my fieldwork, a former union delegate at the Orleans-Saran FC gave me access to his personal archives of establishment and company-level agreements, signed between management and worker representatives and that were still in force in by 2018¹⁰⁹. The archive was a digital folder named "agreement currently in force" (*accords en cours*) and contained 19 collective agreements (whose 3 "projects of agreement", not clear whether they were signed) and amendments (*avenants*); the dates of signature cover a period from January 2002 to June 2017. For what concerns the first phase of Amazon France (2000-2009), three agreements and two *avenants* were signed, between January 2002 and September 2004.

The evidence of a certain bargaining activity between Amazon and worker representatives is surprising for one main reason: Amazon's corporate ideology that infused the way how the company conceived of its labour relations. Yet, this is not the only surprising element. Some agreements were signed by union representatives since the end of 2002. This is surprising precisely, because union presence was not initially mentioned by interviewed veteran workers (while management eventually admitted it). Does this mean that workers consciously omitted such information? Or that, rather than an omission, workers did not consider such a presence relevant or comparable to the subsequent union activity?

Before answering this questions, let's describe the agreements contained in the archive. The first one was signed in January 2002. The document is 7 pages-long (for 11 articles), and the headline

¹⁰⁹ In fact, company-level agreements are usually classified and available on a public database. However, the accords concerning Amazon France Logistique, the French Amazon subsidiary in charge of FC operations, do not include the early ones signed before 2018.

states the object of bargaining: “agreement on work time reduction” (*Accord sur la réduction du temps de travail*). It reports also other key information about names and the office of the signatories and the purpose of the agreement. Signatories were two: on the one hand, the site’s HR director (representing Amazon’s French subsidiary); on the other hand, “the CGC union, represented by O.M., [a manager-]employee duly appointed for the negotiation and signature of this agreement” (‘Accord Sur La Réduction Du Temps de Travail’ 2002). The preamble explains that the purpose of the agreement is to:

establish new modes of work organisation by decreasing the effective work time of its managers [*cadres*].

[...]

- to improve the work-life balance of managers,
- to significantly decrease the number of days worked during the year and the weekly work time, as showed by the recruitment, in force since January 2002, of a third manager for operations,
- to organise such reduction of work time so as not to undermine the competitiveness of the company in front of its rivals.

Furthermore, the preamble circumscribes the perimeter of application to a specific profession i.e., managers:

Indeed, since the creation of the company, all non-manager workers [*non-cadres*] have been employed under contract establishing a weekly work time of 35 hours, therefore they are not affected by this agreement.

It is precisely this limitation that explains the presence of the CGC as signatory union. CGC (CFE-CGC since 1981) is a professional union created in 1944 that has its constituency in a variegated group of “intermediate” professions (mostly, but not only, *cadres*) including executive employees, supervisors, engineers, technicians etc.¹¹⁰. The CFE-CGC has traditionally embraced a moderate political stance, defending clerical professions from the pressures of blue-collar workers and promoting a unionism centred on “proposition” rather than conflict and on the defence of a specific professional group (however more heterogeneous than conventionally considered). By 2000, however, the CFE-CGC had by no means the monopoly of representation of clerical workers. Surveys run by the CEVIPOF reported that *cadres* had significantly increased their trust in trade unions

¹¹⁰ For the historically important role it has played in the history of the French system of industrial relations, the CFE-CGC is a specificity of the French trade union movement. For an overview of the organisational dilemmas of the CFE-CGC see, Béthoux et al. 2011; 2013.

(Rouban 2001); at the same time, other unions, especially the CFDT but also the CGT, had made inroads into this category, increasing their score at the professional elections.

	1982	1987	1992	1997	2002	2008
CFE-CGC	41,4%	29,5%	27,2%	21,9%	22,8%	27,8%
CFDT	17,5%	21,3%	23,5%	31,5%	28,6%	22,9%
CGT	13%	14,6%	14%	16,2%	15,8%	16,9%

Table 7 – Nationwide electoral results (élections prud'hommales) for the management and supervising occupations (1979-2008); % of expressed votes (Béthoux et al. 2011)

Notwithstanding these changes, it was probably for this reputation – an exclusive focus on *encadrement* and a quite pro-employer stance¹¹¹ – that the CFE-CGC was selected as a representative of the site’s managers. It is not clear whether at that time the CGC was the only union present in the workplace (provided that by “presence” here is intended a broad spectre of possibilities). The fact that the agreement concerned only managers, does not allow us to exclude that other unions had already intervened into some negotiation.

The hypothesis of the involvement of other unions is confirmed when looking at the following agreements. In May 2001, another deal was stroke by Amazon France Logistique (again represented by the HR director of Boigny’s site) and a delegation of workers members of the establishment’s *Comité d’entreprise* (‘Accord de Participation’ 2002). The delegation was composed by two employees representing blue-collar (*ouvriers*) and white-collar (*employés*) employees (*membres titulaires du premier college*), and one representative of managers and supervisors (*membres titulaires du second college*). They signed a “profit-sharing agreement” (*accord de participation*) i.e., a deal made in conformity with labour law (according to which companies with more than fifty employees were expected to share part of the profits with their own employees). We understand from this agreement that, by May 2002, a *Comité d’entreprise* had been elected at the establishment-level.

Box 4 – Employee profit sharing in French labour politics: participation and intéressement

Employee profit-sharing is a legal mechanism designed to associate the company's employees with its growth through bonuses that are frozen for 5 years and calculated on the basis of a formula combining several parameters, including the company's financial results, the amount of its equity capital and added value. Profit-sharing is compulsory in companies or economic and social units (UES) with at least fifty

¹¹¹ Indeed, such a stance would change through time. In the 2010s, the CFE-CGC would undergo a political turn versus a more oppositional style of unionism.

employees. All employees are eligible for profit-sharing, including apprentices and employees posted abroad. Company directors and managers are also eligible for profit-sharing in certain cases. Firms with fewer than 50 employees may voluntarily join the profit-sharing scheme. However, an agreement is required. France is an exception in the world for having made profit-sharing compulsory (Noël-Lemaître 2016; Aubert and Clerbois 2021).

Participation, or *l'association capital-travail*, is an ambiguous notion historically associated with the broad “Gaullist” coalition and to left-wing Gaullists such as René Capitant and Louis Vallon (Le Van-Lemesle 1990). Under these terms, these figures promoted to associate labour and capital in such a way to make any difference of class interest disappear. Participation could be reached by three forms or stages: a share in the profits generated by the firm; a share in the capital of that firm; a share in the management of the firm. The underlying goal of such a societal design was to incorporate the workers into the firm and to cut off workers from labour organisations outside: “there was no tole for trade unions in participation or, more accurately, no role for trade unions in the normal sense of their purpose” (Howell 1992, 75). *Intéressement*, which we saw above as the frame for the establishment of Amazon’s PRP program was a typical product of the crisis of the Fordist wage-setting (Coutrot 1992), a scheme designed to improve labour productivity while providing employers with greater pay flexibility (Delahaie and Duhautois 2013). It consists of an additional remuneration to employees based on the achievement of performance targets, which may be defined at company level or within one of its establishments or work units. The calculation may be based on results from previous years' operating accounts (e.g. pre-tax profit on ordinary activities, gross operating surplus, sales) and also on operational performance (e.g. productivity, parts manufactured without defect, waste, returns, quality targets). Incentive payments may be conditional on the achievement of targets (e.g. percentage growth in an indicator) or on exceeding trigger thresholds (e.g. if the indicator exceeds a certain level). As stressed also by the managerial literature, “the discretion that companies have in defining the criteria of the agreement makes profit-sharing a genuine performance management tool” (Aubert and Clerbois 2021, 17).

The collective contract that established the *participation* at Amazon had a simple structure (12 articles, 7 pages) and the formula for the calculation was the standard one defined by law, so it was based on the profits of the employer. It goes without saying that only the profits of Amazon.Fr Logistique (the name of Amazon subsidiary which employed the workforce and run the FCs in France) were considered, and not those of the whole group (which, in addition, had not stopped to record losses by that time). So, the overall amount of the *participation* was not particularly high. In sum, the agreement was done more in compliance with French labour law rather than in a spontaneous initiative of the company, given the small amount distributed to the workers. After all, since the beginning of its activities in France, Amazon has distributed restricted stock units to its employees (two years of seniority to get them, and two more years to vest). This, combined with the fact that the organisational structure was still relatively simple, explains the standardised form of the agreement. The agreement had an undefined term, but it would be amended three times (by the end of 2017): one

in September 2002, in order to add some marginal clauses; two more times, in September 2004 and April 2010, in order to comply with further minor legislative changes.

The third agreement signed in 2002 that I found in the archive was reached in October and it concerned the “modulation of work time” (‘*Accord de Modulation Du Temps de Travail*’ 2002). The accord is directly linked to the recent “35-hours” reform that the French left-wing government had carried on between 1998 and 2000. As established by the reform, companies with more than 50 employees like Amazon had the possibility to negotiate work time reduction with union delegates or worker representatives in exchange for fiscal and social security advantages (see Coutrot 1999; Bloch-London 2000; Péliisse 2000; Bloch-London and Coutrot 2001; Bloch-London and Péliisse 2008). The text contains 10 articles and is 6 pages long. It is signed by the HR director, as a representative of the company, and three members of the *works council* (two of them are the same of the previous agreement, while one member is replaced by another, perhaps a deputy member).

There are two interesting points to stress. The first refers to the content of the agreement. The first article (*Données économiques et sociales justifiant le recours à la modulation*) explains the economic conditions in which the company operates that justified the *modulation* of work time:

- To take into account variations of activity linked to the kind of distributed products
- To meet, in accordance with our engagements, the expectations of our customers
(compliance with delivery schedule)
- To keep the company competitive in front of its competitive environment
- To keep the workforce available in periods of intense activity
- To avoid excessive use of overtime work
- To avoid the use of redundancy schemes during low activity
- To avoid as much as possible greater use of temporary work
- To preserve the stability of remuneration, whatever the actual work time of every period

Signatory parties agreed on establishing a system for the modulation of work time, in compliance with the article L.212-8 of the Labour Code

This introduction presents in a synthetic way some of the main characteristics of Amazon logistics operation: the company had a seasonal activity, that management attributed to the “kind of distributed products” (something that is equally stressed in Amazon.com Inc.’s annual reports); this seasonality “forced” the company to increase flexibility in the use of the workforce, in order to maintain its competitiveness and satisfy its customers; without such an adjustment to market fluctuation, the company would rather lay off workers during activity decrease and hire temporary workers during peaks.

The seasonality of sales cycles was a specific economic strategy typical of the mass retail sector inherited and magnified by the e-commerce. Amazon, in particular, fostered such a cyclical mode of functioning precisely in order to control demands. Thus, not only Amazon deployed its special promotions as any other retailer (Christmas Holidays, the Black Friday), but would set out new ones such as the Prime Day, an annual event introduced in summer 2015 during which Prime subscribers have exclusive access to a number of sales and promotions on Amazon's website.

In Amazon's official discourse such strategy was presented as an intrinsic property of the market. Given such a spontaneous arrangement of the market, the only option for workers was to adjust to the need of customers. In the specific case of the 2002 agreement on work time modulation, the company obtained flexibility in the form of the *annualisation* of work time duration (Art. 3.2). Given such annualization, the weekly work time could vary within the following limits (Art. 3.4):

- Minimum weekly work time during low regime activity is set at 28 hours of actual work [*travail effectif*], spread over 4 days
- Maximal weekly work time during low regime activity is set at 45 hours of actual work [*travail effectif*], spread over 4 days
- [work time duration] cannot exceed 44 hours over a period of 12 consecutive weeks
- [work time duration] cannot exceed 10 hours of actual work [*travail effectif*] during the same work day
- Respect of daily rest for at least eleven hours in a row.

Once set up these limits, art. 4.1 presents the planning of modulation for the year 2002-2003. During Christmas Holidays, when the company planned a cyclical surge in operation, work time would stretch:

- During the months of November/December 2002, there will be three weeks of high activity, from week 49 to week 51, with a peak of 42 hours per week.

Instead, in the following Spring, when the company usually programmed a decrease in operations, work time would shrink:

- During the months of March and April 2003, there will be 6 weeks of low activity, with a minimum duration of 28 hours, from week 10 to week 15.

Furthermore, Art. 7 gave the company more flexibility, by allowing management, "in case of exceptional increase of orders", to adjust the schedule of modulation. The modification could take place before 7 workdays or even before less than 7 days; in this second configuration the company

would owe employees with an extra pay rate for overtime (*heures complémentaires* or *heures supplémentaires*) as provided by the law. However, with art. 5.2 the parties agreed that the payment of overtime extra-rate would be “replaced by an equivalent time of rest”. It was also stated that in case of non-remunerated absence, the annual remuneration would be cut in proportion to the number of hours of absence and in relation with the monthly work time duration.

The agreement regulated not only the impact of work time modulation on remuneration but also the organisation of paid day offs: at art. 9, the parties agreed that “*except for individual cases* [emphasis is ours], paid day offs would have to be taken out of the period of high activity”. In other words, not only workers, through their representatives, renounced to take day offs during the peak of activity, but bargaining on “exceptional cases” was individualised and management obtained significant in conceding or denying day offs during the frenetic period of Christmas Holidays.

Considered globally, the agreement opened margins of flexibility and discretion to the company in setting work schedule according to its economic needs. On top of that, the company was able to spread the calculation of work time over the year and to convert extra-time work with day offs instead of wage augmentations. Furthermore, even if the preamble reported the will of the parties to contain the use of agency staff, the following years would show that the accord did not prevent Amazon France from make a massive use of temp workers during the peak of activities.

The second relevant aspect of this agreement concerns the signatory parties of the accord. On the one hand, as usual, the company was represented by the HR director of the site. On the other hand, workers were represented not only by the elected members of the works council (*comité d’entreprise*), as in the previous agreement. In this case, one of them was also a *délégué syndical*, a worker appointed by a representative union and mandated to sign an agreement.

3.3.2. *Selecting and coopting unions in the start-up labour regime*

The analysis of collective bargaining in this early phase suggests that not only management accepted to introduce its HR practices via collective bargain, but also that it did so by actively involving unions. We will see however that this involvement turned out to be rather formal than substantial.

Box 5 – Forms of firm-level worker representation in France in the early 2000s

Firm-level institutions of worker representation have been historically subordinated to extensive state regulation and of secondary importance in the determination of pay and work organization compared to what was established by labour law and by sector-level collective bargaining (Howell 2009; Bevort and Jobert 2011; Rehfeldt 2018). Unions had a central role sanctioned by different legislative interventions

(1936, 1950, 1968), which built the system around the notion of “*les organisations syndicales les plus représentatives*” which included CGT, CFTC, CFDT, FO and CGC (Béroud and Yon 2011).

The corollary of this approach was the introduction by law, in 1968, of the union section (*section syndicale*) and of the union delegate (*délégué syndicale*, DS) as the legitimate representative of the unions in the workplace and the only figure with the power to negotiate and sign collective agreements¹¹². In companies with at least two establishments of at least 50 employees each, the law allows each representative trade union in the company to appoint a central union delegate (*Délégué syndical central*, DSC)¹¹³. The role of the union delegate is to represent the union in dealings with the employer (C. trav., art. L. 2143-3). It is through him or her that the union makes its claims, demands, positions and proposals known to the employer. It is the union's natural point of contact, particularly for negotiating company agreements. It is the union delegate's duty to defend the interests of employees, and of the profession in general. In this capacity, he presents the demands, objections and wishes of employees. The DSC is the de facto leader of his/her union within a company, namely in the central work council.

However, the legislators also established forms of worker representation directly emanating from the workforce without the union intermediation: the “worker delegate” (*délégué du personnel*, DP) and the *comité d'entreprise/comité d'établissement* (CE), established by law respectively in 1936 and 1945. The system of representation thus took a dual shape (Béroud and Yon 2011; Bevort 2011). In companies with multiple workplaces, a “Central works council” (*Comité centrale d'entreprise*) could be constituted and the unions could appoint “Central union delegates” (*Délégué syndical central*). As emphasised by Batstone, the main role of plant- and central-level works councils “was the provision of a platform where management and unions could declare their broader philosophies and positions with minimal impact upon the actual course of events within the company” (Batstone 1978, 80).

The compromise between these two opposite logics – bodies elected by workers vs bodies appointed by unions was the modality of election of the DP and the CE. Until 2008, DP and CE were elected for a period of four years¹¹⁴ on the basis of lists presented by the unions which were present at the workplace (every “representative” union had the right to open a section provided that they had two members among the workers). If the participation rate at the elections remained under the bar of 50% (or if no union was present at the workplace), then a second round was organised where also non-unionists (*candidatures libres*) could be presented. DP election was compulsory in every workplace with at least 11 employees, while CE election had to be organised beyond the threshold of 50 employees. The competence of the DP and CE were different. DP were entitled to present individual or collective grievances about working conditions and the respect of legal and conventional (i.e., established at the branch collective contract, called *convention collective*). CE, as I anticipated earlier (see Box 4), were elaborated at the intersection of

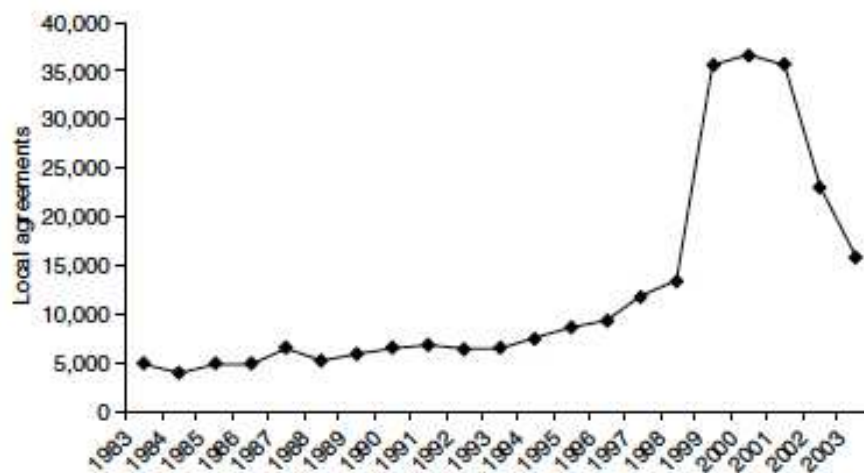
¹¹² To be valid, an agreement must be signed by unions which represent individually or together at least 30 per cent of the workforce and must not be opposed by unions that represent more than 50 per cent. In practice, workplace agreements are generally signed jointly by all the unions that are present at the workplace. A non-representative union is not allowed to participate in workplace bargaining but can appoint a representative of the trade union section that has significantly fewer rights and resources (Rehfeldt 2018).

¹¹³ The union must have received at least 10% of the votes cast in the 1st round of the most recent elections for CSE members, whatever the number of voters, by adding together the votes from all the establishments included in these companies. The union must be representative throughout the company.

¹¹⁴ Until 1993, DP and CE were elected every year. In 1993 the term was extended to two years and, in 2005, to four years (Jacod 2008; Bloch-London and Péglise 2008).

two models – a participatory approach and a worker control approach (Le Crom 2003) – but given employers’ opposition to any co-determination experiment, they had solely information and consultation rights. DP and CE used to meet monthly with employers and management to discuss issue related to work but also to stage a confrontation between the parties (Batstone 1978; Khalidi 2011).

Starting from the 1980s the French system underwent a process of state-led decentralisation, with firm-level institutions acquiring increasing importance and autonomy in labour regulation (Lallement 2006; Bloch-London and Pélisse 2008; Howell 2009). This gave new impetus to firm-level bargaining, which grew steadily through the 1980s and underwent a peak at the turn of the millennium, with the massive diffusion of negotiations to introduce the 35-hours working week (Figure 38).



Source: Ministry of Employment.

Figure 38 – Collective bargaining at the firm level

(Lallement 2006, 58)

As a consequence of firm-level decentralisation, the CEs increased their importance in collective bargaining: on the one hand, they were allowed to sign agreements on profit sharing and, in absence of DS, on any other topics¹¹⁵; on the other hand, developed their traditional competencies on “socio-cultural activities” (distribution of gift cards, organisation of leisure events and holidays, management of the company’s canteen) and autonomously managed a budget paid by the employer, equivalent to 0,2% of gross salaries. Since 1982 another institution was introduced (from the merger of two pre-existing ones), the health and safety committee (*Comité d’hygiène et sécurité des conditions de travail*, CHSCT), mandatory in workplaces with 50 and more employees. The CHSCT was chaired by the employer (like the CE) and was composed by representatives elected by the CE and DP members. The CHSCT was vested of information and consultation rights, included the right to take legal action, to launch inquiries on accidents and safety risks, and to appoint experts in the investigation. In 1993, a reform made possible, in small companies, to merge DP, the CE and the CHSCT into a unique worker delegation (*Délégation unique du*

¹¹⁵ Scholars stressed that in practice, the employers often reached informal agreements with works councils that were very close to formal ones and were recognized *ex post* by courts as unilateral decisions of the employers (Rehfeldt 2018; see also, Bloch-London and Pélisse 2008).

personnel, DU), either on initiative of the employer or on the basis of an agreement with the majority of unions.

These three pillars of worker representation in French firms remained substantially the same throughout the 90s, and the 2000s. Since the late 2000s, two important reforms reshaped its functioning. The first was the “Law on the renovation of social dialogue” (2008), transposing a previous agreement between the main trade unions (CGT, CFDT) and employer associations (MEDEF, CGPME). The law put an end to the principle of irrefutable presumption of representativeness: from then on, in order to have the right to appoint a trade union delegate (DS) and to negotiate with the employer, a trade union section should have obtained a minimum of 10% of the votes cast in the elections to the works council or establishment (CE). Trade unions failing to reach the representativeness threshold in a company could nevertheless establish themselves there, but without taking part in negotiations, by means of the new trade union section representative (*Représentant de section syndicale*, RSS) mandate (Yon and Bérout 2013; Rehfeldt 2018). The second intervention was President Macron’s labour reforms, five ordinances passed into law in December 2017. Among other things, the reform replaced these three institutions with a single entity, the social and economic committee (CSE, *Comité social et économique*). CHSCT functions are now incorporated into the CSE, resulting in a reduction of organisational resources for worker representatives (Pélisse and Wolmark 2021; Contrepois 2022; Delahaie and Fretel 2022).

The delegates that signed the early collective agreements at Amazon were appointed by two unions: FO (officially CGT-FO) and CFE-CGC. What do we know about the bargaining process that led to these three establishment-level collective agreements and to the direct involvement of these two unions? How is that possible that a company so hostile toward worker representation and collective bargaining could so blatantly transgress its norms? Agreements suggested that a formal union presence was established, but what actual form did it take?

We shall preliminarily notice that neither CFE-CGC nor FO make a special attempt to unionise Amazon workforce. On the contrary, differently from unions such as CFDT and SUD, which had been the most innovative in the union landscape during the 1990s, FO and CFE-CGC were among the unions that made less attempts to renovate their forms of action. Therefore, they were the least likely to enter a workplace such as Amazon, unless management somehow supported their presence.

In the first place, we should remember that, once attained the threshold of 50 employees, Amazon had the obligation to organise the election of a CE (and of DPs). This was explicitly recognised by local management. French management was aware that margins for the individualised employment relations were much tinier than in the US. Sooner or later, they would have to cope with collective worker representation, declared an executive of Amazon France to the press:

Vincent Marty, Operations Manager at the Orleans site, wants to make a clear distinction with the American situation: “All our employees have permanent contracts, work 35 hours and earn well over the minimum

wage. We're open to dialogue, but we're still too young. Legally, we can wait until a year after the fiftieth employee has been taken on to set up a works council". In the meantime, it's time for "individual negotiations" between management and employees.

(*Libération* 2000, my translation).

Second, CFE-CGC and FO, alongside the aforementioned legally "representative" unions, could present its candidate to the CE elections, no matter the effective membership it had in the workplace; for what concern company-level agreement, as we saw (Box 5), only union delegates were allowed to sign collective deals.

The third consideration is that Amazon's management actively steered the process of union involvement, with ruse and ability. The institutional prerogative of "representative" unions does not explain why precisely CFE-CGC and FO, instead of other unions, secured a ticket for bargaining with Amazon. I made the hypothesis that it was not only their institutional prerogatives but also their political orientation that helped these unions.

FO was founded in 1948 as an anti-communist split of the then PCF-dominated CGT. The ideological orientation of FO however has traditionally been heteroclitic and swinging between different poles: on the one hand, the defence of "reformism" and of independence from the political sphere; on the other hand, politicisation of important factions of the union (Trotskyists and even left-wing Gaullists) combined with a confrontational and "bread and butter" stance (Yon 2008; Andolfatto and Labbé 2011). Its general secretaries have usually been members of the Socialist Party (Rehfeldt 2018), but the rank-and-file included anarcho-syndicalists, Trotskyist and Gaullist factions (Bergounioux 1975; Ubbiali 2013; Dreyfus, Gautron, and Robert 2015). Historically stronger in the public sector rather than the private sector, FO remained for a long time a preferential partner of business and governments. In some private firms, especially as mass retail, FO managed to become the dominant union and the favourite partner of management, granting social peace in exchange for organisational resources (for a thick description see, Benquet 2015). However, at the time Amazon arrived in France, FO had given a turn to its policy: the *recentrage* of the CFDT reduced the space for partnership unionism, while the decline of the PCF and the progressive disentanglement of its tight relationship with CGT had opened new possibilities of cooperation between FO and CGT. At the turn of the century, the identity of FO was even more torn between opposition (especially vis-à-vis employers' associations and governments) and cooperation at company-level (Andolfatto 2015). In terms of score at the national professional elections, at the beginning of the 2000s, FO was the third most representative union, with almost 18% (Andolfatto and Labbé 2006).

CFE-CGC was conventionally known as the union representing managers, supervisors and white-collar employees, which are usually the stratum of the workforce more likely to find

compromise with the company. This helps us explain why the first agreement signed with a union concerned *cadre*'s work time and why CFE-CGC was involved. This could be also a way for management to test relationship with a union expected to be more cooperative than others such as the CGT. In terms of contents, the agreement was not an outlier compared to what was usually negotiated in other firms¹¹⁶. Perhaps the only noteworthy provision was the fact that all *cadres* were considered “autonomous” workers and eligible for forfeit work time, something that a labour inspector could have contested; yet the whole agreement represented a slight improvement for cadres' working condition. The second agreement was a different case in point: it was a mandatory agreement and, I remind, labour law established that profit-sharing was a matter of negotiation with the *comité d'entreprise*, so there was no need to involve unions. In the case of the third agreement, conversely, labour law did not force Amazon to negotiate on work time modulation. It was management to decide to open negotiation, on a topic on which union delegates were, by law, the only worker representative allowed to bargain and sign agreements.

Why FO was the only union that took part to the negotiations? Was it the only union that had some form of presence among workers (and not among *cadres*, like CFE-CGC)? During interviews, veteran workers told me that during the first years, professional elections took place without union candidates:

Worker 1: So the first professional elections took place without a trade union, right? So it was the employees who stood for election. I'm not going to tell you how many people were elected because I won't be...

Worker 2: Nominations are open.

Worker 1: It organised the elections and everything, and honestly, I don't want to talk rubbish... at that time, there was no...

Worker 2: The site opened in 2000... so the first elections must have taken place in 2001-2002, if I remember correctly?

Fieldwork Quote 44 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

However, they added, some of the candidates were in fact “covered” members of FO:

Worker 1: And at the beginning, at the beginning, he didn't come out. The person didn't come out.

Worker 2: He was elected, but nobody knew if...

Author: Didn't anybody know he was a member of the FO union?

Worker 2: At the beginning, nobody.

¹¹⁶ For instance, the definition of *travail effectif* used in the agreement incorporates the one established by an amendment to the Aubry I Law (for the definition see, Bloch-London 2000).

Fieldwork Quote 45 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORYI, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

It was later, once elected, that one of the members of the CE came out about its union affiliation, reported interviewed workers. I insisted with my questions, until one of the workers revealed:

Worker 1: Listen, this was something... weird! [Worker 2 bursts into laughter very loudly in the middle of the bar where we are sitting and she continues for almost thirty seconds, while Worker 1 tries to stay calm and explain to me]. I'm telling you, it's stupid, I think what happened was that everyone let himself push around... they [the management] told him [the worker representative and then appointed by FO union as a DS] "sign this [a collective agreement], we'll keep it simple".

Author: And why did he want to sign this agreement?

[the other worker suddenly stops laughing and responds] Because that's what it was at the time... and then the guy, to be honest, he got a promotion [she starts laughing]

Author: And why did the union want to make a deal?

Because it was much more interesting. It gave them a lot of weight; the company was starting to grow.

Fieldwork Quote 46 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORYI, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

What happened was very common in French firms: elected workers representatives are appointed by a nationally representative union, with the consent of the employer, in order to sign an agreement whose clauses they do not really care about. The rest of the workers, as admitted by the interviewed ones, "let themselves push around". In their views, the DS appointed by FO was not an example of independence and militancy.

It is possible that this elected member of the CE decided to join FO after the election, in total goodwill; such a behaviour could be part of a strategy of union organising into a new workplace. However, we cannot but ask ourselves what role management played in this "weird" situation, as the interviewed workers defined it. Such a question is even more legitimate if we consider that local management had previous experience in other companies. The site director had worked for years in a major logistics company in the area (see above), and the HR director's previous job was in a French company specialised in the distribution of electrical and plumbing equipment. They were familiar with the French union landscape and they knew how to cope with unions. Someone in the board could have suggested to deal with FO because of its reputation of a reformist union (despite the recent re-orientation of the union).

In fact, it was precisely what happened: management not only accepted to negotiate with unions but *chose* to do it. French law required union presence to negotiate work time flexibility without paying overtime. Furthermore, there were also financial incentives to involve unions. This opening

to unions, however, was not universal. In order to control union involvement, management leveraged on its knowledge of the union landscape to *select* the unions that appeared most “*raisonnables*” (in the words of management). This was a process of co-optation of unions, whose logic and realisation were explicitly illustrated to me by the management of that time:

Well yeah, union presence in France is compulsory, in practice. In fact, [...] *we had to organise it...* I know because I was the one who had to explain to the Americans why it was necessary to have one. It happened back in 2002, because the size of the company meant that it was compulsory to have a union presence. Except that no one in the warehouse was a union member! [...] And so, in fact, we even had to talk to some people and say, “Well, please go on with it, because we need it”. So, it’s true that we sent them to the unions that were the least aggressive, obviously. But we took the employees who had a certain aura with the other employees, who also had a bit of leadership because of their age sometimes, quite simply. I remember T. [the FO union delegate mentioned above], who had experience, who’d already worked for 20 years, who was in maintenance, a great guy, really honest, a tough guy, who didn’t hesitate sometimes to say when things weren’t going well, which was great. So, we said to him, “Well, go and join the union and tell them what you want, you want to join the union so you can be more of a company representative”, because we knew he was a real representative. He was interested in people and he was interested in business. So, we thought that he was perfect... I don’t like trade unions too much either in general, when it’s badly played out. *I like employee representatives, but I don’t like unions* because they’re driven by political union action, whereas Amazon didn’t want any and we were able to avoid it for a while [...] In the US, when I said: “We’re obliged to have unions”, they went crazy because it’s forbidden for Americans. In Amazon’s mind, it was out of the question. Even Amazon finally had unions in the US very late on, not so long ago, but for years they were blacklisted and I can tell you, as a site manager, it was like: “Wait! if you have unions, you haven’t done your job properly”. So clearly, *it was seen as, “if there are trade unions, it’s because there are problems in the organisation of the warehouse. It means management isn’t doing its job”*, whereas we said, “No, in France, with more than 50 employees, there has to be a union representative in the company and so, if we don’t take things in hand, they’re going to send them because they can send them”. So, it was... Explaining this to the Americans. They told: “but we don’t have any unions”. Yes, we replied, but we need to make an exception here.

Fieldwork Quote 47 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023 [author’s emphasis]

This was confirmed by the HR director, who told us that management “kindled” (*susciter*) the “vocation” of one elected worker representative at the works council to join a union (in this case FO) so as to be appointed union delegate and sign the agreement on work time modulation:

Manager: With P.H. [the site manager], we wanted to put agreements in place. We understood that in France, in any case, agreements had to be signed with partners, so we simply... [She smiles]: we inspired vocations, so-to-speak, quite simply.

Author: And then, there were people who were already union members, or not?

Manager: So, I don't know if he [T.F., the worker representative appointed by FO] was a union member... Anyway, here we are. We told the employees that we wanted to sign agreements, but we needed personnel representatives to negotiate with us, to sign the agreements. We called on volunteers, on people, on associates who really wanted to get involved, to sign agreements, quite simply. So yes during that time, I didn't have a trade union [in the workplace].

Fieldwork Quote 48 – Former HR director (2001-2013), ORY1, woman, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

This last sentence puzzled me, because I understood that unions were formally present in the workplace, as FO had signed an important agreement. So, I reminded that to the HR manager, but his answer confirmed the fact that union presence was the result of management initiative and the cooperation of a single worker loyal to manager, and not a compromise with any whatsoever union:

Author: Excuse me, wasn't FO there? They had signed the agreements on modulation, and it was signed by T.F.

Manager: Yes, but it was a vocation that I had inspired.

Author: Can you tell me what you mean by that?

Manager: T.F. agreed to join a union and to sign. He was already a staff representative and a member of the works council. We had discussed this agreement with him, and we wanted to put it in place. We explained at a serious meeting that we couldn't sign if we didn't have a trade union delegate. He offered to do it, he said: "No problem, I want these agreements to be put in place". He simply joined the union, nothing more.

Fieldwork Quote 49 – Former HR director (2001-2013), ORY1, woman, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

The appointment of the worker as a union delegate boiled down to a simple formal procedure. I asked the HR director if the FO union structure at the territorial level (the *Union Departementale*), ever intervened in workplace labour politics and the answer was negative. This explains why the HR manager said that for a while this settlement allowed here *de facto* "not to have unions".

Local management was aware of the legal constraints and that it had to persuade the headquarter in Seattle about the necessity of recognising workers' collective representation, including unions. Local management reassured top management and planned the *co-optation* of certain unions in order to deal with this constraint:

Manager: I was the one who played a role in the other direction by saying "there's no problem, we're not going to be, we're not being invaded by the unions, we just have an obligation and we're going to try to comply with the obligation, so to have some... on paper, but roughly speaking it won't change anything and

we don't have any more risk than that in the end". And also, by explaining that in France we don't have the US systems, where employees have to vote [to let the union in], and so on. Here, they just parachute in a union delegate, it's the union that has the right to decide. All it takes is one employee, any employee can go to a union and say: "I want you to appoint me as a delegate". And it's done: no request, no vote, no nothing. Very different from the US.

Author: So, for example, even if there was a shop steward from a certain organisation, the organisation didn't really interfere, right?

Manager: No, no, because of course we had chosen what union... I think it was the CFDT [here the interviewee is wrong. The "selected" union was FO, not CFDT] from memory... we chose a union organisation which was... we'll call it "reasonable" in fact. In the unions you have everything. You've got the CGT, which is tough, you've got FO... No, not FO... there's SUD which is tough too. FO, it depends, but it can be hard, it depends... FO was variable. And then there was the CFDT and the CFTC. I don't even know if CFTC still exists, you'd have to look, but roughly speaking... the CFDT, if I remember correctly, was more... rather than being very left-wing, communist, etcetera – like the CGT can be – the CFDT was more centre-left as a trade union organisation, so much more into dialogue and not at all into demanding aberrant things, just to prove things, to play the big man or, on the contrary, to send messages to employees saying, "You're striking in your company because we're supporting a national movement" even though your company is doing very well. In other words, they disconnected and dealt with global social issues in companies. And the CGT and SUD were very good at doing this for years to strengthen their union by asking their members "you're going on strike at home because we're opposed to pension reform", for example, whereas there are unions... Well, pensions, all unions got involved, in fact... But, anyway, there were unions that on less controversial subjects were much more... They intervened in the company only when there were real problems, and they came to provide real help to the employees. But they weren't going to make union claims for union claims' sake. Think about those unions which try to involve workers in national or union struggles...

Fieldwork Quote 50 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

This interview quote is an interesting sample of how Amazon's French management perceived French unions. It also shows on the one hand how local management had a better knowledge about the concrete structure and functioning of the union landscape than Amazon's corporate management. Subsidiary management was able to prove to the headquarter that the process of union involvement could be carried out under control. Unions were, therefore, a necessary evil. However, no law bound local management to negotiate working time modulation, a matter that required negotiation with unions. As one of the veteran workers commented:

Worker: In fact, this is something that was done without the employees being informed. See what I'm saying and I think, as the site manager told you, I think they went looking for an employee, perhaps to ask him to sign these agreements.

Author: OK, but the employees They weren't... they weren't aware, right?

Worker: No, most of them weren't.

Fieldwork Quote 51 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2023

Not only most of the workers were excluded by this process of political co-optation of certain unions into the managerial governance of the labour process. The co-opted unions were in turn excluded by substantial decisional power in a crucial arena such as work organisation. This was clear to subsidiary management, and we can imagine that corporate management in Seattle was ready to reiterate it if necessary: Amazon's organisation of work intended as the technical division of tasks and jobs was to be applied without any union interference. As the former site manager put it:

However, we didn't have any say in the actual work tools or the way the processes were carried out. They were implemented. Afterwards, we helped them evolve. We helped because the company was young after all. So, we contributed, but we couldn't do what we wanted in our own corner. [...] The shelves, the way it was worded, the calculations and the processes were all very simple. We had to follow it, and we followed developments like everyone else.

Fieldwork Quote 52 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

In such a context of rigid application of a homogenous organisation of work, space for unions to influence the work process was very narrow, provided that union delegates at that time had the intention to engage with this issue.

On the other hand, striking deals with unions was not a simple matter of compliance with law, because the law in certain case did not strictly require it. What law required was that certain topics, such as work time, had to be discussed with a formal union delegate (see interview with the HR director). Work time was very important, and she needed an agreement: in front of the dilemma between not regulating working time and regulating it at the price of formally recognizing unions, management chose the second option. For a while, management's manoeuvring combined with the relative satisfaction of workers allowed the company to substantially keep unions at bay. In addition, time management took into account also the possible advantages of co-optation in terms of legitimation. More particularly, such a surplus of legitimation was conferred by the fact that union delegates were also workers' elected representatives in the *Comité d'entreprise* and this increased their independence from the unions that had appointed them delegates:

What's more, they held both roles, and that was good because staff representatives are elected by the employees. So, in fact it gave even more legitimacy to these people who were elected by the employees. They also wore union hats, but they were hardly influenced [by the unions, author's note].

Fieldwork Quote 53 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

These worker representatives had a double legitimation, and this gave management wider margins to influence them. All the conditions were in place for Amazon to continue running its operation unilaterally for the years to come. Yet, the structural conditions of this labour regime were slowly changing, and this eventually led to the emergence of a new configuration.

* * *

What can we conclude from this analysis of oral and written sources concerning the first years of Amazon workplace in France? Interviews with senior workers and former managers, who worked and directed the ORY1 site during the first years of Amazon's presence in France, were not always clear and consistent. However, a work of interpretation and comparison with written sources such as collective agreements and press articles, allowed us to clarify many obscure aspects. From this first analysis emerged a reality that had not been examined before.

First, the Amazon global model of labour process was progressively adopted in France. In this initial phase, between 2000 and 2007, operations took place in a small FCs, based in Boigny; the workforce was limited¹¹⁷, and the division of work still under-developed. In such a pre-taylorist context, workers enjoyed a certain latitude in the execution of tasks, which in turn required workers active involvement and commitment to the goals of the company, which was then to consolidate the French base and gradually expand it¹¹⁸. Such a commitment was ensured via symbolic and tangible remunerations, which were directly collected to worker individual and collective performance in the labour process: for instance, individual workers could be rewarded with small symbolic prizes (associate of the week etc.), while the whole team was given a monetary bonus if certain productivity, quality and safety goals were achieved. Finally, a style of management based on the direct relationship between management and workers, contributed to the cohesion of the work teams and to the personal commitment of workers. Of course, this account is drawn on the memories of the interviewed workers (and managers), which were still employed by the company even if they regretted that through time,

¹¹⁷ After an initial growth, it stagnated around 100 employees and then grew again up to 180 in 2007, see next section for complete figures.

¹¹⁸ These goals, we saw, were immediately undersized after the dotcom burst of 2000, which contribute to the stagnation of Amazon expansion in France, along with an unexpected pressure from already-established competitors.

this initial labour regime had faded away. Most of the workforce employed in the initial phase had quitted and it was impossible to get in touch with those who left, which perhaps did not have such a positive image of the workplace. We have already discussed the possible bias of my oral sources, but the combination with other oral sources, namely the managerial ones, and with written sources, allowed us to draw a reliable portrait of the labour regime, based essentially on low technical coercion and active mobilisation of the workforce.

Second, another crucial element was the way how management mastered labour relations in the specificities of the French institutional context. The analysis of Amazon carried out so far (Chapter 1) showed that Amazon was characterised by a strong anti-union attitude to labour relations. In the US and the UK, Amazon had crushed with no mercy any union attempt of organising workers. What happened in a country such as France, where the labour movement had been unravelling for years but that still could rely on a strong level of institutionalisation (mandatory union presence in workplaces over 50 employees, mandatory professional elections, substantive information rights etc.)? It emerged that Amazon not only recognised unions, thereby adapting to the specificities of French industrial relations, but it mastered this process so much to co-opt and domesticate unions during the entire first period, until at least 2007.

The specificity of the French pattern of labour politics emerges even more clearly if we look at what happened in the other European countries where Amazon had settled between 1998 and 2000. In the UK – rather unsurprisingly, given the prompt and radical neoliberal restructuring of industrial relations (Marsh 1992; Howell 2005; Davies and Freedland 2007) – Amazon adopted the same standard anti-union textbook that was deployed in the US (*The Guardian* 2000; *Word-Power* 2004; Boewe and Schulten 2017). Amazon's first FC had been opened in 1998 in Milton Keynes and employed around 500 workers by the end of 2000. During 2000, several workers initially approached a union over poor wages, work intensity and excessive work hours grievances¹¹⁹. In 2001, the union launched an organising drive in the FC, with the aim of unionising at least 10% of the workforce in order to gain union recognition¹²⁰. The union managed in fact to recruit around 100 employees, but Amazon required the GPMU to cease any further organising effort as a condition to engage in negotiations. The union accepted, few meetings took place for two months, but nothing emerged from

¹¹⁹ The union was the British Graphical, Paper, and Media Union (GPMU), whose headquarter was based not so far in Bedford.

¹²⁰ British labour law required for a union who wanted to represent workers in establishment-level collective bargaining to sign an agreement with the employer. If the company did not accept to recognise the union voluntarily, then the union could apply to the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC), the highest-level labour authority, for statutory recognition. One of the conditions, however, was to collect adhesion of at least 10% of the workforce of the bargaining unit. Afterwards, the majority of at least 40% of the employees belonging to such a bargaining unit had to support the union as a representative of the workers (and thereby present any collective demand) either by means of a petition or a ballot (Boewe and Schulten 2017). Compared to the French, the German or the Italian system of union recognition, the British scheme was much closer to the US and restrictive toward unions.

this *drôle de négociation*. Instead, during this truce, management prepared a full-fledged union-busting campaign: a pay increase (fifty pence, over a previous wage of 5 pounds per hour) was given to the employees; some workers that led the discontent employees were promoted; during work briefing, management agitated against the union and anti-union propaganda (posters and baseball caps) was distributed; the canteen of the site was renovated; the union even received declarations on resigning union membership that were written on Amazon letter paper (which turned out to be drawn up by management); in public, the company's spokespersons repeated that Amazon was not anti-union but "pro-customers". The consequences of these tactics were merciless for the union: eventually the ballot took place, with a turnout of 90%, and 80% of the workforce voted against the unionisation. Yes-votes were even fewer than union members. The labour movement never recovered from such a crushing defeat, and a decade would elapse before unions tried a new organising drive.

In Germany, one would expect a different situation, because of the institutional strength of collective bargaining and co-determination (*mit-bestimmung*) (Thelen and Turner 1997; L. Turner 1998; Thelen 2001). As stressed by our German informants¹²¹, between 1998 and 2011 no German union, and especially VERDI, a merger of variegated unions covering the service sector, was interested in unionising the workforce in Amazon¹²². After all, and despite its traditional influence in the economy, the German regulation of labour was not immune from erosion (O. Giraud and Lallement 1998; Hassel 1999; Doellgast and Greer 2007; Baccaro and Benassi 2017). At the same time, German labour law did not provide mandatory union presence in the workplace, like in France, because the system of labour regulation rested more on the autonomy of collective actors (unions and employers' associations) than on the direct intervention of the state. Thus, during the first years, Amazon did not have to deal with unions. Yet, the company had to adapt to a specific constraint of the German system of labour regulation, which did not provide mandatory union presence but did require collective worker representation under the provisions of the codetermination laws¹²³. What

¹²¹ German Amazon workers and rank-and-file union activists that I met during the international meetings of Amazon workers from the US, Germany, France, Poland and Spain..

¹²² Multiple conversations with a German Amazon worker and rank-and-file union militant (2020-2022). For what concern the shortcomings of the strategy of VERDI in Amazon's workplace, Vgontzas writes: "As unions bled members, they have been amalgamating into megaunions, as is the case with Ver.di. Ver.di has the contradictory tendency of decision making being centralized at the highest levels of leadership while its 13 sectoral divisions remain fragmented. As one staffer put it, Ver.di is comprised of 13 "fiefdoms," all of which are vying for money from the top. This produces competition among the sectors and a lack of strategic coordination" (Vgontzas 2020, 122).

¹²³ The German system of co-determination stipulated two distinct levels and forms of employee participation: (1) co-determination at establishment level and (2) codetermination on the supervisory board. The first level was based on the 1952 Works Constitution Act (*Betriebsverfassungsgesetz*) and established the works council (*Betriebsräte*), with far-reaching participation rights in fields such as works rules, working time (including overtime), health and safety, recruitment, transfer and dismissal of individual employees. The second level established elected employee representatives called supervisory board (*Aufsichtsräte*, usually including works council members as well as trade union officials). There were three forms of board-level co-determination; (a) the most extensive form of co-determination, enforced in the coal, iron and steel industry, was based on the 1951 Coal, Iron and Steel Industry Co-determination Act (*Montan-Mitbestimmungsgesetz*) and provided "parity co-determination" (*paritätische Mitbestimmung*) for employee and

was Amazon's attitude toward this institutional constraint? On the one hand, Amazon did not oppose the establishment of certain institutions: management almost immediately accepted the constitution of works councils (*betriebsräte*) in the sites of Bad Hersfeld (opened in 1999)¹²⁴ and Leipzig (opened in 2009)¹²⁵; as stressed by German researchers, “works councils were long [until 2013, *author's note*] seen as a kind of necessary evil for Amazon because there was virtually no way to avoid them” (Boewe and Schulten 2019, 63). On the other hand, the company would fiercely refuse to comply with other requirements that were facultative or ambiguously defined by law. First, the company refused (and still does so today) to apply any collective agreement – namely the commerce sector collective agreement, as demanded by VERDI since 2011 – on the grounds that this was not compulsory and that the company was offering higher wages than those collectively bargained. Second, since the beginning, the company established each individual FCs as formally independent entity or “profit centres” and as a subsidiary of the Luxembourg Amazon EU SARL (a limited liability company). This European parent company was subject to Luxembourg law, which did not provide employee representation at the corporate level. Thus, Amazon avoided the formation of general works councils at the group level, whether in Germany or in Europe at all. Each plant had to reach alone the legal threshold of 500 and then 2.000 employees after which the constitution of a supervisory board, a fundamental *mit-bestimmung* institution, became compulsory. Third, since the 2010s decade, when its workforce had grown beyond 2.000 employees, the company would not accept the constitution of “parity-representation” (*paritätische Mitbestimmung*) supervisory boards (*Aufsichtsräte*), again on the ground of a different interpretation of the threshold count (Boewe and Schulten 2017; Cattero and D’Onofrio 2018a)¹²⁶. In other words, Amazon bought time at risk of infringing the law, but it worked since unions were not able to force the company to comply with their interpretation of the norms, whether by means of strikes or judicial action.

How to explain then the French case in light of this comparison with the contemporary patterns of managerial anti-union action? The first explanation could be found in the provision of labour law. This is also the thesis of management: in France, collective bargaining was mandatory in certain

shareholder representatives on supervisory boards; (b) the 1976 Co-Determination Act (*Mitbestimmungsgesetz*) provides that all standard forms of companies normally employing more than 2.000 employees should have equal numbers of representatives from the employee and the shareholders' side on the supervisory board. However, in the event of a tie, the chair, who was always elected by the shareholders' representatives, had two votes, which means that for all practical purposes the shareholders' side was always over-represented by one vote; (c) the 1952 Works Constitution Act assigned the employee representatives in companies employing between 500 and 1.999 employees with one-third of the seats on the supervisory board (see, Schulten 1998; Teichmann and Monsenepwo 2018).

¹²⁴ Opened in 1999 with 30 employees, by January 2001 the Bad Hersfeld warehouse employed already 420 workers (*Deutschlandfunk* 2001). The German (and the UK) pace of workforce growth was much faster than in France, reflecting a higher level of market penetration.

¹²⁵ Multiple conversations with a German Amazon worker and rank-and-file union militant (2020-2022).

¹²⁶ The controversy was about the count of temporary workers: during peak activity Amazon used to hire hundreds of workers with fixed-term contracts; for VERDI, the base of calculation included permanent and temporary workers; for Amazon, it should only include permanent workers. Eventually, a court would rule in favour of Amazon's interpretation.

conditions (companies with more than 50 employees). However, collective bargaining could be carried on with workers' elected representatives (CE, DP, CHSCT) and not necessarily with union appointed delegates (DS). Thus, one could expect that, where it could, Amazon signed agreements without unions. Interviews with workers that I mentioned before, showed that management indulged to some forms of unilateralism. However, in at least one case, during the first years of activities, the company involved unions in negotiations. On top of that, this decision was taken *despite* the unions were not significantly entrenched in the workplace. This rules out also any explanation based on the substantial constraints represented by union dense membership: Amazon was not forced by law neither by union's substantial power in the workplace.

To understand Amazon's strategy, we need to consider that unions were institutionally strong enough to make their presence practically unavoidable in medium-large workplaces such as Amazon's, and organisationally weak enough in the workplace to let Amazon master labour politics. Given the rules of the game fixed in labour law, it was Amazon interests not to open a useless conflict with the unions, and, as a consequence, with the state authority that provided unions with their legal prerogative nor with the moral authority of common sense. This was particularly true if we consider the broader context of public opinion. Since the beginning, Amazon's arrival in the French economy raised interest but also many critiques and sometimes hostility: publishers, bookstores, writers and civil society activists denounced the risk that Amazon could disrupt the ecosystem of book market and threaten the vested interests of authors, publishers, distributors and bookstores. In such a situation, Amazon was forced to play carefully: avoiding to open conflict with an important sector of the French society as organised labour, despite its symbolic and political decline. In German and the UK instead, the situation was easier for Amazon: the de-structuring of unions rights in the UK emptied unions institutional resources; in Germany, where the institutionalisation of trade unionism is conventionally considered high, labour law left too many loopholes that allowed management to avoid union presence. Furthermore, we can make the hypothesis that the renowned strength of German labour movements, made management even more untrustful toward unions.

There is another key factor that emerged from our analysis of managerial strategies in France: the initiative of local management, and its capacity on the one hand to persuade the HQ and on the other hand to domesticate unions. Amazon had hired local management to run its logistics operation in Orleans. Managers were accustomed to work in an environment inhabited by unions, and they were given a certain margin of manoeuvre in orienting labour relations. Of course, this does not mean that they were supporter of a micro-corporatist approach, intended as the establishment of permanent and constant cooperation between unions and management. After all, French employers and managers were historically hostile to bargain their power in the workplace with unions (Batstone 1978, 74),

while Amazon top management did not delegate them the mandate to discuss the organisation of work with any union. Since the beginning, Amazon local and top management were able to make a compromise enabling the company to adopt an opportunistic strategy. If the law and the social context forced management to open some form of dialogue and cooperation with the *Comité d'entreprise*, then Amazon decided to select and co-opt the unions to legitimise its position in front of the workers and in front of the public opinion. Thus, the first union to be co-opted was CFE-CGC in January 2002: the experimentation was started with supervisors and mid-level management. By the end of the year, collective bargaining was extended to the rest of the employees and to FO. Management was careful not to let other unions to make inroads to protect co-opted unions and avoid outsider unions that could challenge. After all, the French system of industrial relations, with its union pluralism, presented the risk of fierce competition between unions, something that could lead to disorder in the workplace political arena. The CFDT and the CGT, on their part, in spite of having the legal possibility of nominating their delegates in the company, could not find any (or even or did not try to). SUD did not have this privilege, and it is not casual that this union tried to enter the workplace through public action, unsuccessfully. Integrating and selecting unions helped with no doubts to maintain peace. Furthermore, the presence in the workplace should not be particularly tight. In this respect, the former the site management persuaded the top management that unions were not a danger precisely because the union delegates were appointed by the union without an actual support of the workers, and they were unlikely to interfere with the organisation of work. In this respect, local management had correctly read the evolution of French industrial relations, where trade union delegates inside the firm had come to be absorbed by the firm-level representative institutions resulting in a “generalized slippage from collective bargaining toward social dialogue under the control of management” (Pernot and Pignoni 2008, 161; see also Howell 2018).

After all, the co-opted unions could consider themselves satisfied. Symbolically, because a company like Amazon had accepted to recognise unions. From a material point of view because, their “monopoly” on the representation of workers was ensured by management itself and by the fact that workers resistance and horizontal solidarity was not developed enough to attract more unions and/or to spark any labour conflict, as proved by the failure of *Solidaires*.

The form of union representation – with an elected works council that met up regularly – did the rest: it led to the routinisation of bargaining and to the separation of bargaining from the daily life of the workplace. Meanwhile, the structural weakness of unions made very hard that the external unions structure could seriously connect with union delegates in the shopfloor (provided that it was union strategy). This led to the appeasement of any latent conflict and to the domestication of the unions (see, Burawoy 1979a; Penissat 2013; Benquet 2015). For the following years, no major change

ensued in labour politics. In the archive of union agreements, I found the renovation and amendments of agreement on profit sharing in September 2004. No new agreement was found between 2004 and 2007. In spite of this balance in union politics and collective bargaining, things were changing fast at the shopfloor and at the global level. As we are going in the next section, as far as Amazon grew – even if not at an astonishing speed – the Boigny’s site changed: more sophisticated equipment was introduced, digitalisation progressed, the workforce expanded, and its social composition changed as well.

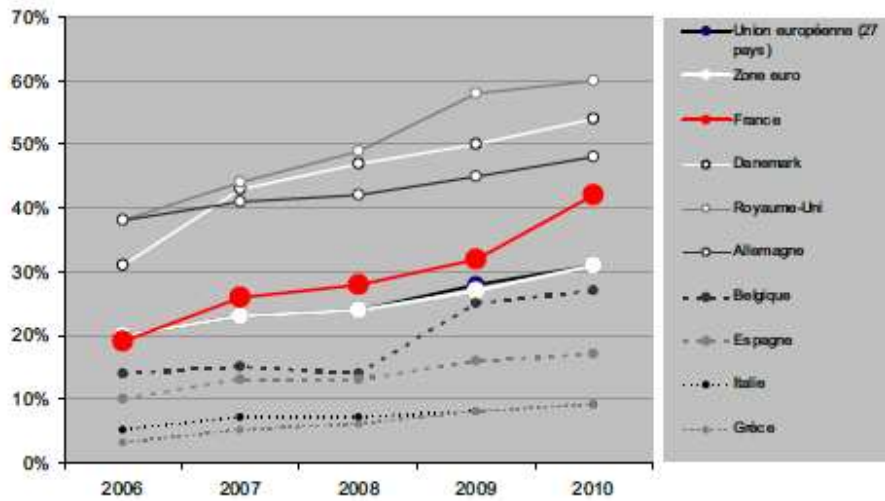
3.4. Crisis and transition from the start-up labour regime

The year 2007 opened a period of transition in Amazon France’s labour regime. The transition started with the acceleration of growth and change in the labour process. Amazon opened a new larger warehouse where it established a fully taylorised and digitalised organisation of work. Meanwhile, the workforce expanded, and the number of temporary workers skyrocketed. This quantitative and qualitative change in the workplace was mostly pushed from Amazon’s headquarter (within a global process of centralisation) and undermined the equilibrium that local management had been able to secure. One of the pillars of the start-up labour regime had been not only the direct relations with the workers and their involvement at work, but also the neutralisation of union representative. This started change since 2007, with gradual turnover in union membership and leadership, however it did not produce significant results until 2013. That year, a strike in Amazon’s warehouses would mark a turning point and the definitive transition to a new labour regime, algorithmic bureaucracy.

3.4.1. Commercial expansion

Since 2006 e-commerce sales in France began to accelerate. According to Eurostat, between 2007 and 2010 get closer to the group of European countries with the highest proportion of individuals responding that they had purchased online over the previous three months.

**PROPORTION DE PARTICULIERS AYANT EFFECTUÉ UNE COMMANDE
SUR INTERNET AU COURS DES 3 DERNIERS MOIS**



Source : données Eurostat

Figure 39 – Proportion of individuals who bought on line during the previous three months (French Senate 2012)

According to the FEVAD, between 2006 and 2007, e-commerce revenue had grown by 35% (€16,1 billion and 180 millions transactions (*Le Monde* 2008c).

At the same time, the e-commerce sector underwent a process of increasing competition and concentration. Online retailers built their strategy on price-reduction, surfing on consumers’ worries about their purchasing power in a time of recession, as stressed on the press by the economists Philippe Moati (*Le Monde* 2008c) and Philippe Askenazy (Askenazy 2008). With increasing competition and tiny margins, the mortality of e-commerce website was high. In 2009 France Télécom, which had “pinched” Alapage from Amazon, ultimately decided to leave the e-commerce business and sold it to competitor Rueducommerce.fr (*Le Monde* 2009a), while Priceminister was acquired for €200 million by Rakuten, a Japanese player that was aiming to expand internationally and had already acquired Buy.com in the US (*Le Monde* 2010).

In this favourable context, Amazon France accelerated its growth. The year 2007 was a key year: Amazon’s French website extended its catalogue (toys, house and kitchen, jewellery) catching up the delay with the US and the other European subsidiaries (*Challenges* 2008). Amazon was not yet among the top-three e-sellers in France, but it started putting the premises for its future domination in the Hexagon. In view of the increasing logistic flows, the company first had opened a support warehouse in Fleury-les-Aubrais and then had prepared to move its French warehouse (17.000 m²) to a larger facility in Saran (46.000 m²), in the North-Western outskirts of Orleans (*Les Echos* 2007). As all Amazon warehouses, the facility was named after the codename of closest airport plus a number:

ORY1. Saran was part of a suburban agglomeration that hosted one of the most important logistic areas in France, especially in the *zone d'activité* (ZAC) of Champ Rouge. The emergence of a logistics zone to the north of Orleans took shape at a time of declining industrial employment. The Alcatel-Lucent factory, which was built in 1974, employed up to 1.300 people in the 1980s but, by the time of Amazon's arrival it had been undergoing a succession of redundancy plans, until it closed for good in 2013. From the early 1990s onwards, the area gradually became a logistics zone, home to a large number of mass retail logistics providers as well as a number of industrial logistics subcontractors (Gaborieau 2016b). As we are going to see, this was a very similar trajectory to the one undertaken by the area of Piacenza, where Amazon would establish its first Italian FCs in 2011.

The opening of ORY1 would be followed during the next three years by a multiplication of the warehouses: Montélimar (MRS1, 36.000 m²) in 2010, which would also work for the Italian market before the opening of the Italian warehouse in 2011, Sevrey/Chalon-sur-Saône (LYS1, 40.000 m²) in 2012, Douai/Lille (LIL1, 90.000 m²).

3.4.2. *Bureaucratisation: rising digital (technical) coercion in the labour process*

In the new, Orleans-based, warehouse and, later, in the new ones, Amazon installed its state-of-the-art equipment and its wave-less system to outbound processes. This implied a change in the way work was designed compared to the previous situation. Workers recall that one of the more significant changes was the much longer distance they had to walk to retrieve the items they had in their scan.

Boigny was a small site in terms of surface area. And then, when we arrived in Saran, it was a lot more complicated, because we walked more during the day and there were more things like that. And then there were the floors that went up. Amazon at Saran was on a unique ground-floor, it was on the ground on which they built cells. Then [in Saran] they built 4 levels! After that it became physically more complicated, you know.

Fieldwork Quote 54 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

That [the opening of the new warehouse in Saran] changed it all! We marched more kilometres! Working conditions weren't the same!

Fieldwork Quote 55 – Amazon senior worker, ORY1, man, ca. 50-years old, informal conversation, October 2019

With the installation of the new equipment, digitalisation increased. Workers definitively lost control on the determination of their picking path, a function now completely incorporated into their

computer-scanner. Progressively, the algorithms that coordinated work were improved at the global level and introduced at the local level. In picking, software became able to generate more optimised picking-paths, so as to avoid that workers had to go back to a bin where it had just picked an item. At packaging stations, the algorithm was set to show packers what size of box was most suitable for the item processed¹²⁷. Workers were no longer supposed to plan their sequence of tasks anymore. Therefore, these innovations in algorithms gave a tremendous boost to productivity, but also narrowed spaces of autonomy for most of the jobs in the workplace. We must say, however, that in the account given by senior workers, autonomy in the work process per se was not an issue that was explicitly raised. Workers insisted more on the increasing rhythms and routinisation of tasks. Yet, this was precisely the direct consequence of the loss of worker autonomy and increasing centralisation.

The reduction of worker autonomy went along with increase monitoring, as management introduced new metrics for measuring productivity. The scanner, and any another digital device, was connected to the informatic system and allowed supervisors to check the batch assigned to each picker, and the hourly rate of unit processed by most of the workers, whether receivers, stowers, pickers, re-binners or packers. Another metric introduced was the Time-off-Task (ToT) i.e., the supposedly idle time during which a worker did not communicate any task to its digital device for any reason (a break to drink or go to the toilet, or to chat with a co-worker; or difficulties in finding an item; a down in the informatic system of the scanner etc.). Pickers and packers were placed under tight scrutiny. In the new warehouse, pickers' scanners started displaying a countdown: it was launched every time that a new item to pick appeared on the screen of the scanner and it set the time that the picker was expected to spend executing the task. Short before my participant observation in Orleans (but also in Italy at Piacenza) the countdown had been removed, but it was evoked often during conversations as a source of pressure for pickers. For what concerns packers, their workload depended on the volumes of items picked upstream. Consequently, an increase in productivity at pick directly impacted work intensity at pack.

At Orleans, the intensification of working rhythms and the deskilling of most of the jobs inside the warehouse went in parallel with significant change in the workforce, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Between 2007 to 2009 the permanent workforce in the warehouse climbed from 170 to 535 employees. In addition to permanent workers, there was an increasing mass of temporary workers that were recruited during peaks – a new pattern of workforce management that, as we saw, did not exist during the first years.

In the account of both workers and managers, the expansion of the workforce fissured the idyllic work environment that had been reproduced so far. Senior workers were upset by the erosion of

¹²⁷ Former HR director (2001-2013), ORY1, woman, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023.

personal relations among peers and with supervisors: the warehouse was filled more and more with strangers, most of them would not remain more than two months. Meanwhile, managers became more distant and less engaged in a personal, affective relations with workers.

Below, two excerpts of interview with senior workers and former union delegates. The first expresses clearly the feeling of deception of veteran workers who participated to the launch of the company in France and now found themselves without recognition of their role (“just numbers”, they say, a common complaint of Amazon workers):

What made it change was the evolution of the company and then the evolution, i.e. the weight it gained and the number of employees. Yes, that’s what made it change... the family business, in inverted commas, disappeared, if you can call it a family business, you know what I mean. There were 50 of us, so you could say that it was a small family business. But after that, the company grew so fast that working conditions inevitably changed too. We’ve just become numbers!

Fieldwork Quote 56 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2018

In the second excerpt, the two veteran workers described together the impact that the transition to a bureaucratic labour regime had on their union activity. At the time of the transition, these workers were already elected worker representatives in the site’s work council (as we will see in Chapter 6, they would later become CFDT members and union delegates). Until then, their role of worker representative was based on the direct relationship they had with the site manager and the HR director. With the transition, such a pattern of direct personal relations faded away and gave way to a more “proceduralised” mode, with many steps of intermediation. The increased distance implied not only a feeling of deception, as it emerges in the following excerpt, but also a substantial crisis of that mode of doing unionism:

Worker 1: Yeah, 2010-2011, things were going well there were still good relations.

Worker 2: There were still employee-management exchanges.

Worker 1: These were employee exchanges. Because I was on the works council at the time and...

Worker 2: We could still talk freely. As an employee, you could easily contact the departments today, make an appointment... it’s all... it’s like I don’t know where everything is framed.

Worker 1: At the same time, the working rhythms increased.

Worker 2: Yes, all that, the production, the working conditions

Worker 1: The picking paths were longer, much longer, because at Boigny they were small cells and here we’ve got a big warehouse, ten times twenty times bigger. After that, there was more of a close employee relationship. Systems were put in place.... In fact, they quickly... how would I put it... in the HR departments they quickly got things under control. Protocols were put in place, so for example. You see, I’ll make it simple. Before, if we had a problem, we’d go straight to the HR manager, we’d go to management and we’d

settle things. Then they set up a protocol. So, basically, I, site manager, I'm not bothered until I've been through the OPS manager, who's been through the area manager, who's been through the lead... and now there's a whole chain. So, you have to make an appointment a day in advance for a yes or a no. So you can't get into the HR office like that! The door is closed... They're gone [meaning that the top managers of the plant were no longer on the shopfloor].

Worker 2: So yes, that's very different now...

Worker 1: And when they open the HR door in the HR office upstairs...

Worker 2: You have to knock!

Worker 1: You knock and knock, and they open the door and hide everything! The lady opens the door like this... just a little bit... and she looks outside: "Yes, what's that for?", No more "Good morning" like before. It's all "Yes, why are you here?". When you try to look a bit into the room, they are disturbed, it's all hidden.

Worker 2: Yes, there's a distance.

Worker 1: Yes, there's no more physical contact.

Worker 2: We don't live in the same world!

Worker 1: Ah well, there's a big difference between working people and ...

Fieldwork Quote 57 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

From the point of view of local management, the transition was also well perceived. Management was aware of this progressive distancing, and it attributed to the growing dimensions of the warehouse and the workforce, which made impossible to reproduce the initial pattern of personal employment relations:

When I did my shift in the morning, I used to arrive, put my stuff down, go for a walk around the warehouse, meet people, be able to name them, say "Hi Jean", "Hi Corinne", and so on... And over 100, after that it depends on the person, but I have to admit that my limit is around 100. Beyond 100, you can't remember all the first names and surnames of people who don't speak to you. So, when you go between us, there are 2.500 people, you can't say "Hello, Henri!", "Hello René", etc. It's no longer possible. So, in fact, and inevitably, it changes the way you interact with people. At the very beginning, when we worked from 0 to 120, it was a single team. And it's true that we didn't have the same level of interpersonal relationships as when we began working with 200, 250, 300 people [...] So inevitably, there's a change in the profile of the people and that creates a very close-knit team at the beginning, people know each other well, and so on... That's a general, business problem and not an Amazon problem, but obviously, when you talk like Amazon about a very strong situation, about uniting people, about making people feel good, obviously, it's more marked in inverted commas. It's just that when you start to put a bit more distance between yourself and people, it starts to be... It's more marked. Because if you talk to the veterans, who were in the warehouse for five years, obviously they're going to tell you, "Things have changed. Before, we used to stop for five minutes, see the boss, stop, chat, and so on". Now they might still do that, potentially. But on the other hand, the boss can't just do it with the veterans and then the others stay on the sidelines. So, in fact, he's

also obliged not to favour anyone in particular, so inevitably the veterans say: “We have more access to the person, we feel a bit more distant”, so it’s harder to create cohesion.

Fieldwork Quote 58 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

Thus, not only the organisation of work changed, but also the social relations that surrounded it and gave them a meaning. The labour process became much more standardised and focused on the productive activity, while weekly events of break and conviviality were drastically cut back. The weekly coffee break, when everyone stopped working and met with management for a briefing and for a friendly talk, were suppressed. Management explained to me that such a decision was necessary because with hundreds of employees it had become impossible to replicate this initiative on a large scale¹²⁸.

In fact, although interviewees are unanimous in emphasising the dimensional aspect, we should not consider the quantitative growth as the ultimate cause of change in the labour process. As we saw, there were also qualitative changes in the organisation of work – namely, the increasing centralisation and digitalisation of process – that went along with the mere quantitative expansion of the workplace. Furthermore, there were qualitative change in management that, even if they are eluded by the manager, were linked to the growing dispossession of local management’s control over the workplace. It was not only a matter of managers’ ability to remember the names of all the workers, but of management latitude in deciding over the organisation of production. This latitude shrank and the possibility for management to establish personal, almost paternalistic, relations with workers did so. The previous policy of workers direct involvement was more aligned with a start-up workplace, when operations were in a phase of launch and management needs to actively engage in dialogue with work teams. After 2007, operations had already been set up and this kind of teamwork was not necessary anymore. Finally, there were also qualitative changes in two other domains that were intertwined with change in the labour process: first, change in the system of remuneration; second, a evolution of in the workforce composition and in the modes of recruitment, with the growing importance of seasonal work.

3.4.3. *Change in the system of remuneration: end of the performance bonus*

The system of remuneration was also *de facto* reformed according to the expansion of the company and to the taylorisation of the labour process. As explained by workers and managers, Amazon France had applied at the local level a global bonus policy, the PRP: workers were collective

¹²⁸ Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023.

awarded a bonus every quarter; the condition was that each team achieved productivity, quality, and safety targets. According to workers, it was a significant amount but as far as the workforce surged, some problems emerged. The major one was the progressive of new hundreds of temp workers, which reportedly were less committed to the company and to their co-workers. This made the achievement of targets harder:

Worker 1: So, at the beginning, they were good bonuses. In the beginning, it was 300 euros a bonus.

Worker 2: Yeah!

Worker 1: Quarterly, right?

Worker 2: Yes, yes, yes.

Worker 1: Quarterly. Except that after this bonus, after a while, when the number of workers grew. That's become complicated! Because the temps were also included.

Worker 2: Exactly.

Worker 1: So, they [temp workers] didn't give a damn, they'd come and go, and if they spoiled our performance in terms of accidents at work, for example. And then there was a "behavioural" problem as well. It created tension because, for example, if a colleague had an accident at work... we'd look at her and say, "Oh, it's a pain in the neck, she's going to cost us our bonus", you see, so it wasn't like that. It was fine! But...

Worker 2: Yes, then it started to drop to 100 euros 50 euros and that's when we said to ourselves that this bonus was no longer adapted.

Fieldwork Quote 59 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

Therefore, workers started demanding an extra-month pay. The shortcomings of this bonus and the demand for an alternative scheme would become a long-standing matter of discussion between management and worker representative between 2009 and 2013, when finally, workers would obtain a new bonus in the form of an extra-month pay (see Chapter 6). In this period, however, local management refused to make this concession: as recalled by senior workers, the HR manager used to say that, as long as she remained in office workers would never obtain such a benefit. The controversy about the introduction of the extra month reveals the deterioration of the relationship between managers and workers, once described by workers as harmonic and trustful.

3.4.4. The rise of a loose internal labour market increases competition and fosters economic coercion

The growth of treated volumes occurred in a special shape: seasonality. Seasonality allowed the company not only to stabilise demand but also to plan labour input. Temp workers were a pillar of this strategy. The massive and stable use of temp workers – many of them being permatemps (*The*

New York Times 2010; Hatton 2011) – had already taken place in the US and the UK. Temp agencies had such a structural (although subaltern) role in the management of the workforce that they used to establish their own offices in Amazon’s FCs. In France, as explained by management (Fieldwork Quote 13), temp agencies had a marginal role in the warehouse. After 2005, however this pattern changed, and Amazon started using agency workers as a seasonal pool of workforce.

Box 6 – The temporary work industry in France

Temp industry came to France from the US, but it was not brought by Amazon. It arrived decades earlier. In the US, temp work agencies have been operating since 1930s (Ward 2003; Belkacem and Kornig 2011), but their importance raised in the post-Fordist era, especially since the late 1980s (Autor 2003). In the logistics sector, important studies have been carried on at least since the early 2000s, and they stressed that temp agencies had become a dominant form of workforce management. Temp workers had ceased to be a marginal or peripheral group but a stable presence in docks and warehouse. Companies structurally relied on this form of casualisation in order to increase their flexibility and discipline the workforce (Gonos 2000; H. Freeman and Gonos 2006; 2011; Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Gonos and Martino 2011; Allison et al. 2018; De Lara, Reese, and Struna 2016). More recent studies had showed that such a pattern has been reproduced by Amazon in its logistics hubs (Alimahomed-Wilson 2020; Reese 2020).

In Europe, temporary work arrived after WWII when US-based temporary staffing companies (the first was Manpower) opened their subsidiaries in London and Paris. Since the late 1950s, European-based companies were founded in Switzerland (Adia, later Adecco) and the Netherlands (Randstad), illustrating the growing acceptance of temporary staffing outside the US and the growing influence of this industry (Belkacem 1998; Ward 2003). Like in the US, the boom of temporary work took place in Europe at the very end of the 1980s in countries such as UK (Ward 2003), Germany (Benassi 2016; Ferreira 2016) and France (Lapoire 2007).

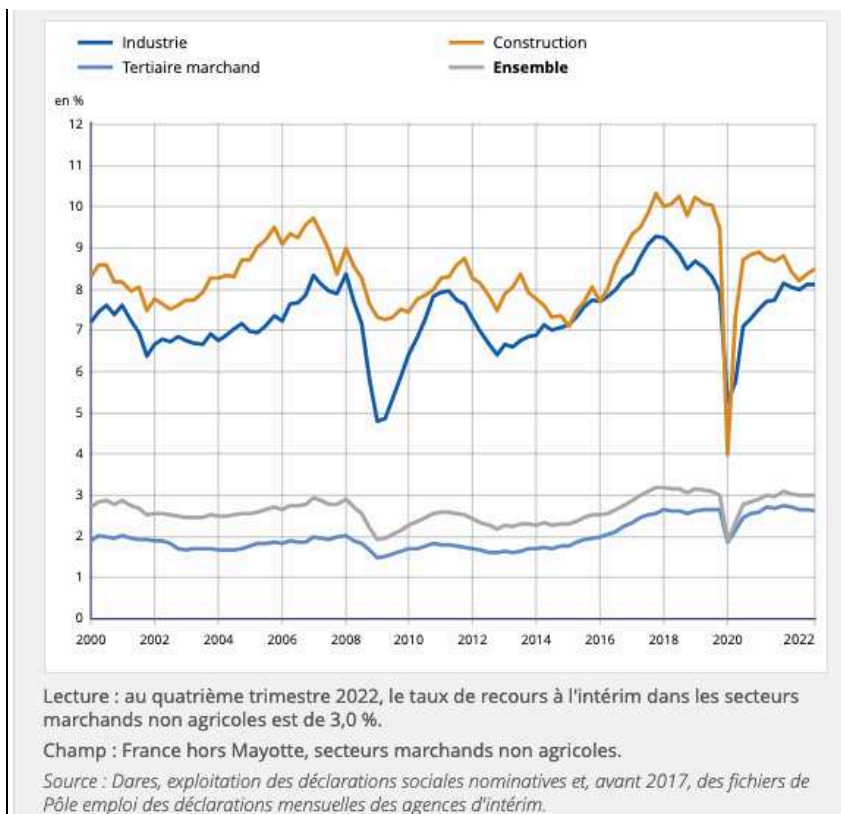


Figure 40 – Share of agency work on total employed workforce, France, business sectors (2000-2022)

Source: INSEE

In France, studies have been carried on in the car industry, illustrating the role of temporary work status in the restructuring of the sector and also the impact that this conditions had on the reproduction of the Fordist industrial working-class (Gorgeu, Mathieu, and Pialoux 1998; Beaud and Pialoux 1999; Gorgeu and Mathieu 2008; Ardeni, Gorgeu, and Mathieu 2019). At the same time, temporary work expanded to the so-called serviced sector, including logistics.

In the logistics sector, studies have shown the interactionist mechanisms through which white-collar workers manage the temp workers in order to create a docile and deskilled workforce, ready to be used at will by customer-companies (Gaborieau 2016b; Massimo 2017; Tranchant 2018). When Amazon arrived in France, temp work was already an established and legitimate (even if often criticised; see, for instance, Jounin and Tourette 2014) tool of recruitment and outsourcing for companies¹²⁹. Therefore, in this respect, Amazon did not disrupt any employment practice in France. Instead, as we will see, this happened in Italy, where other forms of workforce casualisation dominated in the logistics sector (Sacchetto and Semenzin 2014; Benvegnù and Cuppini 2018; Cillo and Pradella 2018; Massimo 2020c).

Amazon has never disclosed exhaustive data on its French workforce. For this early period, I collected data through press archive and fieldwork sources.

¹²⁹ At that time, among candidates for a job at Amazon, there were also people who applied for white-collar positions through temporary work agencies (Interview with a former white-collar worker at Amazon Boigny-Saran).

Table 8 – Amazon workforce in ORY1 FC according to employment status

Sources: author’s own calculation based on press archive and internal reports

	‘07	‘08	‘09	‘10	‘11	‘12	‘13	‘14	‘15	‘16	‘17	‘18	‘19	‘20
Direct Employees	180	NA	535	NA	NA	800	900	870	900	1200	1650	1800	1800	1700
Agency Workers (during peaks)	270	NA	700	NA	NA	NA	2000	NA	600	700	2800	NA	1800	2500

In 2007, Amazon employed 270 temps to work side by side with its own 180 permanent workforce during the Christmas season. Through the next years, permanent jobs kept growing as much as temporary positions. In 2009 there were 535 permanent jobs to which Amazon added 700 temporary positions. By 2013 there would be around 900 permanent employees outnumbered by around 2000 temps. Temp were recruited among a pool of unemployed workers, whose geographical scope became larger and larger. Management became less strict on recruitment. According to the general manager of ORY1, it was not possible anymore to replicate the old system of recruitment (in the first years, the GM or the HR director interviewed every single candidate). The growing number of temps meant that agencies were asked to widen the geographical and social perimeter of hiring, because Orleans’ labour pool had been “exhausted”¹³⁰.

The new workforce was more diversified, with an increase of older, male and foreign racialised workers. The geographical scope of the pool got also broader. Workers came not only from the Orleans’ outskirts, but also commuted from the further areas of Châteaudun, Tours, Vierzon, Bourges, Montargis, located almost 100 km away. Filters to recruitment became looser and, as admitted by management itself, they lost control on the selection of a growing workforce. Among them, the GM explained, there were more people likely to be less loyal to the company and more attracted by unions:

When you’re a big company, well yes, unfortunately you have people coming into the business. And we... Either they have it at their workplace and we don't ask them "are you a union member" when they're hired, and so on. Or they discover their vocation in the company and say to themselves, “Hey, I want to become a union rep”, with a real desire to represent a union. And that happened more in 2006-2007, when we started to have six seven 800 people. Then, of course, this type of person arrived, and it was a bit harder because these were people who were capable [to mobilise], while the first ones we had [in the first years], they would never have gone on strike, not even by themselves, and even if their union had told them to go on strike, they would have said no because they weren’t into that. Whereas some of the others who arrived

¹³⁰ Former HR director (2001-2013), ORY1, woman, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023.

later, they really were in a trade union spirit, they were able to generate some local movements in 2007-2008 on some issues.

Fieldwork Quote 60 – Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023

In fact, the date mentioned by the manager (2006-2007 and 2007-2008) is not exact, for the first labour unrest I could find out dates to 2009. Nevertheless, the overall assessment is clear: change in the profile of workers was a matter of bad selection, and workers were too much to be selected via the old system. As a result, explains the manager, new workers came bringing with them a sort of trade union virus in the warehouses. However, such an account allows management to elude the objective conditions that allowed a new union initiative to take place. It was precisely because working condition had been worsened that worker discontent could be activated by union activists. Second, the loosening of selection criteria was not due solely to the growing numbers, but also to the qualitative change in the labour process: working conditions inside the warehouse were changing so much that an accurate selection of motivated people was not necessary anymore. After all, the company had also less to offer in terms of working conditions, as work had become harder. In sum, the reasons that explained a levelling down of selection were not external, but internal, and these internal objective conditions matched with the arrival of new workers equipped with previous militant capital that they had accumulated though previous experience.

The increasing volume of workforce handled by temporary agencies changed their substantial role: not only searching workers on behalf of Amazon (workers that Amazon previously used to directly hire after a very short period), but also managing this workforce for longer periods (from two weeks to six months). During work, temp workers operated under the authority and scrutiny of their team leaders and area managers, but all the processes of selection, disciplining, bureaucratic follow-up (including wage payment), and possible termination was performed by agencies.

As the FC in Orleans (ORY1) had not reached full capacity, Amazon planned to hire more permanent workers, as far as sales increased. To increase the ranks of permanent workers management would tap into the pool of temps, and the possibility of a stable job attracted candidates. Most temporary workers strived to get a permanent position¹³¹: permanent workers were protected against arbitrary dismissal legally and, in the medium-term, were better paid¹³²; on top of that, being

¹³¹ Even if another part of the workforce, as we saw, found its own groove in the temp condition. These “permatemps” existed not only at Amazon but in the wider landscape of the logistics sector. They were usually young male workers, often single, with no illusions of professional ascent and a less urgent need of payroll continuity. Thus, they used to rotate between a few selected warehouses. For further details on this “strategic” relationship to temporary employment in the French logistics sector, see (Gaborieau 2016b, 359–77; Tranchant 2019, 194–97); for other sectors see, Faure-Guichard 1999; Kornig 2007; Glaymann 2010.

¹³² Under the French labour law, temporary workers receive a bonus at the end of the assignment, plus the standard unemployment check (*indemnité de fin de mission*). As we saw, workers can be misled by this bonus and prefer this

Amazon's and not agency's employees, they had access to ticket restaurants and other benefits limited to profit sharing schemes ('Accord de Participation' 2002) and Amazon's unilateral bonus and stock awards program. Amazon dangled the promise of a permanent job but gave no guarantees of stabilisation to single worker: the decision was taken at managers' discretion. Therefore, to increase their chances to be hired, temps had interest in boost their productivity rate and in showing their commitment to work in front of management. As reported by a journalist who worked as a temp in Amazon's warehouse in Montelimar (MRS1) during 2012 Christmas season:

For temporary workers, things are simple. More than a thousand of us have been recruited in Montélimar to make and deliver Christmas parcels. We have been informed that in January 2013 the best workers may be invited to sign a permanent contract. How many permanent positions are available? No one knows among the precarious workers. The fact remains that, in the words of one of the director's right-hand men who came specially in his suit to talk to us before one of our shifts, "the selection will be tough and there won't be many chosen. But you should know that some of the people you see around you with permanent contracts started out like you, as temps". [...] The distinction between the wheat and the chaff of temporary workers will be made according to their degree of "motivation". "Motivation" implicitly refers to productivity performance, assessed by computer regardless of the job you're doing. (Malet 2013a, 84).

On the other hand, the fact that temporary workers were excluded from benefits enjoyed by permanent workers created negative consequences for the latter. As explained by two of them above, temps "did not care" about the collective bonus based on productivity, quality and safety. Indeed, they had interest in improving their personal statistics, especially productivity rates, rather than improving team-level metrics for a bonus that was not distributed to them. Furthermore, the mass of temporary workers recruited at Christmas were perceived as strangers from the stable segment of the workforce, especially because many of these temps would not be promoted to permanent positions.

Finally, and perhaps this was the most important friction between temps and permanents, was the fact that the first, given their legal protection, did not feel as much pressure as temps. Amazon could not terminate them because of their productivity rate. Instead, temp workers who wanted to get a permanent job had to do their best to improve their rate. Thus, on average, permanent workers were usually outperformed by temp workers (which also says a lot about the deskilling of tasks). Management, in a classic taylorist move, used the top performers to increase that demanded rate and thus constantly set the bar higher and increasing pressures on. In countries such as France or Germany

employment to the standard one. Indeed, temporary workers have a global income considerably lower than their permanent colleagues, since they usually work less hours, they do not have access to certain bonuses and have no right to day-offs during their assignment (Tranchant 2019, 196).

(and later Spain and Italy), Amazon warehouses started operating at “two speeds”¹³³. On the one hand precarious workers exposed to the pressure of management; on the other hand, permanent workers who were more protected from arbitrary dismissal but on the medium and long run were affected by the progressive increase of productivity rate. All this status and economic differences disjoined the interests of the temporary workers from those of their permanent colleagues¹³⁴. These dynamics consolidated a new phase of the Amazon labour regime in France – and we will see that a similar pattern will unfold in Italy, even if with different temporalities – that we called algorithmic bureaucracy, that we will analyse in the chapters 4, 5 and, for what concerns union mobilisation and demobilisation, in Part III.

3.5. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the analysis of Amazon labour regime in France during the first phase provides us with a series of interesting findings to answer our research questions, namely the way how Amazon secured worker effort and the way how Amazon deployed its organisation of work in different socio-economic and institutional contexts.

We saw that Amazon was able to deploy its own organisation of work without major frictions. The company settled in France between 1999 and 2000, one year after it had already put its foot in UK and Germany. At that time, as we saw, in Chapter 1, the dot-com bubble had already burst and Amazon was shifting from its initial “Walmartian” labour process based on wave picking and mechanisation to its own wave-less system and digitalisation, which was more well-suited for Amazon’s e-commerce economic model. Yet, the deployment of this labour process in France, however, was not immediate. The main reason was the configuration of the market. Differently from Germany and the UK, the e-commerce market was less developed; in addition, Amazon had failed to acquire an already-established e-commerce player, as it had successfully done in UK and Germany, so it could not start operation from an already dominant base, and it had to build inventory and supply chain from scratch. Furthermore, the burst of the bubble had curbed Amazon’s frantic expansion and put an end to the phase of “easy money”¹³⁵ that characterised the internet economy.

In such a context, the initial period of Amazon in France was characterised by a smooth growth: labour process remained longer in a pre-taylorist stage, leaving workers with more self-latitude in the conception and execution of tasks; the division of labour was quite loose; the number of workers

¹³³ I am grateful to Denis Segrestin who made this observation after reading some drafts of my fieldwork journal.

¹³⁴ This division was made visible by management: permanent workers were given blue badges (whose edges were coloured by silver, gold and red when the worker achieved 5, 10 or 20 years of seniority), and in winter they often wore Amazon-branded fleece jackets (that they could get with SWAGS special points given every year to permanent employees); temps workers brought a green badge and did not have access to fleece jackets and other gadgets.

¹³⁵ Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023.

remained under one hundred for a long time. Worker effort had to be secured not so much through technical and direct coercion, as on the direct involvement and the commitment of the workers with the goal of the company, in other words, through responsible autonomy (A. L. Friedman 1977b). In this respect, management deployed the set of employment practices that Amazon had developed by mixing elements of US post-fordist corporate culture; employment practices included also tangible elements that corresponded to the pre-taylorist configuration of the labour process, namely the introduction of a collective performance bonus based on productivity, quality, and safety goals.

Particularly interesting in this period was also the mode of insertion of Amazon into the French frame of industrial relations. In front of the legal constraints that de facto imposed union presence and collective bargaining in the workplace, local management proved to be particularly able to deal with the problem: on the one hand it persuaded the company's headquarter of the necessity to formally comply with the rules; on the other hand it mastered the process of union involvement so craftily that union presence and collective bargaining took place in the very first years of the site, but under the complete control of management: some agreements were signed but they were largely favourable to the company; unions were formally included, but management kept full control on the organisation of work, which was crucial, and also preserved its direct relations with the workforce based on individualised bargaining. In this respect, the French situation was exceptional in comparison to the way how, in the same period, Amazon dealt with unions in the US, UK and even in Germany.

The start-up labour regime started unravelling under the impact of important transformations. First, around 2007, the company accelerated its expansion in France. Amazon increased its market share and, at the same time changed its organisation of work, aligning it to the model that was already deployed in the US. On the one hand, the company's demands over working rhythms increased; on the other hand, the increased digitalisation and centralisation of the work process increased monitoring and pressures over the workers while reducing also the scope of autonomy of local management in reproducing individualised and personalised employment relations. The bureaucratisation of employment relations, the increasing of technical and personal coercion and the growth of seasonal agency work provoked a feeling of deception among veteran workers, many of them quit. The processing of growing volumes was increasingly carried out through the massive use of agency work, disposable and docile, which broke the worker collective in the workplace. In sum, between 2007 and 2009, the Amazon site underwent a radical transition that changed the labour process and labour politics.

As anticipated in this chapter (but for a deeper analysis see Chapters 5 and 6) the transition created new opportunities for the unions and labour mobilisation. In this new context, the previous mode of mobilisation of work effort was not viable anymore. Thanks to the innovation in the labour

process, worker effort could be secured by means of technical coercion and managerial tighter supervision, coupled with the economic coercion suffered by precarious agency workers. There was not much space for workers commitment with the company goals – which was also proved by the fact that the initial performance bonus was withdrawn. In this new context, the priority was to prevent discontent workers to mobilise, in other words to de-mobilise. In chapter 5, we will see how such dialectic between demobilisation takes place in the French labour process, whilst in chapter 6 we will see how unions and Amazon face each other in the struggle for workers mobilisation.

In the next chapter, instead, we will focus on the start-up labour regime Italian case. Amazon settled in Italy in 2011, while the transition from the initial to the new labour regime had already started in France. At that time, Amazon was already a well-established large multinational company and its dominant position in the e-commerce market had consolidated. As a result, a similar transition took place in Italy, but it was much more accelerated due to the different stage of development that the company and the e-commerce sector had reached so far.

4. The start-up labour regime in Italy (2011-2015)

In Italy, the rise and decline of a start-up labour regime – characterised by personal workers-management relationship, a proto-Taylorised labour process and a relatively generous internal labour market – took place in another period, 10 years later than France, but developed as much quickly as it came to exhaustion (between 2011 and 2015). Like in France, the goal of management was to successfully launch the Italian subsidiary, and to achieve this goal it needed the active involvement of the workforce. Local management tried to mobilise the workforce, developing a set of material and immaterial incentives. The mobilisation of work effort in the workplace was magnified not only by global structural conditions but also by the transformation of the logistics sector in the area surrounding Amazon's warehouse. This external factor made workers appreciate working conditions offered by Amazon, as they were assessed to be superior to those offered by surrounding logistics employers. Another important variation regarded the specificities of unionism and labour relations, that were different from the French context, and this would have an impact on the development of the labour process. Between 2013 and 2015, the conditions that ensured the reproduction of this labour regime started waning away. The fast growth of the local market and the catching up of Italian operations to the global Amazon standard were the factors that undermined the labour regime and triggered a first labour crisis.

Methodological note

This chapter is built on evidence collected mainly through interviews with veteran workers, that I met during my long-term fieldwork in Piacenza, between October 2018 and August 2019. This fieldwork could be divided in two parts. In the first, between October and April, I tried to get in touch with as much workers as possible, through personal contacts and union contacts. I was able to interview a dozen of current or former workers. In the second part of the fieldwork, I applied and was hired as a temp worker, from mid-May to the end of August. During this period of participant observation in the workplace I did not stop interviewing workers, even if at a slower rhythm. Overall, during the whole period of fieldwork, I interviewed more than a dozen of current or former workers. To this bas of interviews, I could add all the interactions and informal conversations that I had during my participant observation into the workplace.

It is interesting that most workers that accepted interviews were (or had been) union members or union delegates. As it is conventionally agreed, joining a union allows to enrich the experience in the workplace, multiply their interactions, increase the workers' social capital and it is also a vector

of professional ascension, especially for union delegate. Accomplishing union activity (from bargaining to helping colleagues, from writing leaflets to speak publicly) allows him or her to depart from routine and give another meaning to his or her professional life (see in particular, Benquet 2015, 295–304; see also, Beaud and Pialoux 1999; Guillaume and Pochic 2009). All these factors increase the chances that, in absence of other interconnections with the inquirer, union members and union delegates (or in general, worker representatives) are among those workers more likely to accept interviews. In addition, the estimated level of union density in the warehouse at the time of my fieldwork was around 20% among permanent workers, which is quite aligned with the average union density in the private sector (see Table 28). Anyway, whatever the objective and subjective factors that led to an over-representation of union members among the senior permanent workers that I interviewed to analyse the initial period of the warehouse, I took measures to correct any possible bias. Through participant observation and a few interviews with non-unionised workers or former workers I could compensate the composition of my panel.

Like in France (Chapter 3), the interview and conversation excerpts that I am going to quote in this chapter come from veteran workers that were hired at Amazon in the first years of operation (2011-2012). Those workers lived the rapid transformation of Amazon workplace and constitute the bulk of my sources for this period, and I will rely on their accounts to reconstruct the initial labour regime. However, these accounts must not be considered as mere source of data, but also as representations built by the workers themselves during their working experience at Amazon (see *Can the Amazonian speak? Methodological reflections about the speech of Amazon workers*).

Furthermore, like in the case of French workers, these representations are assembled retrospectively, as five, six, or seven years had elapsed between their first day at Amazon and the day I met them for an interview. The method of this chapter is, similarly from what I have done in chapter 2, not to take these representations for granted, but to read them against the grains: disassembling them, connect the pieces with secondary sources (national and local press, internal documents, interviews with external factors such as local politicians and entrepreneurs), comparing to the French case study, and finally recompose the picture by having in mind the global transformation of the company that was taking place in the period under study.

4.1. *Settling in Italy*

The creation and launch of Amazon's subsidiary in Italy was not a linear and coherent process. The settling of Amazon in Italy followed a different temporality, later and shorter. This is going to

affect the development of the labour process and labour politics, with a rapid rise and exhaustion of the start-up labour regime.

4.1.1. Amazon and the Italian Logistics Market

At the turn of the century, Amazon launched a first wave of international expansion, opening subsidiaries in UK (1998), Germany (1998), France (2000), and Japan (2000). Few months after opening in France, Amazon started planning to land in Italy too. This was not reported by the press, neither in the US or in Italy, because Amazon was still a relatively small company in terms of workforce and infrastructure and Italy less than an attractive market because of its tiny size¹³⁶.

However, the dotcom burst and the ensuing cost-cutting turn adopted by Amazon at the global level freeze new plans of international expansion, including in Italy¹³⁷. This was explained plainly to the Italian press by Diego Piacentini, Amazon's vice-president for international business development. Piacentini stated that the company preferred consolidating its position in countries where it had already put its foothold in Europe and in Asia. Piacentini added that Italian e-commerce market was too small and judged the lack of a modern digital and physical infrastructure as a major obstacle, in a moment in which Amazon was struggling to squeeze efficiency and profitability from logistic operations (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2006). While waiting for Amazon to finally open its website and operations, Italian customers could access Amazon's international catalogue on its US, British, German, and French websites, even if delivery could take a considerable amount of time.

Things changed after the great financial crisis of 2007 and the Great Recession. If the dotcom burst had stopped Amazon's plans of international expansion, the Great Recession revived them. Amazon had managed to brilliantly navigate this new crisis, while many other competitors had gone bankrupt. The moment had come to relaunch its international ambitions, and Italy was the next step (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2009a; *La Repubblica* 2009).

E-commerce had grown in Italy, especially in the book market. In 2008, e-commerce in Italy grew by 18% to €5.914 billion, out of a European total of €130 billion (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2009b). Two years later, the total revenue of the online shopping was estimated at €8 billion, "+18% compared to 2009", according to the specialised business press, while e-shoppers were estimated at about 8 million customers, and local player had been emerging (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2010). In 1998, the UK-based Internet Bookstore joined Informazioni Editoriali, an Italian company specialised in information services for physical bookstores, and opened the website *ibs.it*, the first online bookseller in Italy (*Agenzia ANSA* 2016). In 2000, another online bookseller was created, *libreriauniversitaria.it* (*La Repubblica* 2008).

¹³⁶ Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023.

¹³⁷ Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023.

In absence of Amazon, these companies had become the dominating players in the still small e-commerce market. If Amazon wanted to secure a dominant position in Italian domestic market it had to establish a direct presence in the country. This is why, by 2010, Piacentini had changed his mind about the possibilities of the Italian market. “The Italian postal system?”, he said “We are not worried, it has evolved”. As summarised by the reporter, “the company therefore sees neither the slow spread of broadband nor the inefficiency of delivery systems as limitations (orders placed on Amazon.it will be handled by European logistics) and is betting on the soundness of an established but constantly evolving model” (*Corriere della Sera* 2010b). The priority had changed, there were new markets at which Amazon aimed, although not all the conditions were already gathered to run a profitable business.

Since 2009 Amazon set up the terrain, by proposing competitive offer to Italian customers that ordered from its British, German or French websites (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2009b). Meanwhile, the company prepared its starting pack of catalogue and website contents. Differently from UK and Germany, and similarly to France, the company did not enter the Italian market through the acquisition of an existing player. The backbone had to be built from scratch, but the company had now enough experience and capacity to accomplish this task quickly. In November, Amazon officially launched its Italian website with the largest number of category at once, instead of gradually introduce them as it did in the previous transplants (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2010). In addition, Amazon had a second asset to boost its assault on the Italian market: Prime membership with free delivery, whose annual price was set at €9,99 in Italy vs \$79 in the US (*Corriere della Sera* 2010a). For the first year, since Amazon had not yet a FC in Italy, goods were shipped from Amazon’s warehouses abroad, mostly from the new warehouse Amazon France had just opened in Montelimar (MRS1). For delivery, Amazon contracted SDA, the messenger subsidiary of Poste Italiane, as well as the Italian branch of UPS (*Corriere della Sera* 2010a). The expected lapse of time between order and delivery spanned between 1 and 3/5 days for items sold directly by Amazon. These arrangements, however, was not planned to last, because Amazon was already preparing for opening its first Italian FC.

4.1.2. *Amazon in Piacenza. The local context*

When Amazon decided to put boots on the ground in Italy, it chose Castel San Giovanni, in the province of Piacenza (northern Italy). “Castello”, as its people use to call it, is a small town (less than 15.000 inhabitants), close to the Po River – the main Italian river – at the border between Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy regions: it is the central Po Valley, one of the most populous and prosperous areas of Western Europe.

Despite the peaceful and provincial aspects of today, Piacenza inherited a secular history of commercial and financial splendour during the 16th and 17th centuries¹³⁸. Since then, the city declined alongside the Spanish-Genoese empire, and the area lost ground in the process of economic and industrial development of Western Europe during the 19th and the early 20th century. It was in the post-war period that Piacenza and its rural surroundings undertook a path of tumultuous growth: manufacturing superseded the traditional dominance of agriculture, and agriculture in turn became also more mechanized and specialised.

Struttura settoriale dell'occupazione in provincia di PC
(valori %, 1936-2004)

Anno	Agricoltura	Industria	Terziario
1936	56,8	25,0	18,2
1951	49,2	26,0	24,8
1961	33,5	35,3	31,2
1971	22,4	40,4	37,2
1981	13,6	39,0	47,4
1991**	8,8	35,9	55,3
2001**	6,4	35,1	58,5
2004 ***	6,3	31,1	62,6
2004 Emilia-Romagna***	4,8	35,3	59,9
2004 ITALIA***	4,4	30,7	64,9

Fonti: elaborazione da Rizzi 1993 p. 25; ** Censimento Generale della Popolazione 2001 (Istat 2005); *** ISTAT, indagine campionaria Forze Lavoro, medie annue 2004 (Istat 2005)

Table 9 – Employment in the province of Piacenza by macro-sectors

Source:

(Laboratorio di Economia Locale Unicatt 2005)

The economic fabric of Piacenza and its territory resisted to the structural crisis of the 1980s-1990s, even if important transformations occurred: on the one hand, the textile industry collapsed and the wood/furniture sector declined; on the other hand, the agribusiness slightly grew, and the metal and mechanic industry constantly increased its importance; the productive system remained dominated by small and medium-sized firms. At the turn of the century, Piacenza and his province were in an intermediate position in the national economic ranking: in terms of GDP per capita, Piacenza was the “poorest” among the “richest” Italian provinces, but well-above the national average (Laboratorio di Economia Locale Unicatt 2005, 26).

¹³⁸ In his monumental work on the Mediterranean civilisation, the French historian Fernand Braudel reminded, in the late 16th and 17th century, Piacenza was a trade centre connected to the global financial network of the Genoese bankers. There, they settled their quarterly fairs, where businessmen from all of Europe came to trade not goods but financial instruments: letters of credit, debts, and remittances. “The establishment in 1579 of the exchange fairs [...] at Piacenza in northern Italy”, wrote Braudel, “was the event of the century from the point of view of the history of capitalism” (Braudel 1995, 1:379–80).

But the very reason why Amazon landed in Piacenza's province was the presence of one of the major logistic districts at the national level. Since the 1990s, the various local and regional administrations had strived to turn the city and its hinterland into an international logistic platform. Local administrators considered that the area had a strategic geographical position, at the crossroads of the Mediterranean and European flows of commodities, and at less than 200 km from the main cities of northern Italy¹³⁹. The symbol chosen by local administrators, developers and business actors to “marketise” the new identity of Piacenza as a logistics district was the “lying Y” (*Y coricata*), where the “arms” of the letter were the route axis connecting the Po Valley to the rest of Europe:



Figura 6 - Sistema logistico Piacentino. I 5 “sottosistemi” che lo compongono sono tutti posizionati lungo le due direttrici che formano la Y coricata e assommati coprono un totale di 4,7 milioni di mq di superficie.

Figure 41 – The Piacenza’s “lying Y”, a symbol of the area’s logistic “vocation” (Comune di Piacenza 2009)

The crucial year for the history of logistics in Piacenza was 1997, when the centre-left administration of the city started selling lots of land to developers for building warehouses. As explained by Fernando Tribi, a former member of the left-wing PRC (*Partito della rifondazione*

¹³⁹ “Piacenza’s position justifies the recent logistic vocation of the city and its province”, it is stated in a report published by the City administration, but similar phrases were found in many press articles and declaration of local stakeholders that I interviewed during mu fieldwork (prefects, mayors, businessmen, trade unionists etc.). The concept has become common sense, and it is incorporated by citizens and workers.

comunista) and councillor for Labour in the centre-left provincial administration of Piacenza (2004-2009), “when the centre-left parties won the city council in 1994, led by Vaciago [Paolo Vaciago, economist and university professor, mayor of Piacenza between 1994 and 1998], who was a renowned economist, they saw Piacenza as host of a logistic sector possibly advanced”¹⁴⁰. Among the first companies to settle there, the giant of the furniture Ikea had an important role. In a few years, the Swedish-based multinational company multiplied the size of its warehouse in the logistic pole of Le Mose (east of Piacenza) and turned it in a fulcrum of its European and North-African logistic network (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2003). By 2001, the construction of warehouses had expanded to other surrounding areas of Piacenza, such as Monticelli, Fiorenzuola, Pontenure and Cortemaggiore (see figure **Figure 41**)¹⁴¹. The national press started talking about logistic “maxipole” (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2001a; 2001b). Between 1991 and 2001, storage and warehousing activities had increased by 49% according to the ISTAT survey in industry and services (Comune di Piacenza 2016). In 2004, it was the turn of Castel San Giovanni, where the local administration launched the Logistic Park. In fact, despite the rhetoric of administrators there was poor coordination, and logistics poles were multiplying without a serious public planning.

The Great Recession boosted the importance of logistics as a driver of employment and growth in the face of the stagnation of the industrial sector. Local administrators allowed the expansion of the various logistics areas, often in competition rather than in coordination efforts¹⁴². In Piacenza companies such as DHL, XPO, TNT, Fercam and Unieuro opened their bases; in Castel San Giovanni, before the arrival of Amazon, Geodis had already established a warehouse along with other minor players, and after Amazon new ones came, such as QVC (2013), Leroy Merlin (2015), and Moncler (2017). By 2017, Piacenza’s province had become the fulcrum of logistics flows in and out Italy. The logistic pole of Piacenza-Le Mose covered more than 2 million m², with over 5.000 jobs; the Logistic Park of Castel San Giovanni 1,8 million m² with around 2500 employees¹⁴³. According to Fondazione ITL – a local research institute on logistics created in 2003 by public and private institutions – logistics employed 10% of the workforce in the province of Piacenza (Fondazione ITL, reported by *Piacenza Sera* 2017)

¹⁴⁰ Interview, Piacenza, March 2019.

¹⁴¹ To these sub-poles, it is relevant to add Stradella, another town of the area where a logistic district specialized in the book distribution has been developing since the early 2000s. See the report of the Fondazione Franceschi (Fondazione Franceschi 2022).

¹⁴² This point emerged during interviews with the Mayor of Piacenza and the Mayor of Castel San Giovanni (respectively, Interview with Patrizia Barbieri, March 2019, and interview with Lucia Fontana, January 24th 2019).

¹⁴³ Excluded Amazon who had moved just few hundred meters out of the park in 2015.

Territory	Piacenza									
Data type	number of persons employed of active enterprises									
Year	2011									
Legal form	imprenditore individuale, libero professionista e lavoratore autonomo	società in nome collettivo	società in accomandita semplice	altra società di persone diversa da snc e sas	società per azioni, società in accomandita per azioni	società a responsabilità limitata	società cooperativa esclusa società cooperativa sociale	altra forma d'impresa	totale	
NACE 2007										
total	23583	11493	4125	752	12772	25559	5880	347	84511	
agriculture, forestry and fishing	114	72	12	3	..	4	30	2	237	
manufacturing	1937	2874	545	5	7198	10585	224	11	23379	
wholesale and retail trade repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	5890	3044	1105	1	1101	5257	332	23	16753	
transportation and storage	1521	539	203	5	383	1807	2360	46	6864	

Table 10 – Number of persons employed of active enterprises by sectors, province of Piacenza.

Source: ISTAT (Istat, *Censimento Industria e Servizi 2011, NACE 2007*).

The reader can appreciate the overrepresentation of cooperatives (in bold red) in the transportation and storage sector, compared to other sectors.

By the early 2010s decade, however, just when Amazon opened its first Italian FC, Piacenza had started experiencing the contradictions of this rapid and, according to local and national observers, mismanaged development¹⁴⁴. The Italian logistics sector – especially the sub-sector of outsourced warehousing activities in retail, parcel delivery, furniture, food and meatpacking industry – was overwhelmed by an unprecedented cycle of labour unrest (Mento and Violante 2015; Benvegnù and Cuppini 2018; Bottalico 2018; Cillo and Pradella 2018; Bologna and Curi 2019; Massimo 2020c)¹⁴⁵.

What matters here is that the labour unrest took place in a very segmented labour market, where handling and logistics operations (the most labour intensive) were outsourced to cooperatives. Cooperatives were born in the second half of the 19th century as an instrument of worker self-organisation in the market, but at the end of 20th century, they had departed from the tradition of labour movement (Sacchetto and Semenzin 2014). In the warehousing industry, new cooperatives were created and proliferated in the 1990s as subcontracting partners of renowned national and multinational firms. Formally, they were third-party logistics providers, but *de facto* they were just providing cheap, often migrant (and sometimes irregular), labour force to their principal contractors. Hence, principal contractors could keep control of operations without being legally involved in labour relations (like in the case of temporary staff agencies, but with more flexibility and at a far cheaper

¹⁴⁴ This is view was quite unanimous among local observers that I met during my fieldwork (see below). See also the national press (*Corriere della Sera* 2021a; 2021b).

¹⁴⁵ See also sources produced by concerned militants and sympathising journalists (Massarelli 2014; SI COBAS 2017; Scandaliato 2021; Floris and Pallavicini 2023).

cost). Workers, in turn, had to endure harsh working and employment conditions, a situation amplified by racism and discrimination over immigrants.

These structural contradictions sparked labour insurgence across northern and central Italy, where most of the warehousing industry was concentrated, and Piacenza was one of the epicentres of the revolt¹⁴⁶. In this labour movement a crucial role was played by independent rank-and-file unions, namely SI-COBAS and ADL-COBAS, which accused dominant confederal unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL) to neglect these workers, dismissed as “birds of passage”, and, in some cases, to be in cahoots with cooperatives. Leveraging on their structural power on commodity flows, strikers adopted a radical repertoire of action, including blockades of warehouses and protests in front of the stores of principal contractors (as in the case of Ikea). Because of their unexpected strength, protests got national media coverage, while repression did not take much long to materialise. The picket lines were often attacked by police and in some cases by squads recruited by employers or even by truck drivers who drove their vehicle against the strikers. In 2016, Abd Elsalam Ahmed Eldanf, a striker was run over by a truck and killed just out of the GLS warehouse in Piacenza¹⁴⁷. Progressively the public opinion in Piacenza, including certain business associations, realised that the development of logistics had not been a very fair deal: most of the jobs created were low-skilled and low-paid, working conditions were under the minimum standards and workers’ struggle were harsh and cause of disorder¹⁴⁸. Local authorities had been tried to regulate the development of logistics on the base of voluntary local corporatism: two protocols had been signed in 2007 and 2011 between confederal unions, business associations and local administrations, but all the joint declarations remained dead letter. Looking back to the past, Mr. Tribi explained:

They [the centre-left administration of the city of Piacenza; 1994-1998] had the intuition that urban planning was not enough and that all economic and social stakeholders had to been involved. However, that idea was never accomplished. In fact, they did not think about the social impact, the problem of the organisation of work, for nobody was accustomed to, neither the business side, nor the cooperatives, nor the unions [...]

¹⁴⁶ The first strikes took place in 2011 at Tnt (Piacenza Sera 2011; Il Fatto Quotidiano 2011), followed in 2012 by walkouts and clashes at Ikea (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2012; Piacenza Sera 2012; La Repubblica 2012; Il Sole 24 Ore 2012). In the following months and years, the movement touched all the major logistics players Gls, Xpo, Leroy Merlin etc. Si-Cobas became the largest union in the Piacenza’s warehousing industry. At the end of a decade of strikes, the union was hit by arrests and a large-scale and questionable judicial repression (Violante 2019; Bottalico, Massimo, and Violante 2021; Violante and Massimo 2022).

¹⁴⁷ During my fieldwork, I happened to witness the same thing just out of the warehouse of Mondo Convenienza (a low-cost furniture retail company) in Bologna, during a strike in June 2015. The truck forced the blockade and almost run over a group of workers who were forming the picket line. None was injured but the accident could have turned into a homicide. In 2021, a similar episode had deadly consequences in 2021 in Novara, when another worker and union activist Adil Belakhdim was killed by a truck during a strike.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Fernando Tribi, former councillor for Labour in a centre-left provincial administration of the Piacenza (2004-2009), March 2019; Interview with Paolo Astorri, responsible for Industrial relations at Piacenza branch of Confindustria (main national industrial business association), Piacenza, January 2019.

there was a “mis-knowledge” rather than an “underestimation” of the problems [...] Then, in 1998 the centre-right won the election for the city council and that idea was definitively forgotten: the growth of logistic was managed in a conventional way... i.e. it was not managed.

Fieldwork Quote 61 – Fernando Tribi, former councillor for Labour in a centre-left provincial administration of the Piacenza (2004-2009), March 2019

Similarly, Aldo Bersani, the former centre-left Mayor of Castel San Giovanni (1995-2004) retrospectively and self-critically returned to this problem. The top priority of the 1990s administrations, he explained, was to attract investors and nobody considered seriously the “negative externalities” on environment and labour¹⁴⁹. A similar statement was made by his centre-right successor, Lucia Fontana. She insisted on the way how her administration – differently from that of Piacenza, she let me understand – took care of “governing” the development of logistics. The administrators of the logistic park had adopted “guidelines” to govern the logistic park of Castel San Giovanni “as if it was a condominium” (sic)¹⁵⁰. In fact, these guidelines involved only the estate developers and boiled down to very loose rules concerning the maintenance of the building infrastructure (drainage, electricity supply etc.) with no mention of working conditions, employment and labour relations¹⁵¹.

In sum, a decade after the beginning of the logistic re-conversion of the area, this territory seemed unable to govern the development of logistics. Among the public opinion, there was almost unanimous consent about the “bad reputation” of logistics. Nonetheless the dreams of an advanced logistics for Piacenza had not broken apart. Amazon’s landing was welcome as a step toward the realisation of Piacenza’s logistic dream.

4.2. *Launching the Italian FC: labour market and labour process*

Amazon’s first Italian FC was inaugurated in autumn 2011. It was called “the battleship” by locals because of its apparent modernity. Amazon installed its own equipment and software in the warehouse. Amazon imported from the US its own methods of recruitment, including the outsourcing of seasonal workforce to temporary staff agencies, a practice at odds with the dominant pattern in the Italian logistics industry, based on cooperatives. Furthermore, the company recruited mainly young local workers of both sexes, while logistics cooperatives hired mostly immigrant non-white workers. these two elements were perceived as clearly distinctive of Amazon’s employment relations. Also,

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Aldo Bersani, former centre-left mayor of Castel San Giovanni (1995-2004), March 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Lucia Fontana, centre-right mayor of Castel San Giovanni (2014-in office), March 2019.

¹⁵¹ “Regolamento condominiale d’uso d’aree e impianti – Complesso logistico di Castel San Giovanni”, signed on the 4th of August 2011, 33 pages, including annexes. A previous agreement had been signed in 2004.

the labour process followed Amazon's layout, however there was a major variation. While by 2011, in the US, UK, Germany and France, the organisation of work had gone fully fordist and taylorist (see Chapter 2), in Italy, where Amazon's presence was still in its infancy, such an organisation could not be deployed at full scale. Thus, the initial organisation of work was neither pre-taylorist, as in France between 2000 and 2007, nor full taylorist as at the rest of the network in 2011. It was rather proto-taylorist. Margins of autonomy were still present for workers but not as large as those we saw in France during the first phase (Chapter 3). Given these margins of autonomy, the mobilisation of worker effort relied in part on the same mechanisms of responsible autonomy that we saw in France. However, another part of these mechanisms were not needed and since the start-up labour regime in Italy presented already significant element of technical and economic coercion.

4.2.1. *The enclave. Amazon in the local labour market*

Amazon Italia announced the opening of its first Italian warehouse in Spring 2011. Jeff Bezos gave interviews to the national press (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2011; *La Repubblica* 2011), while an agreement was signed between the developer of the facility, the French company Vailog, and the local administration of Castel San Giovanni, which positively reacted to Amazon interest in establishing its warehouse in the Logistic Park. Since April, Amazon launched its recruiting campaign for the managerial team in charge of setting up operations. At the head of the local team, the company put Stefano Perego, a supply chain manager with previous experience in the UK subsidiary of the French industrial group Rexel. Perego had been initially hired by Amazon France to manage the supply chain, but eventually, when Amazon decided to accelerate the opening of the Italian infrastructure, he was redirected to Castel San Giovanni¹⁵².

The warehouse was completed by September 2011 and named MXP1, from the code of the closest airport (Milano-Malpensa). It had a surface of 25.000 m² (the Saran's FC in France was 46.000) and started with less than a dozen managers and a few dozen workers who had been previously trained in France¹⁵³.

¹⁵² Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023.

¹⁵³ Interview with Tommaso*, Amazon veteran workers and former union delegate for Cisl, later member of Cgil, September 2020.

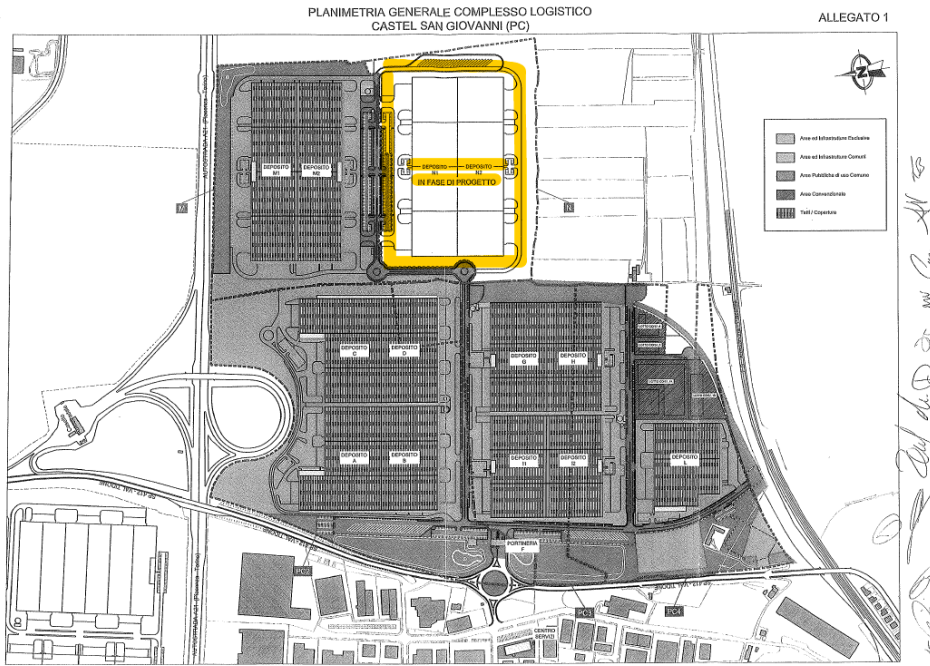


Figure 42 – General plan of the logistics park (2011)

The location of Amazon original warehouse (MXP1) is marked in yellow

Source: Comune di Castel San Giovanni

4.2.2. A problem of isomorphism: cooperatives vs temporary agencies

While taking care of developing its first warehouse, Amazon local managers had to deal with the problem of recruiting the workforce that, like we saw in France, would set up the equipment. In France, as we saw, management recruited directly the first dozen workers, and then delegated the recruitment to temporary work agencies. After a few months, almost all workers were proposed a direct contract. We saw also that in France, during the first years, volumes grew slowly. It was only around 2007 and even more starting from 2009, that Amazon sales accelerated. Sales also became more “seasonal”, with real peaks in Christmas. As a result, also the mode of recruitment changed, with agencies providing not only future permanent employees (“blue badges”) but also seasonal workers (“green badges”) that could be dismissed at the end of the Christmas season. This segmentation system was not adopted in the US, where dismissal was much less deregulated, but only in European countries where Amazon tried to circumvent employment protection for open-ended contracts. Thus, in Italy, as well as in UK, Germany, and France, blue-collar workers were employed exclusively via recruitment agencies; then, depending on individual performance, they *could* be eventually employed directly by Amazon. It was a different configuration from France, where at the onset of operations (2000), this two-tier system had not been fully fledged yet. By 2011, however, the system had become well-established.

This rigidity was particularly relevant in the Italian case, for the temporary work industry was still in its infancy and underdeveloped compared to other European countries. The dominant form of employment flexibilization in the logistics sector, as we saw above, were the cooperative firms.

Box 7 – The growth of the Temporary Work Industry in Italy (2000-2014)

Following the “Treu law” (by the name of the Industrial Relations academic and Minister of Labour of a centre-left government), implemented in 1998, temporary work agency (TWA) employment had rapidly expanded, especially in the North of the country and in manufacturing sectors (Benassi and Dorigatti 2018). Nevertheless, it should be noticed, that TWA employment was still at a take-off stage in Italy: in 2005 TWA employment still amounted to only 0.9% of total employment, far below the level observed in countries where it developed earlier. In 1999, in fact, the overall incidence was 4.5% in the Netherlands, 3.2% in the UK, 2.5% in France, and 2.5% in the US. The average TWA utilization in the European Union was 1.5%. In the early 2000s, Italy was expected to outmatch the 2% level by 2010 (A. Ichino, Mealli, and Nannicini 2005). In fact, by the end of 2014, it had grown only to 1,4%.

Table 11 – Agency work as a percentage of total employment (values expressed as %)

(Consiglio and Moschera 2016)

2001	2005	2008	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
0,5	0,9	1,2	1,1	1,1	1,2	1,3	1,4

Outsourcing to cooperatives was such a dominant pattern in Italy that even a multinational company like Ikea had adopted it since the beginning of its operations in Piacenza (1997). In socio-economic terms, Ikea’s adoption of the dominant form of employment at the local level could be defined as a phenomenon of mimetic isomorphism i.e., the tendency of organisations, primarily those facing “ambiguous goals” or “uncertain environments”, to imitate the dominant structure in their field based on the belief that such dominant model is “more legitimate or successful”; in this case, mimicking another organization perceived as legitimate becomes a “safe” way to proceed (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 151–52). We could have exacted a similar pattern in the case of Amazon, another retail multinational company whose business was based on supply chain management of logistics flows. Temporary work industry in Italy was not very developed, especially in the logistics sector, where most companies, from retail to third party logistics and many of them oligopolistic multinational companies (TNT, XPO, GLS etc.), used to subcontract warehousing to cooperatives in order to increase flexibility and reduce labour costs.

Instead, Amazon decided, since the beginning to maintain its insourcing strategy of vertical integration and direct control of its warehouses. Flexibility would be secured by temporary staff

agencies, even if they were still not very developed. Perhaps, if it would have opened in the early 2000s as initially planned, Amazon would have been more likely to adopt this system too. After all, in that early period, Amazon itself had not definitively undertaken the path of vertical integration (Chapter 1). Furthermore, as recounted by French management, Amazon had planned to set up operations relying on local subcontractors¹⁵⁴, even if it was not possible to verify this information through other sources. Anyway, between 2000 and 2001 Amazon's preference for vertical integration was not yet consolidated. Amazon's organisation of work was still in its infancy (Chapter 2) and did not represent a major obstacle toward a flexible adaptation to the specificities of the Italian context. The advantage was concrete: cooperatives could provide Amazon with an embedded network of recruitment without the constraints of directly employing workers, until the local base of customers developed enough to justify a heavier foothold. In Japan, indeed, Amazon was following this path, starting a partnership with the third-party provider Nippon Express. In Italy, the project could have been realised if the dot-com crisis had not come, constraining the company to postpone international expansion.

A decade later, things had changed. By 2011 Amazon had grown rapidly, it had definitively opted for vertical integration at a global scale, and its size made it strong enough to impose its model on local socio-economic arrangements in the external labour market. As we saw, the pattern of the organisation of work had been standardised and imposed globally as a one-best way for all the subsidiaries overseas, including the form of employment. The balance had leaned on the other direction: temporary work agencies. Amazon could not afford cooperatives, because its model needed homogeneous systems of management. The digitalisation and the standardisation of tasks, and the need to synchronise operation between the different hubs of its network made necessary for Amazon to adopt a standard model of outsourcing. The company, who based its e-retail success on quick delivery and constant process-monitoring was reluctant to entrust its operation to cooperatives, whose main priority was reducing labour costs at *any* cost – more than often, violating labour law, practicing wage theft, and eluding social security and tax payment. This was not Amazon's profit strategy, as those would have brought disorder in the workplace and reputational costs among consumers and regulators.

This brings us to a second and external-local factor that led Amazon to exclude the cooperative hypothesis: the erosion of cooperatives' despotic labour regime. At the beginning of the 2010s, cooperatives were still the dominant form of logistics outsourcing in Italy: foreign companies such as Ikea, TNT, XPO, GLS and the like all relied on it. Yet, the despotic labour regime based on cooperatives was jeopardised by the wave of labour unrest which had its epicentre precisely in

¹⁵⁴ Former site general manager (2000-2007), ORY1, man, ca. 60 years-old, individual interview, June 2023.

Piacenza. There, workers strike at Ikea in 2011, and a year later at TNT. Hit by long-lasting strikes and forced to make important concessions, cooperatives started losing their comparative advantage and saw their reputation definitively damaged. Cooperatives were no longer an economically and politically viable system of outsourcing for a multinational such as Amazon. Assessing its own internal necessities of standardisation (and of social peace) with the external constraints of the local labour market, Amazon opted for temporary staff agencies. In sum, there were not very good reasons for Amazon to jeopardise its efficiency (and its reputation) by adopting an employment model that was proving to be already exhausted.

The cold relationship between Amazon and cooperatives was mutual. During my fieldwork in Piacenza, I interviewed the CEO of the Cooperative San Martino in Piacenza, an important coop in the area, to which Ikea had outsourced its intercontinental hub. I asked him about Amazon, raising the hypothesis of a missed “opportunity” of partnership between the Seattle’s multinational and the Piacenza’s cooperative. The executive’s response was a contemptuous assessment of Amazon’s model, (pronounced with a tone that made me think to the Aesop’s tale of the fox and the grapes):

To understand Amazon, you need to look at the way the organise parking lots. When they opened in Castel San Giovanni, they invited us to see the facility. There was something that impressed me: it was compulsory to park the car with the front in reverse gear, so as when you want to go out you just drive forward and reduce the risk of accidents. I consider it a symbol that epitomises how Amazon makes its notion of efficiency extreme. There, workers are just numbers, it is hard to resist, while we [the cooperative] have another policy: if you do business with us, we are not going to give you staff, we are going to give you professionals. At Ikea, we manage our own part of work, directly and autonomously. Instead, with the agency system, the command chain is much shorter.

Fieldwork Quote 62 – Interview, CEO of the Cooperativa San Martino, Piacenza, January 2019

In fact, the statement of this CEO must be considered carefully. The strike movement that hit the coop between 2011 and 2012 illustrated that workers did not feel treated as “professionals” by the coop’s and by Ikea’s management: workers organised in the Si-Cobas union denounced labour law violations and poor working conditions (Cuppini and Pallavicini 2015; Cillo and Pradella 2018). Anyway, it is evident that the labour regime reproduced by cooperatives did not suit with the plans of Amazon for its Italian subsidiary.

While in France – and other countries such the US¹⁵⁵, the UK¹⁵⁶, Germany¹⁵⁷ and Poland¹⁵⁸ – Amazon’ use of temporary work agencies was completely aligned with the rest of the logistics

¹⁵⁵ (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Gonos and Martino 2011).

¹⁵⁶ (Ward 2003).

¹⁵⁷ (Belkacem 1998; Ferreira 2016; Alsos and Evans 2018; Barbier, Cuny, and Gaborieau 2020).

¹⁵⁸ (Coe, Johns, and Ward 2008).

industry (Gaborieau 2016b; Tranchant 2019; Belkacem and Kornig 2020), in Italy this was not the case. In fact, Amazon started building its firm-level labour regime as an “enclave”: a company that outsourced the fluctuant segment of its workforce to agencies rather than cooperatives. Then, progressively, from this enclave the model would extend in the rest of the industry.

I am not arguing here that Amazon imposed its model to the rest of the industry – we do not have enough element to demonstrate it and recent research seems to suggest that large multinational companies such as TNT were undergoing this transition on their own initiative (Benvegnù 2018). Nevertheless, we can argue that not only Amazon resisted to the external-local pressures, but it anticipated, if not set, a new trend in the industry. By the beginning of the 2020s, big logistics players such as FedEx-TNT would follow Amazon and switch on the agency model. Cooperatives were left to no else option but to open their own temporary staff business in order to compete in the market of outsourcing (Bottalico, Massimo, and Violante 2021)¹⁵⁹. In sum, thanks to its centrality in the logistics field, Amazon could insulate themselves from the local context (thus avoiding mimetic isomorphism). Then, once its position was consolidated, the company turned into the main representative of a new dominant model for the rest of the field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; see also Fligstein and McAdam 2011; Almond and Ferner 2006, 284–85).

4.2.3. *Who is to be recruited? Amazon initial workforce*

Once the coop-vs-temp agencies question was closed, it remained to be answered another one: whom was Amazon going to hire to work in its new flamboyant warehouse? Consistently with the decision of avoiding coop, Amazon tapped into a pool of workers different from the rest of logistics industry. For a company worried about its reputation, and that wanted not only to warehouse commodities, but to sell them in the Italian market, it was better to target a local workforce in order to secure the gratitude of the local authorities and the appreciation of the public opinion; to ensure that workers were docile and able enough to set up the warehouse, better avoiding migrant workers that had just proved to be pugnacious and unreliable.

According to my oral sources, most of the workers that Amazon hired during the first two years were youngsters in their early or middle twenties, born and raised in the areas of Piacenza and the bordering province of Pavia¹⁶⁰. Among those that I interviewed, the majority of them came from working-class families and held high-school degrees, if any. In some cases, one or two parents came from other regions, especially from southern Italy. Before getting their job at Amazon these young

¹⁵⁹ For instance, in 2019, 6% of the workforce of Cooperativa San Martino was employed as temporary staff worker (Interview with Francesco Milza).

¹⁶⁰ According to what reported by the renowned economic journalist Dario Di Vico in 2014, the vast majority of workers were Italian and the average age of the workers was 32 years (*Corriere della Sera* 2014b).

workers were navigating the bogs of underemployment and informal work. Dylan, 21 years old, had worked in a small mechanic shop, with no contract. At the time of the research lived with his parents. Jacopo, 23 years-old after school, started helping his father, an artisan who owned a small window-reparation business. Stefania, 21 years-old, lived with her family and had worked in a bar, under the table, and informally as babysitter.

Then, there were workers who had the same geographical origins but were older. They had already formed a family and had previous professional experience. One of them was Adriano, 38 years old, who had been a public transport driver in a metropolis of the North and a rank-and-file unionist in a Cobas. He was one of the few veteran workers with an active experience as a unionist.

Among the workers that I met, there were partial and interesting exceptions. One was Tommaso a young man in his mid-thirties at the time of my fieldwork. Differently from the others, he came from a middle-class family, based on the hills of the province of Piacenza. His older brother was an executive for a private firm in a Gulf country. Tommaso had a less linear professional trajectory than his brother. He had been a student in Bologna at the DAMS¹⁶¹ department. Previously, he had been worker as an estate agent in Mexico, before coming back to his town in search for “a break”.

There were also foreign workers from non-European countries, but they were not as numerous as in the rest of the local warehousing industry. One of them was Mike, from Ivory Coast, where he had left a large family. Another one was Maria, she came from an Eastern European country and had also entered Amazon in her 30s, after she had lost her husband and father of her two sons.

Management stressed the diversity of these first recruits and workers perceived it. Not without a certain pride, Tommaso recounts:

Let's say that the first hires were made very carefully because they had to start operations, the company had to grow so they couldn't take people with little skills... that is, they had to take those people who could evolve and do more things. If you check the press, in 2016 there is an interview with Stefano Perego who says, “We don't need warehouse workers, but we need super warehouse workers i.e. people who do more things at the same time”. [...] So this is... let's say the first people were very much people let's say in my opinion that they were more... more attentive to quality. More... smarter let's say. Now [with the new work processes] you can take anyone, because even the scanner at this moment gives you... when you go to pick there is the image of the item. Before, there was only the name and you had to be able to read it and recognise it, to spot it, at least.

¹⁶¹ The DAMS (*Discipline delle Arti, Musica e Spettacolo*; Drama, Art and Music Studies) is a higher education curriculum created in 1971 at the University of Bologna with the goal of training students in the areas of visual arts, cinema, music and theatre, accompanied by a study of technical and operational aspects. With time, DAMS student became the symbol of the avant-garde bohemian student. It was with this representation in mind that Tommaso mentioned his previous experience there.

Fieldwork Quote 63 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020.

It was still a happy island. We worked hard but we were fine, there were pre-peak parties, birthdays and you could talk to the managers, and it was still a permanent job, we worked indoors with air conditioning, and we weren't yet worn out with health: the tendons worked well!

Fieldwork Quote 64 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019.

The veteran workers joined Amazon between late 2011 and the end of 2013. What were the working conditions at that time in an Amazon's warehouse? Judging from these quotes they were so good that at the time of the interview workers regretted them.

Yet, from a global perspective, by 2011, working conditions at Amazon had deteriorated sharply in the US and in the countries where the company had opened its oldest warehouses (UK, Germany, and France). In those countries, as I have already showed, the work process had already undergone a process of digital taylorisation, with a significant fragmentation of tasks, increased rhythms, and augmented monitoring. Furthermore, the company had escalated its use of temporary workers, which resulted into labour segmentation and competition among employees. In the countries where Amazon had been running its warehouse for more than a decade, the degradation of working conditions had already emerged: in liberal-market Anglo-Saxon countries (US and UK), unionisation attempt had emerged as much soon as they had been crushed. However, the press had started reporting the situation (see previous chapter) first in the UK (2008) and then in the US (2011). In continental Europe, the situation was more ambivalent: conflict had emerged in France (2009); in Germany, instead, social peace had not been broken, and it would take another year to see union organise the first mobilisations¹⁶². Anyway, despite these different outcomes, the impact of global restructuring of the labour process had affected working conditions all the countries where Amazon had a foothold, and these problems had emerged whether by means of press coverage or workers' collective action.

Rebus sic stantibus, there would have been no space for a start-up labour regime, had Amazon established immediately the new taylorised labour process. Indeed, the evolution of the labour regime in Italy followed a singular path: like in France, but faster. On the one hand, Amazon had to pass through a start-up phase. On the other hand, given the reorganisation of the labour process that had already taken place, this start-up phase would not last very long, and the transition to a bureaucratic labour regime, based on economic and technical coercion rather than responsible autonomy, would take place rapidly. Like it usually happens in underdeveloped contexts – if such a comparison is

¹⁶² By 2011, however, both in France and Germany, no noticeable journalistic inquiry had been carried on about working conditions in Amazon's warehouses. They would be carried out and released starting from 2013.

allowed – Amazon’s Italian subsidiary would catch up a delay and this would accelerate contradictions and conflicts, as we are going to see.

The start-up labour regime that Amazon built in Piacenza presents some striking similarities with the French context, even we will later identify some nuances (especially concerning the level of standardisation of the labour process). Similarities relate to the spirit of trust and cooperation between workers and managers. During an interview, Maria, the Eastern European worker, mentioned Stefano Perego, the warehouse’s GM between 2011 and 2013:

He is the one who founded Amazon [in Italy, *author's note*]... he knew all the employees by name... at work, when he saw a new worker, he would stop you and ask his name, he would ask you about your family... sometimes you would see him coming to do picking with the workers. He was demanding, yes, but he was a boss who lowered himself to the level of the worker. And if you had personal problems you could go to him... even today the managers say that, but it's not the same thing, it's not the same situation anymore... At that time, we also celebrated birthdays: every month all those born in that month were invited to the break room, you stood there with the manager and chatted a bit...

Fieldwork Quote 65 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019

Maria’s account is perhaps the one who puts the highest emphasis on the direct, personal, and almost sentimental relation with management. The general manager appears almost as a *charismatic* figure, in Weberian terms, with which the members feel a direct, intimate relation of followership. Manager’s gesture of going to pick orders with the workers produce *identification*, creating the illusion that the manager is a *primus inter pares*. On top of this charismatic relations, however there is also the fact that workers report not only their positive appreciation of this leader, but also that the leader recognised them as individuals. This recognition passed through the fact that the General Manager knew all the names of his supervisees. Other workers precisely stress the importance of recognition: during their first period, it is reported by most of them, they had the belief that “working hard” and seriously, they could climb up the professional ladder, as management never ceased to repeat it:

The agencies spoke very highly of Amazon. Because there was a care for the worker a care for health for safety and so on. I entered the company with a lot of confidence because I saw willing local guys anyway. Co-workers were from Piacenza or from Pavia, guys who were of a medium-low age, people in their 30s, 20s. Some very few 50s maybe... Amazon offered a job... They created a job, let's say a dynamic job, but an engaging one that gave you the chance to.... To be recognised for what you did.

Fieldwork Quote 66 - Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020.

Indeed, the fantasy of a direct and personal relationship between workers and their supervisors was not the result of a personal virtue of the single managers. As we saw, the same mechanism that operated in France. The appearance of a spontaneous direct relationship was constructed by the ideological apparatuses of the company, with guidelines and precise instructions given to management from corporate offices. Going to pick was a *mise en scene* made conventional by Bezos himself, who inaugurated this practice in the previous years. The performative act staged the foundational myth of the company, the early years, when Bezos and his fellows used to prepare and ship orders all together¹⁶³. Similarly, the act of celebrating employees' birthday or remembering the name of the employees was a way to build an appearance of informality that was carefully orchestrated in Amazon's handbook of HR management. Local managers were trained and asked to follow the instructions. After all, like in the case of the French site manager (Chapter 3), managers took care of direct relationship with workers so far this was possible within the organisation of work. Most workers recount this early phase as a happy period. Our goal is to understand now the structural conditions that produced this feeling and pushed workers to get involved into work. As we will see, these structural conditions, must be limited not only to the objective working conditions experienced during the period under study, but also those experienced *after* the period under study (i.e. when I carried on my interviews), which shed a new retrospective light on the initial period.

4.2.4. *A proto-taylorist labour process: hard work but meaningful*

During the first two years, the organisation of work was still in a phase of launch, and the division of work was in a proto-taylorist phase. If in Chapter 3, referring to the French workplace, I used the term pre-taylorism, the term proto-taylorism will be more appropriated for the Italian case. The labour process and the overall organisation of production had already undergone a process of standardisation and further division of labour. However, since in Italy, everything was to build from scratch and the market presence of the company was still underdeveloped, the labour process had not fully reached the standards that were already adopted in the US and the other European countries. Aisles and shelves had to be set up, the first stock of commodities received and registered, the informatic systems had to be installed. Workers had to be able to accomplish all those different tasks. Some workers had been sent to France to be trained to processes¹⁶⁴. Once the warehouse had been equipped, the basic tasks of receive, stow, pick and pack were ready to be fulfilled.

¹⁶³ See also the book of memories of a former Amazon employee recounting his work experience as a web editor at Amazon during the late 90s (Marcus 2005).

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Tommaso, Amazon veteran workers and former union delegate for Cisl, now member of Cgil, September 26th, 2020.

In the first years, operations were all carried on at the ground floor, but the division of work was relatively blurred, compared to today. Even the pick process, which in mature warehouses was the taylorised task *par excellence*, at that time had much more blurred boundaries. Dylan, a veteran worker that has always described work with disenchantment, recognised that in that early phase workers had a certain control and understanding of the work process:

It used to work differently. For example, before, when you had to pick up, the system made sense. Because you started from a cell, and you knew that you had to do always the same route. Not like now, now you have to go up, down, left and right, because the scanner tells you to. Before, you knew the whole path in advance: you started from cell B, where the smallest pieces were, the pieces were almost all close together, then you went to cell A etc. and then you came back.

Fieldwork Quote 67 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019.

Tommaso shared the same feeling:

You felt more part of the job, certainly you felt more responsible for what was going on. Batches were assigned to one picker, and it was up to the individual picker to fulfil them, it was his own responsibility.

Fieldwork Quote 68 - Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for Cisl, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020.

The work process, in other words, appeared more transparent to the workers: “made sense” (Fieldwork Quote 67) means that the worker could understand the rationale of work assignment, because the task did not respond to an algorithm that optimised in real time all the picking path, thus centralising control on work. Of course, managers had another point of view. For them, the system was still underdeveloped and needed to be digitalised. As declared by the then-General Manager of the site, digitalisation would improve “optimisation” and “simplify” work:

For us, however, simplifying an operator’s route is a constant goal, and robots are just the latest step in a long effort. Robots aside, technology and software have already done so much, allowing the division of the warehouse into areas to be optimised¹⁶⁵.

(Il Sole 24 Ore 2016)

¹⁶⁵ The quote from Mr. Perego’s interview is interesting also for another reason, because the manager emphasises the importance of digitalisation rather than of robots. By 2016, Amazon had already started introduced its Kiva AGVs worldwide, but the element that underpins robotisation is the digitalisation of work process that Amazon has been fostering since the beginning (see Chapter 2).

From the managers' vantage point, the progressive digitalisation of work, in particular the devolution of control to algorithm had a clear advantage: simplifying the picking path. From the workers' perspective, however, this would turn into a loss of control on work.

Not only digitalisation had still to be deployed at large scale. During the start-up phase, the level of mechanisation in the warehouse was also very low. The FC lacked a conveyor, unlike most of mature FCs in Europe and the US. Since the task of moving items through the warehouses was not incorporated into machinery, the job was made by pickers. Not only each picker was expected to collect items but also to transport their cart to a manual sortation area, where a team leader manually checked the batch and brought it to the pack (this process was called *collate*). In other cases, the pickers were asked to bring the cart directly to the rebin or to the pack workstations, a task that they could accomplish without a special digital constraint.

On top of being loosely defined, tasks such as picking were characterised by frequent downtime. For example, since the warehouse handled both sort and non-sort products¹⁶⁶, picking batches contained also orders for large items such as washing machines or electrical appliances. In that case, the picker had to virtually his/her sort of batch and go to the areas where non sort items were stored. There the picker and non-sortable items were stored and handled in the warehouse, the picker called a forklift driver to bring down the item and often had to wait idle the operation and thus have a break. These kinds of imperfections in the organisation of work left the workers with latitude to take informal breaks. With the optimisation of workflows and the increasing digitalisation and mechanisation, this space would shrink.

The fact that tasks were still in their proto-taylorist phase, does not mean that work was easy and slow for workers. Some tasks such as rebin were already renowned for being very repetitive:

Rebin process, for example, is mentally challenging, perhaps the hardest... After a while, many people can't do it. Because you get a little bit crazy, or you get a little bit dizzy if you must turn left and right all the time, and you have to stare at the screen, concentrated... at pack you stare at the screen relatively less, you take one eye... at pick, the "good" thing is that you walk, but is also very hard¹⁶⁷

Fieldwork Quote 69 – Stefania, Amazon worker and union delegate for CGIL, MXPI/MXP5, woman, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, January 2019.

Despite the inevitable downtime, typical of a warehouse that was still in a trial stage, workers were asked to "work hard, have fun, make history", i.e., to increase their effort as well as their

¹⁶⁶ Six years would elapse before Amazon open a special non-sort FC in Italy.

¹⁶⁷ In the new robotised labour process, this advantage of picking would disappear (see Chapter 2; see also, Cirillo et al. 2022; 2023).

enthusiasm. According to my sources, the required work rhythms were intense, but “the sense of belonging”, as reported by some employees, pushed the employees to adapt to it. Management gave “feedback” to the workers, i.e. informed them about their score and exhorted them to do more. In addition to the feedback and the presence of the managers on the ward, the digital devices were present during the work from this early stage on, looming over the employee. At that stage, the minimum target was set by the area manager and could vary from 100 to 150 pieces per hour depending on the processes and the amount of work scheduled during the shift. On the graphical interface of his or her scanner, a worker could constantly check the number of pieces stored or picked up per hour. The worker was thus aware of his or her performance:

At the beginning, the work was already a bit more complex, not very complex, but it was heavier because they used to make us pick with safety shoes, we used other types of carts, like supermarket trolleys, or smaller arm baskets, which weighed a lot. The work was more demanding but there was a climate... there was a lot more cooperation [...] Maybe we were told “please make sure these things are done this way”, or “we need to get ready for the *cutoff*” [the scheduled departure of a truck] and let’s say it gives you a little more responsibility. Even if you were a picker. OK? You were recognised in a different way you were rewarded maybe a little bit, you felt less like a number, you felt a little bit more inside the machine...

Fieldwork Quote 70 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020.

You worked a lot but there was motivation to do it or at least I didn’t realise the problems... your work was recognised, they said “if you work hard, you will go far, the company will reward you”... in fact things did not go like that...

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 2 – Amazon worker, MXP5, man, Italian, CISL union member, 7-years seniority, workplace participant observation, June 2019

We could compare these quotes to those of the veteran French worker comparing her work to that of the marmot packaging chocolate (Fieldwork Quote 19). Italian veteran workers did not use such a colourful metaphor but made clear, like their French colleagues, that working rhythms were intense, but also that they were actively involved and mobilised. They were given “more responsibility” (Fieldwork Quote 70). Workers felt that they enjoyed a certain self-latitude on their activity, that the organisation of work was to a certain extent transparent to them (see the quote on the picking path).

4.3. *Mobilising workers’ effort in the start-up labour regime*

In the capitalist labour process, securing labour effort (while obscuring the extraction of surplus) is an imperative, as labour process theory reminds us (Burawoy 1978; P. Thompson 2010).

However, there are different way for capitalists to achieve this goal, and this gives birth to a variety of labour regimes (Burawoy 1985). In a proto-tayloristic organisation of work, such as the one I have just described, it depended much on workers active involvement than on technical and economic coercion (as it would be the case in the following phase).

How did Amazon's management create the conditions for securing and reproducing this mobilisation? The main difference with the French context concerned the stage of development of the labour process. The two phases took place in different moments of the general development of Amazon at the global level. At the corporate level, the labour process in 2011 was already more taylorised than in 2000. Differently from France, Italian workers did not feel to be an avant-garde of the Internet revolution, because ten years had passed, and the dot-com fever had waned. However, the Italian warehouse faced the same challenge of the French one ten years before: organising operation from scratch, forming a group of loyal workers capable to launch operations, and securing their effort and active involvement. All this had to be done in a labour process that was more advanced than in 2000, but still in a start-up phase.

4.3.1. Immaterial incentives: gamification and corporate events

As we saw in France, incentives for mobilising worker effort could be immaterial or material, even as we will see the boundaries between the two were frequently fuzzy. For what concerns immaterial incentives used to mobilise worker effort, we can summarise them in two types. The first was gamification in the labour process; the second type was the organisation of periodical social events during which worker was suspended and workers were "mobilised" in gathering, parties and other sorts of events.

As already discussed in the Chapter 3, the effect of gamification on the work activity is double: on the one hand, to make work-related suffering more tolerable (Burawoy 1979a; Knights 1990); on the other hand, to influence the perception that workers had of their work: less a tiring and hetero-directed activity than a recreational activity (Woodcock and Johnson 2018). Management introduced gamification through different schemes and practices. One practice that veteran workers mentioned frequently was the broadcast of music or radio in the warehouse. Music gave relief to workers in the middle of their effort, infused them with motivation and rhythms. Like in France, workers could choose the music or the radio station they wanted to listen to, and this also gave them the feeling to control their work¹⁶⁸. As a worker recalled, the fact of being involved made him work frenetically:

¹⁶⁸ Later, in the new warehouse (2015), when the number of workers increased, the "privilege" to decide the music to broadcast through the facility was withdrawn.

You used to stop working less frequently. There was music or the radio, you were in touch with the world outside, you heard the news, they would put RDS on [a renowned radio station]... you heard the news... you didn't get that urge to stop and talk, like you do now.

Fieldwork Quote 71 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019.

Music was a useful instrument to push worker to increase their effort but also to make it less visible. I would become aware of it during my participant observation years later, in Italy, as well as in France: listening to the music gave me a certain relief from repetitiveness of tasks. Nevertheless, music alone it was not enough to secure workers' effort. From the point of view of management, it needed to be completed by other schemes. Management organised contests and challenges. For example, at the beginning of a shift, workers were given objectives. For example, in case of unplanned surge in online orders, teams were asked to pick more items than the ordinary rate.

Gamification also stimulated competition among workers. Workers that distinguished themselves at work were rewarded individually with small gifts, called "swags". Swags, workers reported, were plastic coins that worked as a sort of "company currency" that could be exchanged for Amazon-branded merchandise, like t-shirts, water bottles and other gadgets. Management also awarded workers who achieved high scores with pins; the pins had inscriptions such as "best picker of the month". Workers were given wearable items (such as pull-overs, hats, wristbands, and pins), that distinguished them according to their status: ambassadors, solvers, leads, and managers had their own vest (they could be of different colours usually blue and phosphorescent yellow) and neck cords with the inscription of their job. Were these gadgets real bonus? Partly yes, in so far as they represented the higher "status" of those who wore them. This increased competition, and therefore effort, among low-rank workers that wanted to climb the job ladder; in addition, it generated satisfaction among workers who had managed to achieve higher positions (for instance, an associate being promoted team leader).

Management tried to mobilise worker effort not only in the labour process but also through the organisation of daily and periodical events. Through these events, management infused Amazon's corporate ideology in the daily life of the warehouse. This infusion took place through the use of a specific jargon: workers were called "associates" (as anywhere else in Amazon's growing empire), a denomination that, although very common in US-based firms (Walmart for example), was quite unusual in Italy. Meetings were called "briefs"; all main tasks were denominated in English or in Japanese, showing the influence of lean management on the managerial culture. Senior workers

emphasised the feeling to be “in another world”¹⁶⁹, with “another mentality”¹⁷⁰. Briefs were the daily moments during which this language was transmitted to the workers, but there were also special events that took place periodically, usually every week, every month, or every quarter. Like in France in the first period, there were weekly or monthly rewards for the best employees, those who had recorded a good performance or those who had proposed an idea to improve the work-process. Many workers recalled the “pre-peak” parties, where management gathered workers to prepare them to the winter season. After the discourse of the general manager, workers were offered food, gadgets and sometimes a concert:

There were the pre-peak parties, birthdays, and you could talk to the managers [...] They held parties outside the entrance, they put up big tents, they offered a local food speciality, the chestnut cake... then it is true that at the time there were also a few employees, now it is still done, but it is not the same thing.

Fieldwork Quote 72 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019

From the account of senior workers, it emerges that company events had an important role, along with gamification, in creating a playful atmosphere and in making workers feel lucky members of a special community, which was large, international and close at the same time. Amazon was already a very large corporation, with over eighty thousand employees all over the world (2012) – although numbers would triplicate just in the space of three years. Nonetheless, the warehouse was still the only one in Italy, and it employed just two hundred workers. Thus, workers could feel to be members of a large company which was “so rich to spend money for our fun”¹⁷¹ and, at the same time, to be members of a local community.

Management-orchestrated social events – which in fact were part of the mobilisation of work pursued by the company – were paralleled by unofficial forms of socialisation that arose spontaneously among workers and managers. Networks of friendship were established among workers and managers. People saw each other regularly after work: the most popular activity were dinners in pizzerias (the so-called “*pizzate*”), as well as football and volleyball matches¹⁷². Although they arose spontaneously among co-workers these forms of socialising were encouraged by managers

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, September 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, June 2019

¹⁷¹ Interview with Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, September 2020.

¹⁷² During the recent years it seems that padel tennis has become one of the favourite activities among Amazon workers. During I fieldwork I carried on in another Amazon FC in Northern Italy (January 2023), an Amazon spokesperson told me during a meeting: “when Amazon opens a warehouse, padel fields pop up as mushrooms!” (**Fieldwork Journal, January 2023**).

who were often involved: at pizza-dinners, the two groups of managers and workers took turns paying the bill, a staging of workers-management cooperation. These after-work gatherings strengthened social relations in the place of production, thus cementing the direct relationship between management and workers that Amazon's HR policy wanted to reproduce.

As reported by veteran workers, many tried to take advantage of this social proximity to obtain favours and help from supervisors: promotions, a relocation on better jobs etc. A worker, for example, explained that in the very beginning he was shy and did not take part to this form of sociality; eventually, he accepted to get more involved and thus obtained a permanent contract¹⁷³. These recreational practices, in other words, constituted a dense network of informal exchanges that underpinned everyday labour politics of Amazon workplace in the early phase. In sum, these social events worked as a sort of informal market where workers and manager exchanged loyalty and occupational compensations. In this respect, the immaterial dimension of recognition and loyalty appears as more and more entangled with the exchange of material resources. For instance, a better job implying a better pay.

4.3.2. The competitive advantage of Amazon in the local labour market

Working for Amazon provided particularly tangible incentives if compared to other employers in the area. Workers were particularly aware of this. They compared the working and employment conditions proposed in the flamboyant Amazon warehouse to those offered in the local labour market, in the logistics and, more broadly, in most of the service and retail sector. In comparison with the working and employment conditions that they, or their relatives and friends, had experienced in the local low-wage labour market, Amazon workers considered that a job at Amazon offered a series of material advantages. Comparing what Amazon offered to them to what they saw in the rest of the logistics. Maria, who was an immigrant single mother of two, found a way to escape the low-wage labour market of care work, in which many immigrant women ended up working:

We worked hard but we had a fixed job, certain hours, regular pay... the warehouse was warm in winter and cool in summer... you're indoors with air-conditioning. Yet, we must say, at that time our health was still good.

Fieldwork Quote 73 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019

¹⁷³ Interview with Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, September 2020.

Dylan, who had juggled between unemployment and black work for the previous years, appreciated the reliability of Amazon in regularly paying the salary, something that sounded to him as quite an exception:

The salary was fine, we were always paid on the 27th or even in advance. There was absolutely no complaining about that....

Fieldwork Quote 74 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, June 2019

Differently from the average warehouse in the area, Amazon's facilities were always cleaner, more coloured and with more comforts: from the canteen to table football, from the coffee machines to the PlayStation. The break rooms of the FCs, where workers used to sit to quickly consume their lunch, reminded me the renewed cafeteria of a university, with clean aligned tables, and coloured chairs. Another excerpt from my interview with Dylan is quite illustrative in this respect:

The first day at Amazon... what a world! It was impressive: everything was big and technological, all frenetic... where did these guys come from? What a mentality!... During training they told us that safety was important and if someone got hurt, say, by the dust on their eyes, the next day they would buy eye masks... they always insisted a lot on safety... They explained to us that safety came first, then quality and then productivity... even though, as we later understood, the pyramid was reversed...

Fieldwork Quote 75 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019

In sum, Amazon was not *any* employer in the area of Piacenza. This specificity of Amazon was very clear to the workers that joined the company during the first years. It was the result not only of Amazon's deliberate strategy, but the combination of two elements. On the one hand, Amazon's symbolic and tangible (although not monetary) benefits offered to workers. On the other hand, the gap between these small benefits compared to what workers could hope to obtain from other employers in the area. It was this double specificity – of Amazon and of the local socio-economic context – that helped Amazon to attract and mobilise the workforce. The feeling of recognition that workers reported to experience in the labour process, thanks to an organisation of work that left them a certain latitude and thanks to the system of symbolic remuneration – a phenomenon that we have already found in the French early phase – in Italy was amplified by the specificity of the local socio-economic context.

This combination turned out to be particularly important in the Italian context. As discussed above, the Italian warehouse faced the same goals of the French warehouse in their early phases. The difference was that in 2011, the stage of development of the company business and of the labour

process was much more advanced (see Chapter 1). When landing in Italy, the company was already an established firm in the international landscape and the largest e-seller in the Western world. The company had undergone a process of bureaucratisation at the global level that was not comparable to the early 2000s. The labour process was still in its infancy in Italy, but still partially taylorised thanks to the introduction of equipment that in France were introduced more slowly. This is confirmed also by the account of the Italian workers, which, as we saw, emphasised the hard work much more than their French did during the early phase. Another element that confirms this difference in temporalities is the short duration of the start-up phase in the Italian case. In such a context, Italian workers did not feel to be an avant-garde of the Internet revolution. Yet, they still felt that they were getting benefits from working for a large American employer; most of them considered, and keep on considering today, that working conditions at Amazon were objectively better than elsewhere in the local labour market. Thus, the ingredients of production politics in Italy were partially different: working conditions were harder and more standardised than in the French start-up regime. Yet, for the company the problem was similar: how to mobilise worker effort in a phase of uncertainty due to a labour process was not fully taylorised and an Italian e-commerce market still underdeveloped. The mobilisation of worker could benefit from the gap between working conditions in Amazon and in the local labour market. We will see in Chapters 6 how this aspect will become even more decisive in the second phase of amazon labour regime in Italy. The main difference between these two phases is that while in the second one, the comparison between working conditions operated as a factor of demobilisation of labour conflict, in the first phase, like in France, it operated as a driver of effort mobilisation.

The reason of this difference is that Amazon's workplace was in full expansion, and these created new opportunity for workers who wanted to commit with the company's goals, while in the second phase, we will see, those opportunities shrunk dramatically, thus reducing the incentives for the individual worker to increase his/her effort. In the next section we will explore the role of these opportunities to mobilise worker effort.

4.3.3. Mobile hierarchies and an embryonic internal labour market

In this start-up labour regime, the internal labour market was already a useful leverage for management to motivate workers¹⁷⁴. The division of work was still fuzzier compared to what it would become later. Accessing jobs such as problem solver, team leader (and, in very rare cases, area manager), had a double advantage: symbolic and reputational, but also wage and task-related: on the

¹⁷⁴ As we will see (Chapter 6), it would remain so also in the following phase, but with less influence, because possibilities of promotion shrank, as soon as the warehouse reached its maturity and stopped growing.

one hand these professions were paid better, as they corresponded to higher levels in the pay grid (see par. 4.4.1); on the other hand, they escaped the extreme routinisation of receive, stow, pick and pack – a change that had already taken place at the global level and was being established in the Italian warehouse too.

In this early phase, the FC was expanding at full speed, more rapidly than the French FCs in its initial phase. Thus, new positions were constantly and rapidly opened. The jobs of problem solver/process guide and those of team leader, for example, were usually assigned through an embryonic internal labour market. A position was called vacant, workers applied under certain conditions (having good scores and no disciplinary sanction), they were selected through a test battery and interviews. Area manger positions, instead, the lowest managerial grade, were usually filled through external recruitment. There were rare exceptions to this convention. For example, when I worked in the Piacenza's warehouse, colleagues pointed at the area manager of the vendor department, telling me that she had started as a simple associate in the early years of the warehouse and then had climbed the ladder: problem solver, vendor team leader and finally area manager¹⁷⁵.

Problem solver/process guide positions, conventionally called “solver” and “PG”, were the first step in the ladder, and we have already described their tasks in Chapter 1. In the internal labour market of the Italian warehouse, they were recognised a higher qualification and a higher wage (as stated in sector-level collective contract, see below). Getting such a job was a progress for a worker, not only in terms of money but also of status and work activity. Equipped with a special scanner, or with a laptop from which they could manipulate inventory, free to move and in charge of urgent but essential tasks of fixing, “solvers” were liberated from a repetitive and quite anonymous job. In the symbolic hierarchy of jobs, they rose up above pickers and packers.

To be sure, being a solver was also demanding. In Amazon organisation of work, only the outbound basic tasks of pick, pack and ship were considered “productive”. Management tried to minimise the ratio of all non-directly productive jobs such as solvers and PGs, hence these skilled workers had to constantly run from a side to another of the warehouse to fix any inventory problem. Still, their work was much less routinised (even if framed by dozens of procedures), and solvers/PGs had an active approach to the informatic system (instead of simply executing micro-tasks): solvers felt to be a small elite in the warehouse's system of castes. On top of that, until 2016-2017, this higher position and the quality of work was recognised in employment grids: management unilaterally classified solvers/PGs at the 4th level of the CCNL¹⁷⁶. Stefania, who worked as a problem solver

¹⁷⁵ In Amazon FCs, the vendor department is in charge of handling products that must be shipped back to suppliers or third-party sellers.

¹⁷⁶ *Contratto Collettivo Nazionale di Lavoro* (National Collective Labour Agreement). It is the name of sector-level collective contracts, conventionally signed by representative business associations and confederal unions.

between 2014 and 2015 described this mechanism, stressing the unilateralism of this promotion and how management used the CCNL's grid to differentiate workers:

Yes, [the rank] they gave it when they wanted to, when you had been a solver for a while and for them you were worthy of taking the 4th rank, they gave you the 4th rank because according to them it was something they had to give you [...] as not to... that is, to differentiate, to differentiate from the normal associate from the problem solver or the process guide.

Fieldwork Quote 76 – Stefania, Amazon worker and union delegate for CGIL, MXPI/MXP5, woman, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, January 2019

This dynamic of differentiation was even more evident for the position of team leader, usually called “lead”. While the solver/PG was a support function, the team leader was a central figure in the management of every-day workflow. They assisted the area manager in supervising workflows, in organising and giving speeches during pre-shift brief and, above all, in monitoring workers. Leads (like the area manager, his “N+1”) spent most of the time working with a laptop on which they could scrutiny the productivity rate of workers¹⁷⁷. From their laptop, lead sent messages to their supervisees, giving special instructions in case of necessity. Another important function was to regularly reach supervisees and inform them about their productivity and quality rates, either summoning them to improve it (in case the rate was not satisfying) or encouraging them to do better (when the rate was already satisfying).

Leads could exert great authority upon workers, for they had a say in distributing workers on tasks, prolongating the assignment of a temp, or deciding whether an associate could have a promotion. In many accounts that I collected during my fieldwork, leads (as well as managers) could take advantage of their power to favour their personal interests, and this would become a topic of grievance, as we will see below. Anyway, given the formal and informal authority held by lead, and their place in the division of work, it is understandable that many associates strived to climb up to this job.

Indeed, also this professional figure would progressively be affected by the taylorisation of the work process and by the increasing reliance of Amazon on seasonal peaks of sales. The company progressively divided the group of leads in two categories: temporary and permanent positions. The first had a fixed term and were called to fill temporary vacancies; the latter, instead was the “true” lead position, as it was virtually permanent and implied an advancement in the qualification grid (see below). Workers were eager on taking a job of lead although temporary, for it allowed them to exert

¹⁷⁷ Indeed, the majority of team leader were men, according to my experience as a workers inside the Italian, but also the French warehouse.

power and to hope to become permanent one day. Some of the union delegates that I interviewed had been temporary leader. Tommaso, for example, recounts that during this early phase he spent one year and a half as a temporary lead; Stefania, six months. However, despite their engagement, they would never become permanent leads. As we will see, these forms of individual deception would contribute to the break of relationship between many workers and with management.

4.3.4. *Monetary bonuses*

The hope of promotion was a powerful driver of workers' motivation, but it was not an immediate incentive. What, in this respect, distinguished the early phase of the warehouse (2011-2015) from the following one (2016-2020) was the existence of material bonuses directly linked to performance. Aside symbolic benefits and gamification, aside the mirage of promotion, management set up a system of bonuses and unilateral remuneration with direct impact on workers' income.

There is a first important difference between the Italian case on the one hand and the French on the other hand (but also the US, UK and Germany). Amazon workers in Italy have never been included in Amazon's stock-options programme. This is because globally speaking, by 2010, Amazon was entering its fordist phase. Work had become standardised and taylorised, and the company did not need stock options anymore to prompt workers involvement, as it could already rely already on technical and economic control. Thus, the global RSU program was not ceased, that would have trigger employees' reactions, but it was not extended to the new subsidiaries, such as Italy, Spain, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic.

Instead, Amazon's workers in Italy had the time to enjoy another global bonus program. For the first three years, between 2011 and 2013, workers received the RPR bonus (Performance Reward Program). The reader will remember that the PRP was applied in France precisely until 2013. The rationale of this collective bonus, we saw it, was to keep the standards of productivity, quality and safety on high levels. On the conditions that they reached pre-defined targets in productivity (rate of processed unite per hour), quality (errors minimisation) and safety (accidents minimisation), the workers of the warehouse were awarded a medal (gold, silver, and bronze) and a monetary bonus. Targets were set at the corporate level, "in Seattle" as workers used to say. In Italy, workers received around €150 each quarter. At every quarter, to celebrate the reward of the bonus, management gathered workers for a collective event:

A quarterly meeting was held... all the employees were invited to the break room: it was like a rally. The general manager would speak into the microphone, in the middle of the hall, and he would tell us about our performance at the warehouse level, and then they would give you your bonus, based on the objectives you had achieved: safety, quality, etc... these were the reports that came from America, from Seattle... For

example, if all the pieces in the bins were correct, that there were no inventory errors... then, if I am not wrong, they also considered customer reviews. And then, of course, productivity was also evaluated. As a warehouse, we never reached the maximum, the gold but we still got about one €100-150 every three to four months.

Fieldwork Quote 77 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019

Starting from 2013, the bonus was replaced. The decision was taken at a global level (see Chapter 2), because the bonus had become too aleatory and for the same reason of the end of the RSU program for the new subsidiaries: in the new fordist Amazon it was more viable to rely on economic and technical control rather than on bonus.

Other marginal bonuses existed. Senior workers that during the peak were assigned the task of training new recruits (called “Ambassadors”¹⁷⁸), received a special symbolic remuneration: a voucher worth about €100 to buy products on Amazon’s website. This was the only group of workers to receive a bonus *ad hoc*, but many workers confirmed this. Eventually in the following phase, that started around 2015, this bonus was withdrawn.

In sum, material bonuses played a smaller role in the Italian start-up labour regime than in the French one. The conditions for responsible autonomy, which required the mobilisation of worker effort also through material means, rapidly eroded. Workers received no stock options and the PRP program was also withdrawn after a few years. Still these bonus programmes marked a difference between the start-up labour regimes and the subsequent bureaucratic one.

4.4. *Labour institutions without labour organisations*

When Amazon arrived in Italy, the company had already accumulated considerable experience in dealing with unions. In the US, the UK, and even in Germany, Amazon had successfully thwarted union organising attempts. In France, as we saw in Chapter 2, the scenario was different. Amazon had been forced to accept the presence of unions in its logistic sites, since unions benefited from legally binding protection. However, the company had proven to be smart in coping with this constraint, managing to domesticate union action for almost a decade, until a crisis broke out between around 2009. What was going to happen in Italy?

The configuration of the French and Italian industrial relation systems will be discussed more systematically in Part III. For what concerns the present discussion on workplace labour relations we discuss some essential factors that affected the internal politics into the workplace. From a very

¹⁷⁸ To be “promoted” (I put it in quotes because it was not associated to a change in qualification and wage) to ambassador, of course, a worker.

general point of view, trade unions were at least as much powerful in Italy as much as in France. In conventional wisdom, Italy and France are considered to have very similar system of industrial relations, especially because of the legacy of strong rank-and-file militancy, communist-led and catholic-inspired unions (CGIL and CGT; CISL and CFDT). In fact, looking at things more carefully, there were deep differences between the two union landscapes, and these differences have become much more evident since the turning point of the early 1990s. Facing the same structural crisis, the transition from a wage-led fordist regime to a profit-led growth model (Amable, Guillaud, and Palombarini 2012; Baccaro and Howell 2017; Baccaro, Blyth, and Pontusson 2022), Italian and French unions had reacted with two divergent patterns of action. Italian unions definitively departed from their conflict-oriented strategy and embraced a neo-corporatist strategy (Locke 1992; Regini 1995; Baccaro 1999); French unions, instead, became much more divided among them, with some undertaking a path of moderate “reconversion” (especially the CFDT) while other maintaining an antagonistic stance, thus hindering the establishment of a neo-corporatist framework on labour regulation (Howell 1992; Bevort and Jobert 2011; Rehfeldt 2018).

For what concerns the argument of this chapter, two elements are relevant. First, the form of representation in Italy underwent important transformation that distinguished it from the French one. In Italy, the regulation of work remained based on the principle of “collective autonomy”: the main level of labour regulation was recognised in collective bargaining (especially at the industry and inter-industry level); in France, legal regulation (either legislative or governmental) had a much larger role in workplace labour relations and, as we saw, made it much easier for unions – and almost compulsory for employers – to establish formal union representation in the workplace.

Second, these different principles of regulation were functional, among other things, to the specificities of union organisation and representation. In France, industrial relations reforms had fostered firm-level collective bargaining, while conceding unions a set of legal guarantees intended to guarantee their presence in the workplace. The rationale of this setting was to foster union presence which had become particularly weak, so as to legitimise firm-level collective bargaining, considered the main way to firms’ flexibility. In Italy, instead, union membership had declined but had remain relatively high compared to other countries, and much higher than in France.

Furthermore, sector and inter-sector-level collective bargaining had remained the principal field of collective bargaining, where unions had proven capable to promote unitary action and make important concessions to employers and government. In the Italian system, workplace collective bargaining remained of secondary importance and lacked the deep legal regulation that characterised

the French context¹⁷⁹. As a complement of this order, union presence depended not so much on legal protection, as in France, but on effective membership in the workplace. Furthermore, and even more importantly, the enforcement of the labour law and CCNL depended in turn on union presence.

Consequently, whilst in France Amazon had to face union presence and more binding labour law since its second year of activity (and take the necessary measures to handle this problem), in Italy the initial configuration of the relationship between Amazon and the institutions of labour regulation took a different form. Since the beginning, Amazon management was aware that the company could not avoid the application of a national sectoral collective agreement, for this was clearly established by law and conventions. Instead, since no binding norms provided it, unions could be easily kept at bay. This in turn had consequences on the application of labour law and the CCNL. In a workplace marked by the strong anti-union culture of Amazon and by the mechanisms of worker mobilisation that we analysed above, space for unions, whether confederal such as CGIL, CISL and UIL, or rank-and-file such as the Si-Cobas, were narrow.

4.4.1. *The application of the sectoral collective agreement*

For what concerns the application of the CCNL, management chose to adopt the collective agreement of the commerce sector (*Terziario, Distribuzione, Servizi*, TDS). Furthermore, the company decided to join a business association, Confcommercio, and to adopt a province-level collective agreement that the local branches of Confcommercio and the confederal unions had signed in 2006¹⁸⁰. The application of the national sectoral collective agreement entailed the obligation to adopt the contract's qualification and remuneration greed and adapt the internal greed to the external one, in order to determine the wage of each category.

Table 12 – Amazon Amazon's internal classification and the classification established by the CCNL

<i>Amazon Role (Internal Grid)</i>	<i>CCNL Grid</i>
Temp (T3)	6 ¹⁸¹
Associate (T3)	5 ¹⁸²
Problem Solver/Process Guide (T2)	4

¹⁷⁹ Until the reform promoted in 2011 by Mario Monti's government during the Great Recession, which allowed company-level agreements to derogate from national sectoral collective agreement and labour law on several subjects, including regulations on unfair dismissals (Meardi 2014; D'Amuri and Giorgiantonio 2015; Baccaro and Howell 2017; see Part III of this thesis).

¹⁸⁰ The accord established an annual wage increase for all the employees of the companies which were members of Confcommercio, in case the number of employees and/or the number of companies in the commerce sector resulted higher in the considered year than in the previous year (at the provincial level).

¹⁸¹ Since 2018.

¹⁸² Between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, Amazon started promoting associates to the 4th level, after 18 months of tenure.

Team Leader / Eng.Technician / IT technician (T1)	3 ¹⁸³
Manager (T1)	// ¹⁸⁴

The adaptation to a sectoral collective agreement negotiated by unions and business associations could appear at odds with Amazon's ideology. However, the French experience has already illustrated the pragmatism of subsidiary management when it came to bow in front of mandatory institutional constraints.

Indeed, not only managers understood that these constraints did not affect the organisation of work in a significative way. Management also grasped the potential advantages of appropriating institutional regulation. After all, a CCNL offered useful guidelines to organise employment relations in an ordered way (for instance, remuneration and working time). In addition, small adjustments were possible, provided that they did not change in worse the provisions of the CCNL. For example, as we saw, in 2013 local management replaced the global PRP bonus (abolished at the top European level) with unilateral and individual wage augmentations. Later, between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, Amazon would make another change in employment contracts: under union pressure, the company started promoting to the 4th level all associates that had reached an 18-months tenure. This measure was provided by the CCNL. However, the promotion was set up so as to guarantee some advantages to Amazon: workers whose tenure had passed the threshold of 18 months received a letter where they were also informed that the promotion replaced ("absorbed", the letter said) the previous wage increases.

While in Italy employers must adopt a CCNL to frame their employment relations, they have no obligation to deal with unions, unless a considerable number of workers decides to join a union and claim a firm-level bargaining table¹⁸⁵. For the first five years of activity, this would not happen. The above-mentioned measures were adopted by Amazon in a unilateral and individualised way, i.e. worker by worker, because unions were still not present in the workplace as an organised and bargaining actor. Unions did not show up in the workplace until March 2016, and until 2018 they would not have enough force to be recognised as an organised and bargaining actor by the employer (see Part III).

¹⁸³ Some team leaders decided to individually sue the company in a labour jurisdiction. At the moment, one of them, who was also a union delegate for CISL won his lawsuit: Amazon was forced by the judge to award the worker with a Level 2 qualification.

¹⁸⁴ CCNL of managers and executives.

¹⁸⁵ This is a major difference as compared to France, where negotiations with union delegates was compulsory.

4.4.2. *A workplace without unions*

Evidence on this period suggests the temporary success of Amazon's start-up labour regime: for almost five years workers did not feel the need of a union, and this despite the fact that unions in Italy have institutional force and a relatively high presence in the economy (more than 30% membership). It was not the purpose of this chapter to analyse the role of unions' strategies in this delay, since this aspect will be better dissected in Part III. What is more interesting in the economy of this chapter – which is how Amazon management mobilised worker effort – is to understand how the organisation of the labour process and the style of labour relations adopted by management prevented the presence of unions in the workplace.

A first element to consider is that the dominant social traits of the workforce – young, with small professional experience, and even less knowledge of trade unionism – made it not very likely to unionise. After all, we have just seen it, workers reported that they felt satisfied at work and most of them had positive expectation for their future at Amazon. It could be argued that there were other workers who were not happy with their situation already in that early period, as it emerged from discussion with one of them; nonetheless, if such a discontent existed it manifested itself through *exit* rather than *voice* (Hirschman 1970).

Since its arrival, Amazon made efforts to build a labour regime isolated from the upsets of the surrounding logistic industry, and it did that successfully: there was no subcontracting to cooperatives, no despotic and openly racist management of the workforce (after all, the vast majority of the workers were white Italian), no tax and social security evasion (at least for what concern the logistics segment of the business), and decent working conditions; on top of that, management had introduced benefits, and a specific corporate ideology, with which there was no comparison in the local low-wage labour market. In such a context most workers – whether they were young local un- or under-employed, single mothers, or family breadwinners – found good reasons to play the game, work hard and enjoy the symbolic and material gratifications offered by management.

Now that we established the internal causes of the lack of unions, we can raise the question of consequences, in the short and in the long term. In the short term, the lack of union presence arguably made the control of the workforce more comfortable for management. It is true that, as we saw in France, even with a formal union presence, Amazon plant management had proven able to exert political control in the workplace anyway. In Italy, the complete absence of unions made the task easier for management. For the first years, employment relations were inspired to an individualised and personalised style of management, as well as on informal but discretionary exchange between loyal workers and benevolent managers. In the long term, however, it is possible that such uncontested power generated unexpected effects that undermined the foundations of the labour regime. The lack

of a union counterbalance on managerial discretion, made management less accountable toward the workers.

Workers reported that their demands, especially on health issues, but also on working time, were easily dismissed and that it was precisely this arrogance on the part of management that pushed first a bunch of them, and later more and more workers to call the unions in. As Maria told sharply, hadn't management behaved in such an outrageous way, she would have never considered joining a union¹⁸⁶. Another worker explains that workers felt that they could not trust managers anymore and that a new way of regulating labour relations had to be found:

Everything was one-to-one, any request, if you needed a day off... Everything, everything! That's why if a company is a healthy one, it's a company that knows how to manage its employees well, then okay... I mean, more or less... but since there were... differences in treatment were perceived... those were also the inputs that pushed us to ask for something different because I wanted to be protected... I wanted someone who, if they said something wrong at a one-to-one, would respond with, "No, you can't do that, it's not legal".

Fieldwork Quote 78 – Tommaso, Amazon veteran workers and former union delegate for CISL, now member of CGIL, Interview, September 2020.

On the other hand, the analysis of the global trajectory of Amazon and of the French cases points at increasing centralisation of control as a source of crisis. The taylorisation of the labour process reduced the space of initiative not only for workers but also for management. Also, the narrowing of responsible autonomy made managers less interested in engaging with formal and informal exchange with the workers.

How did workers react to the initial implementation of Amazon's labour regime and to the progressive erosion of its conditions of existence?

Retrospectively, workers recognised that those impressions were "illusions": illusions about their safety, about their professional improvement about meritocracy. In their account of the first years, workers did not omit the dark sides of their early experience. Dylan uses a crude expression to explain his feelings:

The former manager [the one who used to come down to work with workers from time to time, author's note] used to make you think that shit was chocolate. The new one was more honest, somehow: he didn't give a shit about you... he even treated you badly.

Fieldwork Quote 79 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, January 2019.

Another worker proved a certain self-reflexive gaze on himself, distinguishing his own self in the early years from the self of the interview:

So, if the me from 2012 were to answer you, he would say, “Well the managers are a bit hard but they are very responsible people. And they work and help us a lot”. If I had to answer you in 2021, I would say, “They were great bastards”, they made you come at work 10 minutes earlier, not paid, to do the briefing. In the briefings, they would... they would attack you, they would say “please check other people too and tell us the ones who are talking instead of working”, that is: they used us as spies. [...] And then they would often remind us that there were a lot of people outside who wanted to work, ok?, and that if we didn't want to work that was the door, ok? So, at the time, they had attitudes that I considered harsh but up to a certain point... now I condemn them much, much more because in a nutshell they are taking advantage of someone's fear of losing his job. You are pushing on people who nevertheless have needs and wants. They're pushing on the level at the psychological level you're...you're manipulating them to give their best anyway... [...] compared to today not much has changed so... But they were perhaps more cunning! At the time there was Stefano Perego who was more astute. I remember that every week he used to come and make the pick with us. So, he would try to make it clear that he was no different from us. He was trying to touch us on an empathic level, but it was a cunning, it wasn't sincere....

Fieldwork Quote 80 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020.

Workers recognized that the promises of the company made them work, put their health at risk and make them trust people that did not deserve it. Maria explained her bitter feelings about it:

An American company, yes, but it Italianised quickly. All that mattered was acquaintances, evenings... that's how Amazon works. You go out drinking all around and so maybe you go blue earlier [change from temp (green), to permanent (blue), author's note] or maybe they change your job for a better one. If not, you get stuck at pick and pack all the time.

Fieldwork Quote 81 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019

Workers reported that events such as parties, games and celebrations of various kinds produced a feeling of recognition and belonging in them, at least during the first years. In such a context, there were few margins for union to organise workers and little need for workers to unionise. This effect however started waning, in a moment that we can locate around 2015.

4.5. *Transition in the labour process, crisis in the labour regime*

The start-up labour regime worked efficiently throughout the plant's first expansionary phase, but a series of long-term dynamics (business growth and taylorisation of the labour process) and contingent events (turnover in management) undermined the conditions of its existence.

Already by the end of 2013 the situation in the shopfloor had deteriorated. According to Dylan, management did not do anything to hide it:

Worker: I remember there was a veteran manager, who fortunately is no longer here, who used to say at briefings that the company is changing in this respect. He was someone who organised dinners etc. As soon as we all moved to MXP5, he started saying that the company was changing.

Authort: Can you tell me in a little more detail what it said?

Worker: Well... a general discourse that we were also losing the family thing because we would be even more... Before the environment was smaller

Fieldwork Quote 82 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019

What did this manager mean by saying that “the company was changing”? Objectively, Amazon in Italy was growing fast. Sales had grown so much that the MXP1 warehouse had reached its full capacity. If in France, it had taken seven years, in Italy it was a matter of two. Between 2011 the number of permanent employees had quadruplicated (Figure 43). The company decided to open a new and bigger facility a few hundred meters north across the highway, just out the logistic park, and to open a larger warehouse (75.000 m²; 100.000 since 2016) (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2013; *Libertà* 2014; *Corriere della Sera* 2014a).

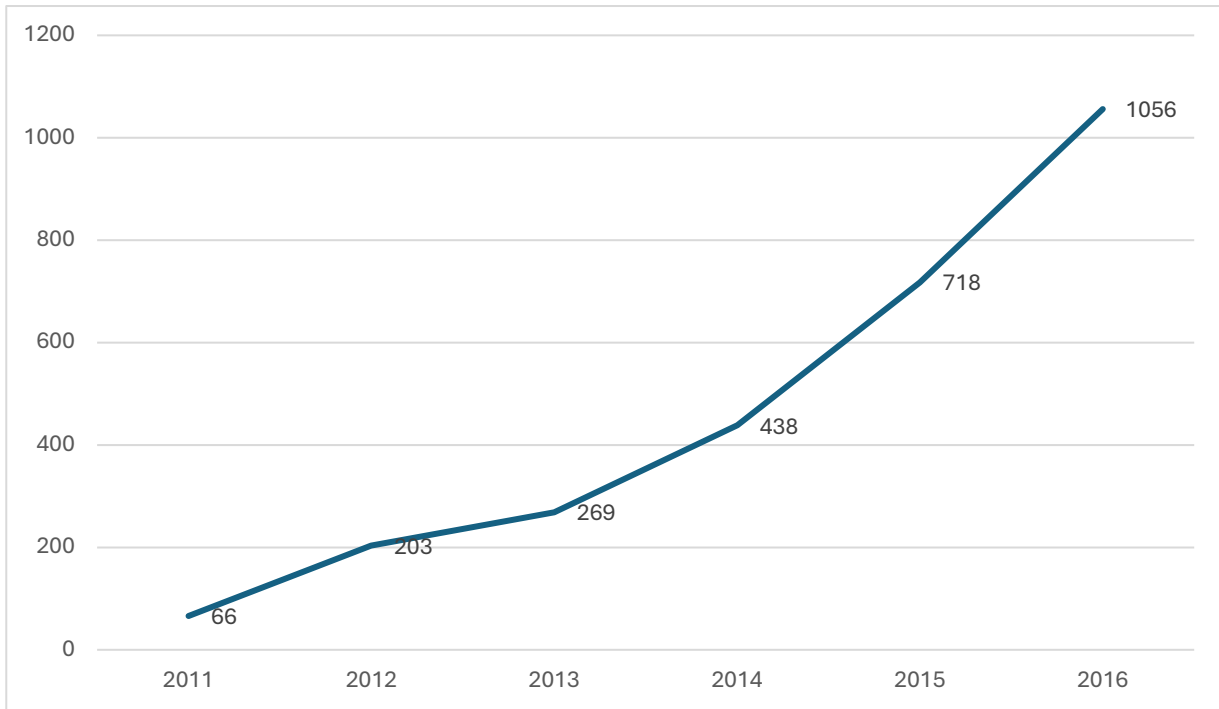


Figure 43 – The growth of MXP1/MXP5 workforce (2011-2016)

Source: Amazon Italia Logistica, Annual report

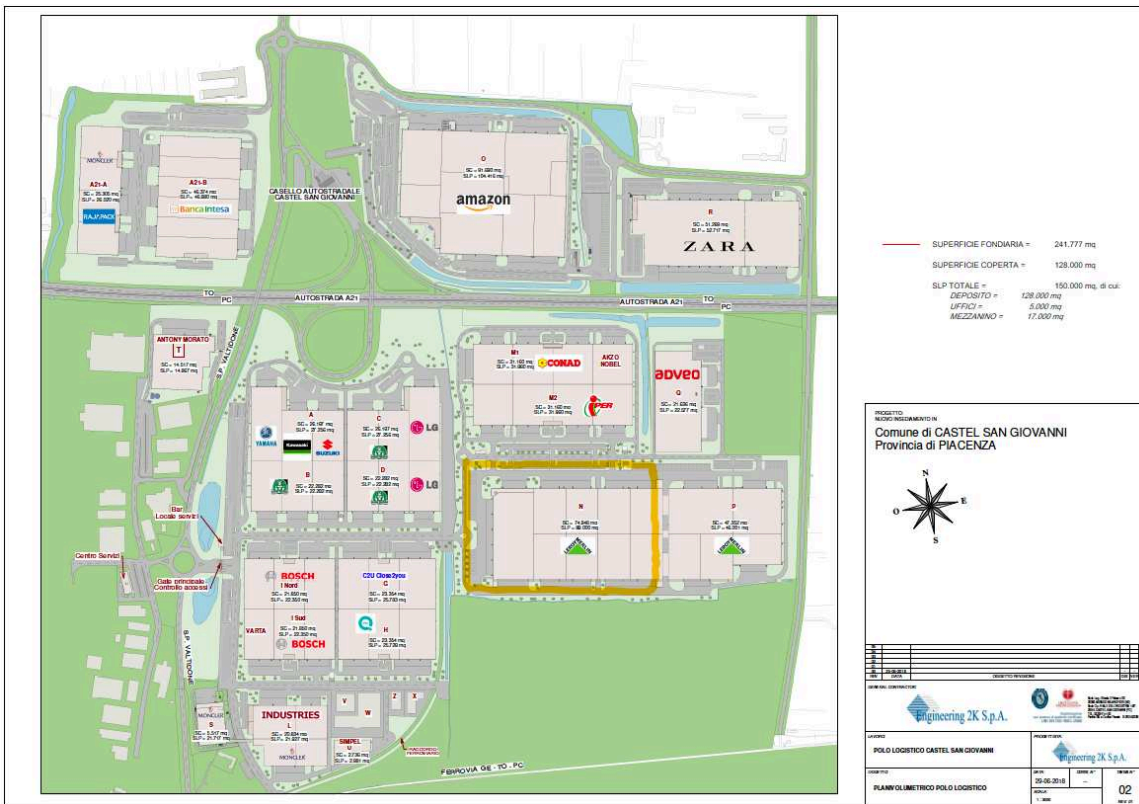


Figure 44 – Amazon current FC (MXP5) in the logistic park of Castel San Giovanni in 2018

Bordered in yellow is where Amazon opened its first smaller FC (MXP1)

Source: Comune di Castel San Giovanni

Like in France, the transfer to a new warehouse coincided with change in the labour process. With the movement of operations from the original small warehouse (MXP1), to the new one (MXP5), the labour process was updated to the one in use in the rest of Amazon warehouses.

The new warehouse had two picktowers of 4 floors each, where commodities were stored and picked. They were connected to the ground floor, where the receive and shipping operations took place, through a system of conveyor belts.



Figure 45 – A worker with a manual forklift. In the background one of the picktowers in MXP5

Four floors are visible: from the ground (P-1) to the fourth (P-4)

Source:

(Libertà 2014)

Mechanisation was improved. The conveyor belts passed through all the cells of the warehouse, moving totes filled of items that had to be stowed (Inbound fluxes) or had just been picked (Outbound fluxes). The introduction of conveyors and totes led to the progressive removal of silver carts, which were confined to part of stowing operations, while they were replaced in picking by blue carts with the capacity of two totes each. Once one, or both totes were full, the picker was not required anymore to bring it to the buffer areas, but just to drop them on the conveyor (see par. Picking). Another front of mechanisation concerned pack operations. Not only pack stations were updated with the most advanced systems, in which pack was manually executed by packers but digitally directed by algorithms (see par. Pack); also, two large automatic machines were installed at the ground floor.

This was an experiment that Amazon was running in the Piacenza's warehouse and in another FC in the US (as explained by Mr. Perego to the press: *Il Sole 24 Ore* 2016).

Digitalisation was even more pervasive than mechanisation. Like in France, most of the processes fell under tighter direction of the informatic system. With the reorganization, each task was much more defined, more limited and monitored. For example, picking. If in the old warehouse, the picking path was determined locally by management and the picker had a certain self-latitude in following it, with the digitalization the determination of the path was not questionable anymore: the algorithm fragmented the batch and redistributed to the whole team of pickers; thus, picker lost control on ordering the list of items, for they were constraint by the informatic machine to pick one specific item, the one which appeared on their screen-scanner, before picking the following one.

The results of this updated organization of work for Amazon were clear: picking was reduced to the simple collect of item and, along with other jobs, was put under strict monitoring and technical control. Control was incorporated by algorithms and thus centralised, and this increased the speed of cycle time. Mechanisation and digitalisation of transport functions also increased speed and allowed to assign much more workers from auxiliary functions to directly productive outbound jobs (mostly pick and pack).

However, such reorganisation produced contradictions. The centralisation of control had major consequences not only on workers but also on managers, who lost autonomy in the govern of workflow, and this would devoid them of the necessary ability to informally negotiate small adjustments in the every-day activity of the warehouse. Workers realised this change in the power of managers on the organisation of work:

Now the managers are younger. The hard core has been already setup, they just have to follow the guidelines. That's enough, everything has been already set up by previous management. [...] Our manager's negotiating power is zero, all decisions come from Luxemburg now.

Fieldwork Quote 83 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020

Another worker reported that during the first years, managers could set autonomously the productivity target of pickers, packers and stowers¹⁸⁷. Now, this function had been centralised by the informatic system. Hence, management loss a lever to adjust work plans to the concrete necessities of the warehouse (in case of volume fluctuations).

¹⁸⁷ Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, June 2019.

Overall, the centralisation of command – that was linked to the constitution of a centralised managerial structure at the European level – allowed management to make less concession to the workers, for they had no more control on planning, but at the same time made it less capable to deal with grievances, and this would become evident in the major political crisis of the labour regime (the strike of 2017 and the pandemic crisis of 2020). Subsidiary management also had to enforce the corporate decision of abolishing the PRP bonus, in 2014. The bonus was replaced by a flat wage increase.

* * *

It was from the perspective of workers that things changed the most and with strong impact on their morale. In workers account, deception was the dominant feeling. Deception was the product of different concomitant factors.

First, the workers felt that with the re-organisation of the labour process they were losing control on their work:

Yes, now you just pick one item after another. You don't know what's going on behind. You say OK. You feel like you're shopping... but for someone else of course [...] before, you didn't have that desire to stop and talk, like you do now, when you're excluded from the world and maybe you get a bit depressed, a bit sad because you say "Fuck, I'm in here and I don't know anything about what's going on outside". Maybe the work is heavy for the rhythms, not for what you do, but for the rhythms, like the movements: getting down, getting up especially when you must count the pieces. It was a different environment before.... It was a friendlier environment, now they make you realise that you're just there to work and you don't have to think about anything else...

Fieldwork Quote 84 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019

Second, not only the process became less transparent, but also more routinised and monitored. Workers reported that rhythms had intensified, as well as managers' pressures:

The working hours were increased to seven days a week, we even worked on Sundays, and on top of that they were bugging us with productivity, saying we weren't doing enough!

Fieldwork Quote 85 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019

Another worker, who managed to become temporary lead was finally had a clash with her manager because she refused to pressure workers to increase their productivity. After all, she added, she was

just a temporary lead, she did not have the authority of a permanent lead, neither the correspondent economic recognition:

At one point, my manager said to me: “Look, go to picktower, and go and give feedback to that guy, because they're going slow”. I don't do that, because I'm at the same rank as them, and if I go bother him with feedback, he says: “who the hell are you to give me feedback?”. In my opinion, it's a responsibility and if you give responsibility on things and people, you pay, you remunerate. I did it for six months, and they did not promote me to the corresponding rank. If you think I'm capable, you give me the rank, you give me something that formally differentiates me from the others, a recognition, because it's normal that if you come to me and I don't even know who you are, you're someone like me, you tell me “Look, you're going slow, why are you going slow?”, you understand very well that I'll tell you to fuck off: “what do you want? Who are you, send me the manager”. And in fact, I told my manager “You go, I'm not going”. In addition, I'm not someone who likes pressuring people.

Fieldwork Quote 86 – Stefania, Amazon worker and union delegate for CGIL, MXPI/MXP5, woman, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, January 2019

Third, workers started realising the impact of working conditions on their health, and this was a turning point in the consciousness of many of them. In another interview, another anonymous worker explains that she decided to join the union when she started realising that many workers were suffering from the deterioration of workers health. Also, this worker would later suffer from serious problem at her knees that would require surgery and rehabilitation. The worker recounts that the decision to join a union – at a time when very few workers dared to do so – coincided with the moment when management proposed her a job as temporary lead. She guessed that the two choices were not compatible with one another, but she explained she was too disappointed with management. After all, management was offering a mere temporary position, just to replace someone for the incoming Christmas peak.

I joined the union, and it was something crazy, because I don't think anyone ever had done so in there! And I joined the union just when they [management] proposed me to become a temporary lead! When they gave me the opportunity to make a career, what did I say? I go with the union. Because at the same time I could see that some bad things were happening, even in my department... people who were sick, the one who had a hernia, the other one they always kept in the pack, the other one who was rotting there in the pack...

Fieldwork Quote 87 – Anonymous Amazon worker and union member, MXPI/MXP5, woman, 8-years seniority, interview, January 2019.

Fourth, it became clear that there were less and less possibilities of promotion. The worker cited above probably understood that temporary position was no longer a step to permanent team leading

jobs. Another worker explained that the internal labour market was stagnating more and more, with consequences on the morale and the physical health of co-workers:

If you remain a picker or packer, it's hard physically and morally. At a certain point, you were only doing picks for months and months... you were even afraid to ask... then came the compulsory overtime, sometimes you were told you had to stay longer just in the middle of the shift, right after the break, and you couldn't make it home, there were colleagues with their husbands waiting... it was a mess... It became hard physically, with hernias, tendinitis, broken knees etc.

Fieldwork Quote 88 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019.

While the labour process became more massified and taylorised, workers increased pressures on the internal labour market to escape bad working conditions by seeking a promotion. However, in that phase the internal labour market could not absorb such a demand. With customer orders soaring and the process becoming more centralised and digitalised, the proportion of more qualified positions (from solver to lead) shrank (Figure 46).

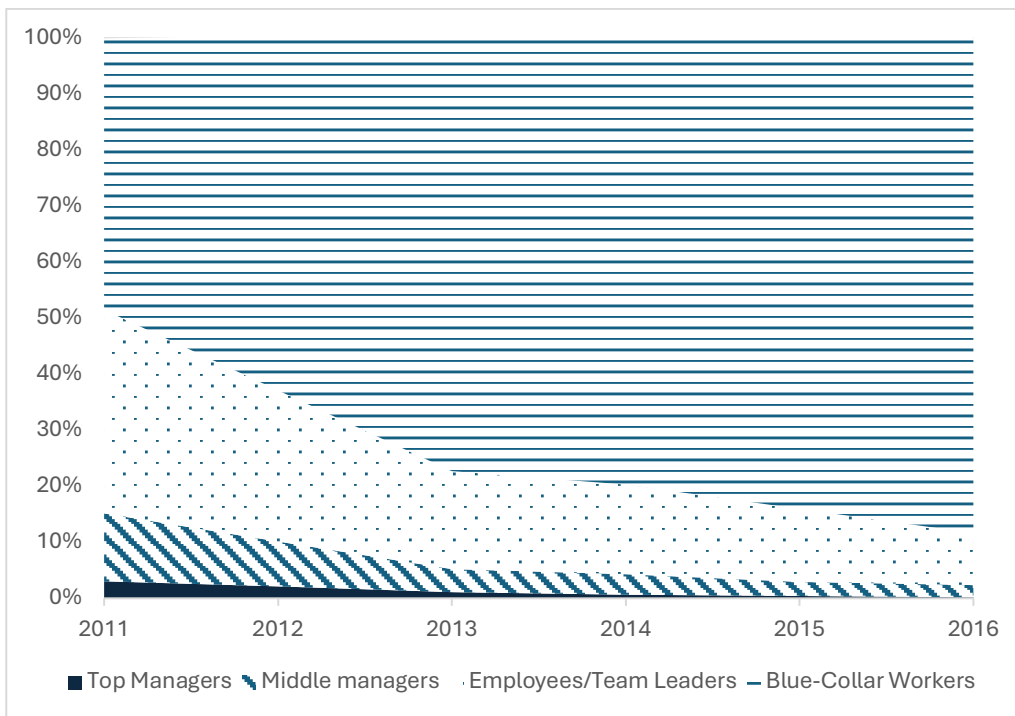


Figure 46 – Breakdown of the employees of Amazon’s logistics subsidiary in Italy by professional groups (%) (2011-2021)

For 2012 data are missing, (a 2011-2013 average is plotted)

Source: Amazon Italia Logistica, Annual Reports

Fifth, a general lack of individual recognition contributed to separate the workers from management. This was due to the factors mentioned above but also to a shift in the composition of the workforce. At every peak, the warehouse got crowded, with the agencies recruiting hundreds of workers between September and November to prepare the Christmas peak. In this context, veteran workers felt almost “invaded” by temporary workers whose social characteristics were different: many were migrants non rooted in the territory, and their approach to work was perceived as different:

By now you see that the type of work is idiot-proof. Now there’s also the image of the product you have to pick [displayed on the screen of the scanner], so even if I don't speak Italian, even if I speak Chinese and Japanese or another language, that’s the job: you do it without any problem. At the beginning it was a bit more complex, well: not very complex, it was heavier [...] but there was much more cooperation. Now it’s obvious, I see that even with the green badges [temporary workers] now, it’s obvious that there’s also a lot of green badges that are lazy or maybe they are aware that they won’t be kept in the job after the season or... or they don’t like the work, they don’t like how they are treated.

Fieldwork Quote 89 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020.

The growth of the number of employees and especially entry of a mass of temporary workers, was a decisive change because it made impossible for management to leverage on the personal direct relationship between workers and managers. It was simply impossible. In this respect I remind the statement of the ORY1 site manager explaining that over a hundred of workers, it is impossible to remember the name of every single employee (Fieldwork Quote 58). In Italy a similar process of loss of personal identity took place, linked to an erosion of the direct personal relations between management and the workers. This erosion did not imply that direct relations lost its own influence, but that it lost its reach. Many workers started feeling excluded by the privilege of direct relationship with managers:

I mean afterwards, when there was the transition to MXP5, soon we became 1.500, I saw the real dynamics, even as a lead. As a temporary leader I was asked by managers “who would you keep”, “what do you think of him... of her...”. I’ve seen people who worked their asses off being left at home because they weren’t liked by the manager, for example, or people who made much less stay precisely because they were liked by the managers and because they went to the dinners with them.

Fieldwork Quote 90 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020.

I once asked a manager: “how do you choose?” [what temp is being hired as permanent] – I had seen people become “blue” in 3-4 months, despite they had only been trained to basic processes, such as problem solving

– The manager told me: “I’m forming a team and I choose those I like best”. Meritocracy, my foot! Some became leads by going out the evenings after work, or by becoming girlfriends of the leads...

Fieldwork Quote 91 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019.

At one point of our interview, Tommaso became explicit about the disappointment that he, and other workers, felt. It is interesting how he compared the social dynamics of the workplace to institutional “politics”, as if the workplace were a microcosm of the broader socio-political sphere. The excerpt shows how the normative discourse of management lost its credibility in the eyes of many veteran workers:

What created a break between me, and Amazon was the classic “Italian” managerial management, which I believe is nepotism, it’s all a matter of *cliques*. [...] it took away the respect I had for the company, that is, a multinational that casts itself as infused with concrete values, at least on paper, that says “Those who work go ahead, those who respect the rules go ahead, etc.”... these are principles in contrast with what was then the actual management of human resources. And they demoralised so many people who worked and believed in the values of the company, that is, meritocracy – because they kept telling us that meritocracy at Amazon was fundamental. And instead, I saw them creating little groups of friends of family members of people who were only improving because they were friends, OK? [...] I made the analogy to politics to the Italian Parliament: where those who go forward are friends of friends of friends, cousins, and brothers. Think about RAI [Italy’s public television], for example, right?

Fieldwork Quote 92 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020

In front of a looming process of anonymisation, many veteran workers got fed up with managerial rhetoric, events, and parties; in their opinions, there were urgent problems, especially concerning health and safety, but management was not taking it seriously. Stefania recounts that she hoped to become a permanent lead, she worked hard, but then she realized workers around her were getting sick, and she lost interest in participating to social events promoted by the company:

I used to go to parties too, but then you realise that it's all stuff... I don't know how to put it... At first, it's all good, you go in... And then you get sick... of this shit here, you get annoyed with the fact that there are real problems, and they spend money on this shit... And so, I don't go. Then there are still some colleagues who go...

Fieldwork Quote 93 – Stefania, Amazon worker and union delegate for CGIL, MXP1/MXP5, woman, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, January 2019

Workers locate these changes in the years between 2014 and 2015, after the warehouse had been moved and upgraded. Even more interestingly, and similarly to other classic cases in industrial sociology (Gouldner 1954; 1965), these changes and the consequently break of the labour regime was associated with a turnover in management:

I believe that if the new plant manager hadn't arrived, the union wouldn't have set foot in the warehouse... or at least it would have been more difficult... The new manager increased pressure, with feedback and he didn't come to pick with us, like the old manager did... Then the habit of celebrating employees' birthdays was lost, and he didn't give a damn about us, he didn't even know our names... so I met him once and I said: don't you want to meet your associates? Eventually then the following year he introduced a voucher for a paid breakfast... but he didn't really understand the spirit in which birthdays are celebrated, it's not like I'm scrounging for your breakfast... he's just not interested in a relationship with people...

Fieldwork Quote 94 – Maria, Amazon worker and union delegate for Cisl, MXP1/MXP5, woman, Ukrainian, ca. 35-40 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, January 2019

You did not joke with the new manager... For example, I got negative feedback from him for I was pushing my cart in a way that was not correct. Discipline got tighter... negative feedback started pouring in... more and more...

Fieldwork Quote 95 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for Cisl (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019

Management – it appears from these accounts – became more demanding and authoritarian. Stricter enforcement of productivity goals was associated in the memory of workers to a turnover of management, especially the site director. Although there is no doubt that turnover in management catalysed the tensions that I have just described, the erosion of the labour regime does not boil down to a simple change of the guard in local management. Rather, I have illustrated, it was the result of structural changes at the global corporate level that reverberated, with its own temporalities, at the local level in the labour process and the internal labour market. On the one hand, management turnover opened an intermediate phase in which management was constrained by new directives coming from above while losing power on the labour process because of centralisation of control. On the other hand, it took two years (until 2017) before constituted unions in the workplace.

Anyway, the period between 2014 and 2015 coincided with a crisis in the labour regime that would explode in 2017. The crisis marked the transition to a new labour regime characterised by reduced worker autonomy in the workplace, higher technical coercion and an increasing bureaucratisation of worker-managers relations. We will see in the next chapters how, in this new context, management tried to secure the mobilisation of work effort, while responding to a new necessity of thwarting the union mobilisation triggered by the transition to a new labour regime.

4.6. *Conclusion of chapters 3 and 4. Comparing the French and the Italian start-up regimes*

In chapters 3 and 4 I analysed the start-up labour regime in both French and Italian case studies. The comparative analysis showed the development of two very similar patterns of labour regime in both countries.

Similarities: a common trajectory of bureaucratisation and Taylorisation

In this initial phase, both warehouses were opened when the company had just established its presence in each country. In this initial phase the primary goal of management was to launch operations and to support a rapid growth of volumes, for Amazon to occupy the largest market share in the shortest lapse of time. In terms of the organisation of work, both warehouses were characterised by a medium-low level of division of labour, with medium-low technical coercion (compared to the levels that will be achieved later in the second phase). In such a context, the necessity for management to mobilise worker effort passed through the active involvement of the workers via responsible autonomy (A. L. Friedman 1977b). Workers enjoyed a certain self-latitude in the execution of tasks and in the determination of their effort, so such effort had to be solicited by fostering their commitment with the goals of the company. A distinction between management and workers was already formalised but mitigated by the personal relationship that plant management was able to establish with the initial group of workers. The personal relationship was a pillar of this start-up labour regime, where workers received gratification and personal recognition of their effort through the reward of symbolic prizes (gamification), the celebration of birthdays and other practices (management-orchestrated collective actions) that we discussed above. These symbolic gratifications were coupled with tangible economic compensation, that Amazon had introduced since the beginning of its business, namely stock-options and PRP bonuses. Their role was crucial, because these two bonuses provided symbolic compensation with a tangible support. If certain devices, for instance gamification, fostered competition between workers, it is also true that management pursued cooperation. Therefore, collective bonuses such as PRP and, limited to France, stock-options, aimed at favouring horizontal cooperation between the workers and vertical cooperation between workers and management.

For what concerns the way how Amazon dealt with the institutions of industrial relations, including the unions, in both cases management avoided any significant form of labour conflict and managed to keep unions at bay, although, as we are going to discuss, with important differences.

The crisis of this labour regime followed also very similar patterns

In interviews, workers and managers emphasised the erosion of the personalised relationship as the main reason of decay of the start-up labour regime. In both warehouses, workers were disappointed by the way how plant management (often in correspondence with executive turnover) receded from this implicit contract. Management (although on this point we can rely only on interviews with French managers), found the cause of this change in the increasing number of the workforce, implying that unions managed to “infiltrate” the workforce when new recruits with union experience or union membership joined the ranks of the warehouse: so, it was the workforce somehow who broke the contract.

In fact, as we saw, both accounts make sense when they are read one against each other and both against the background of structural changes in the company’s business and labour process. Even if with different temporalities, both warehouses underwent a process of bureaucratisation boosted by the growth of Amazon. The increasing division of labour (taylorisation by means of digitalisation and mechanisation), connected with the centralisation of control, increased technical coercion. As Amazon’s sales soared, the logistics infrastructure inflated. In both countries the initial small FCs were replaced by new and larger ones, equipped with advanced technologies (conveyors, updated algorithms etc.). The workforce changed not only quantitatively, but also *qualitatively*, with the arrival of hundreds of seasonal agency workers at every peak seasons.

These changes implied the rupture of the direct form of employment relations: technical coercion and the routinisation of operations required less and less the active commitment of the workers; part of the symbolic forms of gratification (especially events during the shifts) were abolished – because, as explained by management in Chapter 3, interruptions were not affordable in an increasing interdependent network of warehouses (see par. 3.4.2). The symbolic gratification that remained were emptied of their substantial support when management unilaterally withdrew the PRP bonus. Plant management also suffered from centralisation brought by algorithmic and by bureaucratisation. As its autonomy was curtailed the personalised form of employment relations was eventually undermined.

It is interesting to notice that the labour crisis was not a purely mechanic effect of change in the labour process but rather of change in labour politics. For a relatively long period of time, both in France and Italy, workers remained committed even after change in the labour process. In workers’ account, what undermined the base of social peace in the workplace was the deterioration of vertical (workers-management) as well as horizontal (workers-workers) relations, rather than the taylorisation and digitalisation of tasks.

In the new context, the start-up labour regime had become dysfunctional and was not viable anymore. This dysfunctionality was confirmed by the labour crisis that took place in both warehouses, as management lost control of the unions (France) or was forced to accept their presence (Italy). Nevertheless, the labour crisis, as we will see in the next chapters, did not mean a final crisis for Amazon's labour politics. On the contrary, a new labour regime would emerge.

Table 13 – Comparative summary of start-up labour regimes in France and Italy

	<i>France (ORY1)</i>	<i>Italy (MXP1/MXP5)</i>
<i>Duration</i>	2000-2009	2011-2015
<i>Amazon business in the country</i>	Slow steady growth	Rapid growth
<i>Labour process</i>	Pre-taylorist (low technical coercion)	Proto-taylorist (medium technical coercion)
<i>Amazon global phase</i>	Phase I and Phase II	Phase II
<i>Effort mobilisation</i>	<u>Primary</u> : Responsible Autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal worker-manager relationship - Symbolic gratifications - Gamification - Management-Orchestrated collective action (gatherings, events etc.) - Collective performance bonus 	<u>Primary</u> : Responsible Autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal worker-manager relationship - Symbolic gratification - Gamification - Management-Orchestrated collective action (gatherings, events etc.) - Collective performance bonus <u>Secondary</u> : Medium economic coercion
<i>Performance bonus</i>	Stock-options <u>and</u> PRP bonus	<u>Only</u> PRP bonus
<i>Form of union exclusion</i>	Formal co-optation	Exclusion
<i>Reasons of the labour crisis</i>	Bureaucratisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylorisation - Deterioration of working conditions - Eclipse of personal worker-manager relationship - Withdrawal of collective bonus - Labour market stagnation - New warehouse 	Bureaucratisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylorisation - Deterioration of working conditions - Eclipse of personal worker-manager relationship - Labour market stagnation - Withdrawal of collective bonus - New warehouse

Differences: temporalities and scales

Despite the similarities of the two patterns of labour regime and their crisis, comparative analysis made important specificities emerge. These specificities are linked to the intersection of two level of analysis: (1) the stage of development of the company at the global level; (2) the insertion of Amazon in the specific configuration of the local level, namely the stage of development of the e-commerce (and the place Amazon occupies within) market and the institutions of labour regulation.

There is an important variation in the temporalities of development of the labour regime in France and Italy. In France, as we saw, Amazon arrived at the beginning of its business, and at the peak of the dot-com bubble, when Amazon was “getting big fast” (Spector 2002). One year before, Amazon had opened its website and its logistics operations in UK and Germany, by acquiring a major local e-commerce player in each country. In France, Amazon tried to follow the textbook, but it failed to take over Alapage, which fell in the hands of France Telecom. Therefore the Seattle-based company had to build its own inventory, its own network of suppliers, and as in any country, its own logistics operations. The timing turned out to be quite unfavourable since in 2000 the dot-com bubble burst and Amazon had to retreat from its plans of further expansion, which at the time included the opening of an Italian subsidiary too.

These unexpected financial strains, which forced Amazon to restructure, combined with a local competitive environment constrained Amazon growth for several years. It was only after the Great Recession that Amazon was able to consolidate its dominant position at the global level and also in France – where anyway important competitors such as Fnac emerged. It was this acceleration that led, between 2007 and 2009, to the transition to another labour regime. In Italy, instead, the arrival of Amazon, initially planned in 2001, had to be postponed. It was only ten years later, when Amazon was already a dominant player in all the countries where it had established, that the company opened website and operations in Italy. This influenced the evolution of the labour regime, because the labour process adopted was no longer the initial pre-taylorist uncertain organisation that Amazon adopted in France. The restructuring of operations had already taken place, thus, when Amazon arrived in Italy, the level of digitalisation and mechanisation was already higher.

Also, the forms of workers active involvement were slightly different: while in France, the initial group of workers was mobilised through the myth of the internet economy, and the image of Amazon as an outsider actor, this element emerged less from the study of the Italian case: in symbolic and discursive terms, Amazon was no longer an outsider firm (even if workers were stroke by its “modernity”); the company had already passed through a path of normalisation that partially downsized this element; the tangible aspect of this specificity was the absence in Italy of any stock-option program, as if the company itself had begun the passage (at the global level) to a new Fordist

phase, with a reduced need – thanks to the increasing taylorisation – to mobilise worker effort through the mirage of shareholder value, typical of the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). In addition, the growth of volumes in Italy did not lag like in France, but it accelerated rapidly. Thus, change in the labour process, with the passage to a full-fledged taylorised organisation occurred faster. This explains the different temporalities between the two case studies, and also shows how the stage of development at the global level does not translate immediately into a specific labour regime, but it is filtered by the specific conditions in the local market and socio-economic context.

This appears even more clearly if we look at the forms of effort mobilisation and to employment relations in this early phase. In both cases, employment relations in the workplace were predominantly based on personal and individualised relationship between plant management and the worker. The mobilisation of worker effort was based primarily in the active involvement of the workforce, through the mechanisms discussed above. In Italy, however, there was a secondary mechanism that completed the primary one, and it was medium level of economic coercion (that we will find expanded in the following labour regime, Chapter 6). Workers recruited in the local labour market in Piacenza were often unemployed and underemployed, with previous jobs in the logistics and the broader services sectors. In these local labour market, working and employment conditions were significantly worse than those offered by Amazon, as illustrated by workers account and by the labour unrest that had started taking place in the logistics sector, especially in the area of Piacenza (Cuppini and Pallavicini 2015; Cillo and Pradella 2018; Scandaliato 2021; Floris and Pallavicini 2023). In such a context, workers’ effort was mobilised also by fear of losing their job. Anyway, this element of economic coercion remained secondary compared to responsible autonomy.

* * *

The reference to worker struggle in the Italian logistics sector, raises the question of the specificity of labour relations in the Italian vs the French Amazon workplace. The French and the Italian cases are renowned for being the only countries where Amazon signed a collective agreement. This is particularly interesting for a company based on such a strong anti-union ideology. Does it illustrate the resilience of local institutions or rather the capacity of management to adapt? The signing of the agreements happened soon in France (2002, *one* year after the opening), while much later in Italy (2018, *seven* years after the opening). How to explain this difference and, what does it tells us about workplace politics in this early phase?

While in France, Amazon was legally bounded to accept union presence, in Italy there was no statutory mechanism that forced the company to recognised union presence and bargain with unions

(unless the union enjoyed a substantially significant membership in the workplace). This allowed plant management in Italy to keep unions out of the workplace until an important part of the workforce decided to unionise (see Chapter 7). In France, unions were not required to certify members in order to appoint a union delegate in the workplace. Therefore, subsidiary management faced a different problem: formal union presence could not be avoided. Thus, showing a remarkable degree of autonomy, management persuaded corporate management in Seattle to accept the appointment of delegates; then, it operated to control the process of designation. The selected union, which was organisationally too weak to exert control on the workplace, let management do.

In this way, plant management incorporated unions into the labour regime without transferring actual power; indeed, management also obtained some advantages that it could not achieve without formal union presence. This configuration corresponded to formal co-optation (Selznick 1949), opposed to the complete exclusion of unions from the workplace. This arrangement would last until the transition in the labour regime, when union gained independence in France and access to the workplace in Italy. We will see in Chapter 6, how management dealt with these new problems.

So far, we have drawn a comparative analysis of Amazon's labour regime in the European context. The analysis illustrated how management secured the mobilisation of work effort in the initial phase, the way how workers responded to managerial politics. The stability of the labour regime was underpinned by the complementarity of different mechanisms: tangible and intangible, local and global. However, the increase in technical coercion jeopardised the mechanisms of direct involvement (both tangible and intangible), while the growth of the workforce broken, the horizontal solidarity of the group. Management lost a great deal of autonomy and the capacity to reproduce the individualised employment relations. Yet, the fragmentation of the worker collective group (confirmed by the withdrawal of the PRP bonus) would turn into an advantage in the new labour regime. This new labour regime, based on a much more coercive labour process required less and less the direct involvement of the workers. Instead, the bureaucratisation and the deterioration of working conditions will widen the gulf between management and the workers. In such a context, worker commitment would become redundant, and replaced by a new goal: the de-mobilisation of labour collective action.

5. Algorithmic bureaucracy in France (2010-2021)

In 2018 I was hired by Amazon as a temporary worker in Amazon France's warehouse in Orleans (ORY1). In 2019 I repeated the experience in Amazon Italy's warehouse in Piacenza (MXP5). My perception was completely different from what was remembered fondly by senior workers in the previous chapter.

The situation was different from that described by workers in the first phase. Work had become fragmented and monitored, physical and mental effort more demanding. The company had grown but they had found themselves with a work that was deskilled and governed by algorithms; with managers who had become distant and more interested to “numbers” than to their supervisees; with a company that offered uncertain possibilities of promotion. They had found themselves executing repetitive tasks, no family environment, no solid perspective of career. This situation matched with the first stories on Amazon that journalists started publishing in the UK (*The Sunday Times* 2008), the US, Germany and France. These journalistic accounts described with accuracy the intensity of working rhythms, the precarity of employment and the demanding objectives of management. However, there were also some limits in these reports. For example, they defined a dystopic scenario in which management had total control on workers and workers were victimised and presented as passive subjects. In fact, the every-day life of production politics at Amazon was much more ordinary and quite distant from both the apologetic discourse produced by the company and the denunciatory register of journalists¹⁸⁸.

Second, they did not report any form of resistance, or agency among workers. Workers' agency, their motives, are crucial to understand why in the first phase they mobilise *for* their employer, as we saw in the previous section. Though, they are no less crucial to understand also why workers did (not) mobilise *against* their employer. Were workers passive subjects that accepted their working conditions, or did they try to escape them? And if so, why workers, as a collective group, did not manage to mobilise to overturn the status quo?

We saw that in both the French and the Italian cases, there was a transition from a start-up to a bureaucratic regime (even if with different temporalities and different local specificities). Also, we saw that this transition was marked by a crisis of the labour relations both in France and Italy, that brought in the union as a supposedly independent actor in the workplace.

¹⁸⁸ Indeed, this “false” exceptionalism contributes to explain worker demobilisation and even certain passive union discourses. Compared to the dreadful situation described by journalistic accounts, both workers and unionist could consider that their specific situation, one that they could evaluate through direct experience, was not so bad (see also Chapter 8).

Now, we are going to see the anatomy of the labour regime, trying to understand how Amazon was able not to overcome the crisis (because it did not remove its causes) but, instead, how it was able to find new ways of eliciting workers effort while preventing workers from politically mobilise against management.

This for what concerns the transition from the old start-up regime to the new “algorithmic bureaucracy”. But what about the comparison between the two countries? Were there major varieties of this new labour regime? We will see that in terms of employment rules there are obvious differences. For instance, in France work schedule are based on 35-hours week; the regulation of tempo workers is also slightly differences. Apart from that, here is no major break between France and Italy. However, in terms of organisation of work, one important difference emerged from the comparison: the attitude of management is much more aggressive in France rather than in Italy. The reasons of this important divergence, nevertheless, cannot be found in the strict dimension of the labour process, whether “cultural” or “technological”. Indeed, they concern two external dimensions: one is the market dimension (the level of concentration); the other one, and perhaps the most influent one is the style of unionism and the level of resistance that Amazon finds. I will explore this dimension in Part III.

The previous labour regime had been eroded by market and technological forces. It collapsed under the first strikes of workers. A new labour regime was to be founded in order to keep the new organisation of work running. The foundations of the new labour regime were not invented *ex novo* but were already present in the previous regime: responsible autonomy, on the one hand, and economic and technic coercion on the other hand. What changed was their centrality in production politics.

I am going to analyse the politics of demobilisation in French FCs under two dimensions. The first one is the bureaucratisation of labour process; the second one consists in the dualisation of the internal labour market. In fact, these two dimensions tend to overlap. Nevertheless, we are going to study them separately for an analytical purpose.

Methodological note

From a methodological point of view, the thrust of this chapter is based on participant observation inside the oldest and then-main Amazon’s FC in France, ORY1. Observation was partly covert, since I did not inform the agency of my research project. This was necessary in order to have a thick description of production politics. Part of my co-workers, however, were informed about the research. Overall, I spent almost three months working as a picker and as a stower.

The advantage of covert participant observation was to observe and analyse work and managerial practices with enough proximity and during a sufficient lapse of time. At the same time, this method must not nourish the illusion of transparency, i.e. that by simply accessing the workplace I would have grasped its social reality. The illusion of transparency is based on an artificial conception of the social world, where social relations would be spontaneous and not constructed.

In fact, participant observation, whether covert or not, is always a social relation (Burawoy 1998; Chauvin and Jounin 2012). The observer is a participant constrained by the same social settings that he/she wants to study. As an agency worker, I could access a world, the daily life of Amazon workplace that was impenetrable to the public. At the same time, as an agency worker I was prisoner of this role. For instance, I could work and observe things, but I could not easily interrogate management on what I observed.

I asked myself whether my condition of incognito observer and researcher – at least for all my supervisors and most co-workers – would be a bias for my observations. Was my experience “authentic”? In fact, I ended up considering that there was not such a thing as a “real” agency worker. In most of the cases, people dealt with me for what I looked like: a green badge. As an agency worker, I was expected to do my job and behave as someone likely to seek a prolongation of his assignment, which is what I did. I had so many reasons to pretend to be an agency worker that I found myself behaving like a real one: working hard, monitoring my productivity performance, hiding from the eye of managers when I wanted to take a break.

The limits of participant observation were partially offset by enlarging the range of my sources. For this chapter, I relied essentially on interviews with workers (for a reflexion on this source, see par. II.5) and Appendix 1. **Fieldwork methodology and data sources**) and written sources. Written sources include press articles found by keyword research in the Factiva database. The main part of written sources, however, are documents collected in the fieldwork, namely internal reports of the two Amazon’s logistics subsidiaries in France: Amazon France Logistique (AFL), in charge of the FCs, and Amazon France Transport (AIT), in charge of the sortation centres and the delivery stations. These reports were produced by consultancy firms at the request of employee representation bodies (CHSCT and works council). The goal of these reports is to inform worker representatives about economic and social aspects such as, the performance of the firm, the organisation of work, employment and working conditions. They are based on survey and interviews with workers and on the analysis of data that the employer is required to provide.

5.1. Labour process. The politics of technical coercion in France

Under algorithmic bureaucracy, coercion becomes the prevalent element of mobilisation of worker effort. We can distinguish a first form of coercion, technical coercion, which is embedded in the labour process. In this section I will analyse the main element of coercion, namely algorithmic control and standardisation. These elements constrain worker self-latitude and make monitoring easier for management. These are aspects that the literature on algorithmic management has already stressed. However, the direct observation of labour practices shows a series of contradictions internal to the labour process and to Amazon’s profit strategy. However, this space of uncertainty, far from carving out niches of autonomy for the workers, turns into a further leverage of action for shop-floor management. Nevertheless, forms of resistance emerge and the dialectic between these two poles shape the specificities of the labour process at Amazon France.

5.1.1. *The state of Amazon’s logistics operation under the new labour regime*

At Amazon France, between the beginning of 2013 and the end 2020, the number of warehouses rose from three (ORY1, MRS1, LYS1) to seven FCs (with the opening of another classic FC, LIL1 in 2013, the non-sort FC of BVA1 in 2017, the robotic site of ORY4 in 2019, and the cross-dock site of CDG7 in 2020)¹⁸⁹.

Table 14 – Amazon’s FCs in France

Source: Internal documents

NAME	LOCATION	DATE OPENING	TYPE OF FC	SURFACE AT GROUND (M ²)	DEVELOPED SURFACE (M ²)	N. OF FLOORS
ORY1	SARAN—ORLEANS	2007	LEGACY - SORT	69.495	108.560	1
MRS1	MONTELMAR	2010	LEGACY – SORT	36.075	36.075	1
LYS1	SEVREY—CHALONS- SUR-SAÔNE	2012	LEGACY - SORT	41.200	81.500	1
LIL1	LAUWIN-PLANQUE— LILLE	2013	LEGACY - SORT	83.984	114.530	1
BVA1	BOVES—AMIENS	2017	LEGACY – NON-SORT	107.096	107.096	1
ORY4	BRETIGNY—PARIS	2019	ROBOTIC	55.000	152.098	3
CDG7	SENLIS—PARIS	2020	CROSSDOCK	55.000	55.000	1
ETZ2	AUGNY—METZ	2021	ROBOTIC	50.896	185.500	4

¹⁸⁹ I do not include here the sortation centres (SCs) and delivery stations (DSs) that Amazon has opened since 2017. The growth was not only quantitative but qualitative, given the diversity of new FCs opened.

The volume of processed commodities also grew steadily. Amazon’s French logistics subsidiary treated over 220 million items in 2014. They were 762 in 2019.

Table 15 – Number of handled units and sites at Amazon France Logistique

Source: Internal documents

	HANDLED UNITS (MILLIONS)	ANNUAL GROWTH (%)	NUMBER OF SITES
2014	226		4
2015	282	25%	4
2016	384	36%	4
2017	510	33%	5
2018	601	18%	5
2019	762	27%	6
2020	571	-25%	7
2021	1.294	127%	8
2022	1.135	-12%	8

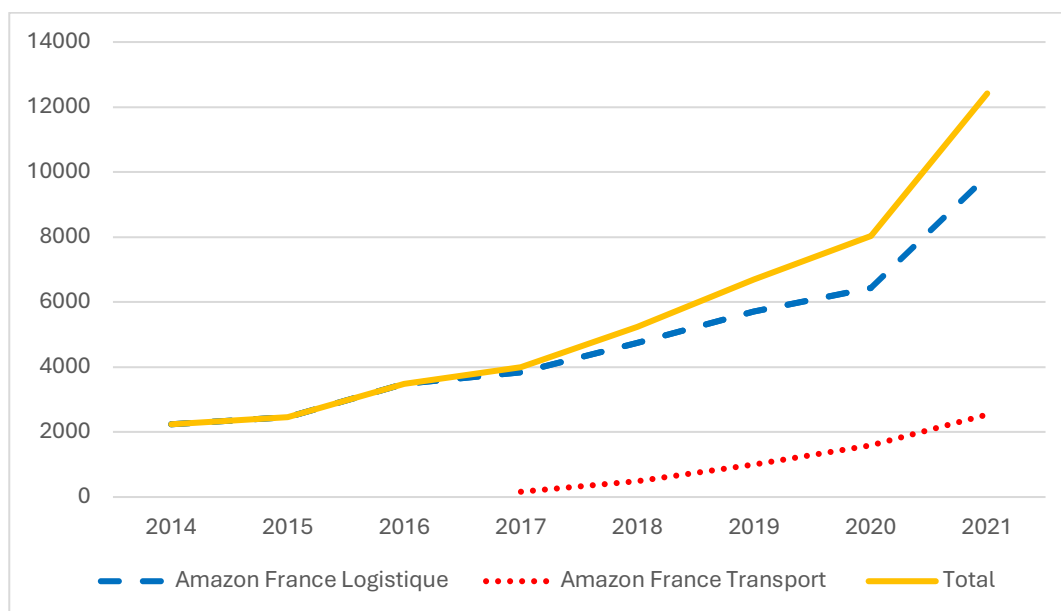


Figure 47 – Amazon’s logistics workforce in France

Source: Orbis database; Internal documents

We have already examined, in Chapter 2, the transformation of the labour process at Amazon since the early 2000s at the global level. In Europe, and in France, this transition took place from 2007 onwards. The transformation opened the second phase of Amazon’s labour regime.

I have already showed the level of standardisation and monitoring of the labour process. At Amazon, work is organised around the principle of a “one best way”. Work is fragmented in simple physical and digital tasks. Therefore, most jobs become routinised and deskilled. The fragmentation of tasks is the premise of algorithmic centralisation: all the tasks are first broken into pieces and then gathered under the control of the software that plan and monitor workflows. This technical design represents the first layer of coercion that allow management to elicit effort from workers.

However, this technical coercion needs to be enforced by direct managerial supervision. The execution of tasks is structured upon the hardware and software of the work organisation, but it is inseparable from the political devices forming what Burawoy calls the “internal state” (Burawoy 1978; 1979).

5.1.2. *Recruitment*

My ethnographic observation of work in France started in July 2018, during the Prime peak, when I was hired as a temporary worker in the FC of Orleans. At that point of the year, Amazon was restarting its seasonal cycle that would lead the company to expand the ranks of the temporary workers in preparation for the Christmas peak. The Prime peak was the dress rehearsal of the Christmas peak. I was part of the contingents of new recruits that agencies were hoovering up from the local workforce pool and beyond.

My application did not follow exactly the standard process of recruitment. In spring, a friend employee at Amazon took my CV and handed it on to the HR office in the warehouse. The HR office transmitted it to one of the three temporary agencies that Amazon contracted at that time to recruit seasonal workers. I received the call in the second half of June, from one of the agencies. The agency was in search of new cohorts of temps for the next Prime Day peak in July. The recruiter, a woman on her thirties, interrogated me following the standard script: she asked me whether I was ready to start my assignment from the following week, I said I was not available, since I had personal obligations but that I could start from the beginning of July (I prayed that she would not drop me for that). She was not upset and said: “Ok you can start beginning of July, I will write you an email with all the details”. I received the mail in a few minutes, with an invitation to show up at the agency’s main office in downtown Orleans on July 2nd at 2pm. There I would participate to one of the *sessions de recrutement* the agency organised every week for Amazon.

Before the session, however, Amazon requires agencies to administer an online preliminary test to the candidates. Amazon has been using tests for the recruitment warehouse workers since at least

the early 2000s¹⁹⁰, after the first restructuring. It was part of the bureaucratisation of employment relations following the expansion of the firm and the need to put work under stricter control. Things went differently overseas.

The test I took was a basic psychometric battery, provided by Amazon itself to the agencies. Questions do not concern the professional skills of the workers but rather his or her *attitude* to work. It is a simplified behavioural and moral test. The test starts with a presentation:

Amazon works for a positive and safe environment... Amazon pays a higher salary than the norm and provides benefits to its employees from day one. This text is finalized to determine the compatibility of candidates with the company's values. This test is part of the recruitment process, so your success depends on it.

Fieldwork Written Document 1 – Preliminary test for warehouse job applicants, France, 2018

The candidate is also informed that a small countdown at the top of the page will start at each question¹⁹¹. The candidate has a variable number of answer options, from two to four depending on the question. Candidates are given a particular scenario in the work context, and they are asked about what reaction is appropriate in that specific situation. Before starting the test, I did not have a precise idea of what was considered appropriate in Amazon workplace. The answer came immediately. The first question was a simulation. The goal was to orient the candidate toward the answers that are supposed to be correct:

¹⁹⁰ In the first few years of Amazon in France, workers were not required to take such a test. Senior workers confirmed that they only submitted a CV and a motivational letter.

¹⁹¹ The existence of a countdown for the test could be considered a form of training. As we saw in Chapter 3, Amazon workers in France had a countdown in their devices that measured the time expected and the time actually spent to execute a task. At the time of the test, such a countdown had been withdrawn.

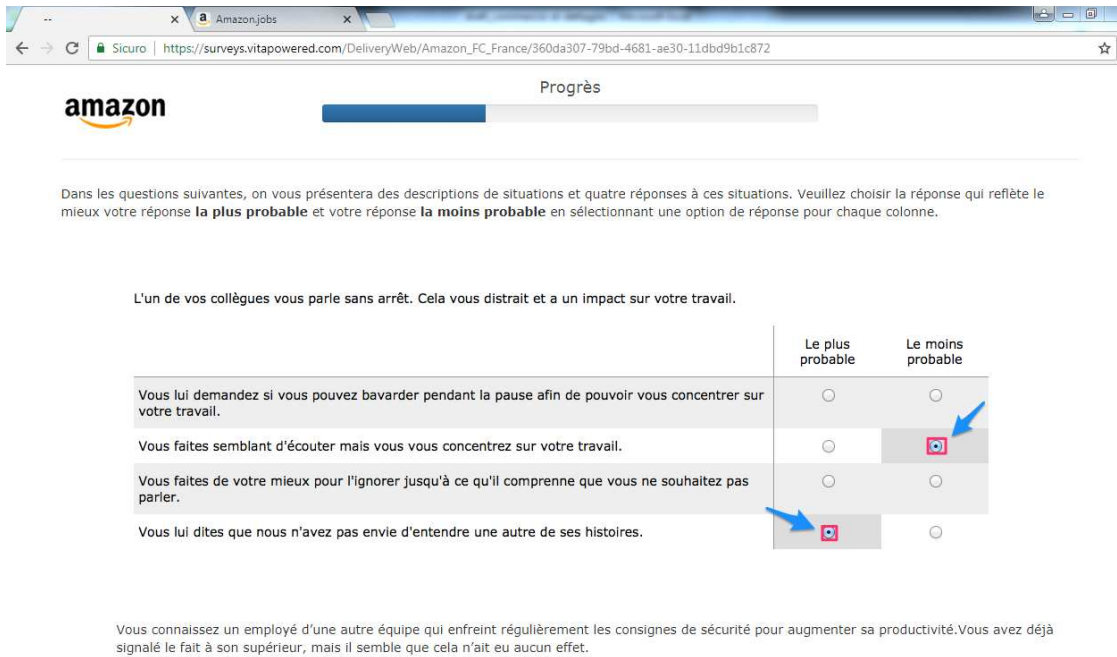


Figure 48 – Simulation test for applicants to job position in Amazon’s French FCs.

Source: fieldwork

In this simulation, the candidate is given a scenario: “One of your co-workers does not stop to talk to you. This distracts you and affects your work”. The software asked me to select “the most likely” and “the least likely” reaction, among four options:

- (1) You ask him to talk later during the break, so as you can focus on work.
- (2) You pretend to listen to him, but you are actually focusing on your work.
- (3) You try to ignore him until he understands that you do not want to chat.
- (4) You tell him that you do not want to listen to another of his stories.

Fieldwork Written Document 2 – Preliminary test for warehouse job applicants, France, 2018.

As suggested by the arrows, the right answer expected by Amazon is (4) and the wrong one is (2). The answers are not necessarily of common sense. Quite the contrary, they reflect a specific “ethics” that Amazon tries to transmit to the workers: work is the priority; behaviours that infringe this rule must not be tolerated and need to be remarked explicitly. A first question concerns the candidate’s “ethics”:

Computer: “Do you think that most people lie?”

My answer: “No”

Computer: “Error. You must not be naïf. People are never 100% honest. You must not answer according to what you think the examiner expects from you. We invite you to answer honestly”.

Fieldwork Written Document 3 – Preliminary test for warehouse job applicants, France, 2018

Leaving aside the paradoxical suggestion (asking the responder to answer sincerely and at the same time stating that nobody answers sincerely), there is one element that is worth to notice in this test. The test aims at educating the worker rather than assessing specific work capacities. This is evident looking at the following “exercise”: candidates are required to express their degree of agreement to a series of statements:

The test begins. The questions revolve around certain concepts that must pass:

1. Telling the truth to the employer (“I don't hide information that might discourage my employer from hiring me; I always tell the truth...”)
2. Not stealing (“I never steal even if I have the opportunity; stealing is never right; if I see someone stealing I write a letter to my manager; if I see a colleague taking a tool or object from the workplace I report it, no matter the circumstances”).
3. Justify control devices on employees (“I think if people weren't controlled, they'd steal”).
4. Verify skills (“I'm never in such a bad mood that anything lifts me up; my colleagues know me to be a very nervous person at work - not true”).

Fieldwork Written Document 4 – Preliminary test for warehouse job applicants, France, 2018

The fact that workers are given the right answer suggests how the test operates as “normative” training: the good Amazon worker is someone respectful of managerial authority, ready to multiply efforts at work in order to make customers (and managers) satisfied, enough ambitious to seek promotions but also docile enough not to protest in case of refusal, disciplined and willing to report any co-workers’ wrongdoing to the hierarchy.

The test tells us two things about the organisation of work at Amazon. First, the test is the self-representation of an organisational *ethos*, a set of norms, that Amazon tries to impose on its members (the paradox is that the more the organisation grows and the relations between members dispersed, the more this ethos is professed and the less it is effective). The necessity of formulating Amazon’s ethos results from the weeping out of the direct relationship between managers and workers that dominated the previous phase. Second, the focus on values rather than on skills reveals how much the work process has become abstract and de-skilled: no specific capacity is required, other than docility and obedience. These two elements are specific of Amazon. In the rest of the French logistics industry it occurs that agencies and companies require candidates to do written tests (Gaborieau 2016b; Tranchant 2019), but the aim of the test is to check candidates’ basic intellectual skills rather than to shape workers’ morale.

Once the test completed, I waited for the next step: the recruiting session. Recruiting sessions take place in the agency and are usually managed by one agency recruiter (*chargée de recrutement*,

very often recruiter are women¹⁹²), in charge of selecting up to twenty candidates at once. The job of the recruiter is to select CVs, call candidates, administer the tests, correct them, inform candidates about the procedures, briefly interview those who passed the test, send the worker to the warehouse, and follow the administrative aspects of the assignment (including some disciplinary aspects). While waiting for the session, the agency kept sending me reminders, asking candidates to inform in case of absence, even the day before. This suggested that one of the main problems that recruiters have in this job is make sure that all workers invited will show up. In other words, recruiters have to cope with a volatile workforce, typical of the logistics sector (Gaborieau 2016b; Benvegnù 2018; Tranchant 2019).

5.1.3. *Training to technical coercion*

Training at Amazon unfolds over two days. The learning of the work process is only one part of the programme and perhaps not the most important. Each recruit is assigned a job – pick, stow, pack or receive. The recruit is trained *only* to the process assigned. There is no planned job rotation for the first months, even years. Sometimes management needs to fill some vacancies and is likely to train agency workers to new processes; yet, this rotation is not enshrined in any collective agreement, but unilaterally governed by management.

Tasks are very simple and consists essentially in learning to understand the instructions displayed on the screen of the barcode reader; to execute the tasks according to the procedures; to insert an informational input in the system when each single task is executed. It emerges again that the crucial aspect of training is shaping workers' attitude to work: the transmission of Amazon spirit into the rank of the new recruits. For instance, the first day of training does not involve task learning. It is rather a day of initiation to Amazon's world, its language, its "spirit" and its principles. But the infusion of this spirit is not limited to learning. Norms are continuously reproduced by the action of supervisors because they underpin the technical coercion of algorithms.

Norms are condensed in the *safety-quality-productivity* triad. In management discourse, these three principles are interdependent and are always presented together, but always in a specific order: Safety, Quality, Productivity:

During my second assignment in France (Autumn 2019), on the second day of training, our instructor accompanies us to desk of Stow to introduce us to our team leader:

¹⁹² In Paris, for my master dissertation at the EHESS, between 2016 and 2017, I had carried on research on temporary work agencies in the logistics sector, focusing on the profession of recruiters and drawing on direct observation of their work and a dataset about the social profile of recruiters produced by the Minister of Labour. The research presents the everyday life of recruiters showing their intermediate positions of dominated dominator in the labour market of the logistics sector (Massimo 2017).

Team leader: Good morning! How are you?

Recruits [5 people] [shyly]: Good, thanks...

Team leader: Great! Welcome and thanks for being here! I am Jérôme, lead of Stow. Well... I'm not here to tell you my whole life story. I've been working at Amazon for three years. *[I look at his appearance: to my eye he should be my age, 28. He has a beard and long hair gathered into a bun at the back of his head. Under the yellow and blue vest - on which are pins, an identity card and a pair of work gloves - he wears a high-necked pullover, with the sleeves pulled up so that reveal tattoos on the arm. Tight trousers to ankle, protected by safety shoes. At the fingers of the hands, which gesticulate with restraint, there are rings, and bracelets on the wrists, which he does not renounce wearing despite the fact that they are uncomfortable, especially when you have to pass by metal detectors at the exit of the floor].* If you are here, it is because we need you for this period of Q4 [the winter peak] coming up. So: I start with Safety. Do you know why this is important?

[Silence of recruits. Embarrassment of our instructor].

Recruit *[risking an answer]*: Because it is for us?

Team leader: Yes! That's right! Our interest is that you arrive safely at work and that you return home safely... We don't want you to get hurt. So safety first! It's very important that you are here, because you're new and you have a fresh look at things. We [older workers] have been here for a long time been here for a long time and it's normal that we have got used to certain things that will not remain unnoticed to you. So, you will be our eyes and ears! If you notice that there are things that are wrong for safety, report them! Either verbally or with safety saves *[these are short forms that associates can fill in and give to their leads or area managers to report any safety risks]*. Then we have quality: it is essential to place the right article in the right place. right place. Remember that our goal is to satisfy the customer. Finally, productivity: don't worry for the moment... You probably know that Amazon has a certain reputation, that managers push for productivity etc.... that's not the spirit at all! Production will come naturally... there is indeed an evolution curve of productivity, at the end of which you will reach the target... but don't worry too much for now... you will see over time and if something doesn't go well, there is an individual program to find any weaknesses... we are not firing anyone...

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 3 – ORY1, October 2019

It is evident from this excerpt how management tries to immediately convince the workers that the company cares about workers' safety. Newcomers' inexperience is even celebrated because it allows new workers to spot weaknesses in safety management. Temp workers are literally "mobilised" ("you will be our eyes and ears!"). Then the team leader presents to the recruit the trinity safety-quality-productivity. These three principles form the cornerstones of managerial discourse and practice and are continuously emphasised during work, whether through posters and slogans posted in the various departments, both during start-of-shift meetings and in other periodic meetings, such as *gemba* (a Toyotist-inspired term) meetings in which managers, team leaders and some associates have to confront each other to try to improve processes with these three principles in mind. But What is it concretely about safety, quality, and productivity? And how are these principles applied?

5.1.3.1. Safety

Safety is the supreme principle to which everyone in the work floor pays homage. The higher the rank the greater the emphasis. This is quite surprising, since the company is celebrated (and stigmatised) for its focus on productivity. As trainers explain to us:

Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon – you know him, don't you? – talks about “customer obsession”... It means that the customer must be happy, satisfied... but of course: safety first!

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 4 – ORYI, July 2018

The notion of “safety” at Amazon encompasses a broad set of rules regulating the behaviour of employees in the workplace. A general list of safety rules exists, valid in all European subsidiaries. It consists of 95 articles divided into 11 sections:

Arts. 1-17: “handling pallets”

Arts. 18-25: “trolleys and cages”

Arts. 26-37: “transport of materials”

Arts. 38-46: “forklifts and pedestrians”

Arts. 47-57: “equipment and installations”

Arts. 58-61: “conveyor belt and machinery”

Arts. 62-65: “gestures and postures”

Arts. 66-72: “clothing”

Arts. 73-77: “accident census and investigations”

Arts. 78-84: “personal protective equipment”

Arts. 85-95: “general rules”

Fieldwork Written Document 5 – European FC Operational Safety Rules

The prescriptions contained in this regulation encompass a heterogeneous set of activities: from the maximum speed of cars in car parking lots and the way of parking (backwards facing the lane) to the maximum length of the beard (to avoid it getting caught on the conveyor belt), from signs inside the warehouse to the handling of trolleys, from risk assessment for extraordinary activities to the smoking ban, from the way an associate should hold the scanner (in a “neutral” position and alternating left and right hands) to the immediate reporting of accidents and risk situations. Some of these rules in turn refer to other requirements.

In fact, for management safety boils down to one principle: following the procedures (how to push a cart, how to lift objects, how to scan bins in the lower part of the shelves etc.). Every operation at Amazon is proceduralised, it follows a protocol. “If we respect the procedures”, trainers explain to us, “we will stay safe and, also, do a good job”. Another point on which they insist is to report

information from the ground up: any anomaly, anything that exceed the procedures must be reported, of course following specific procedures or, if there is no procedure to deal with the issue, calling a supervisor.

The basic rule is that communication of the anomaly has the priority on intervention itself. For example, if workers find an item on the floor (or if an item just falls from its bin), they should take it and put in a specific blue case (there is one in every aisle), called “amnesty bin”. As explained by our trainer:

It is very important that you do not put it in any ordinary bin, even if you are sure that the item was there (for instance, because you saw it fall). This because if the item is put in the wrong bin, then that would create an inconsistency between the physical and the virtual, for the system will not register the item in that bin: this is called a ‘wrong put back’. So just put it into the Amnesty bin.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 5 – ORY1, October 2019

The importance of safety is reminded daily by team leaders and area managers during briefings. In the briefs, any incidents that occurred during the shift or in the previous days are also reported and in this case the safety rule that was not respected. If no incidents have occurred in the previous week, this is triumphantly announced to the associates during the briefs. Safety is monitored through standard procedures. Accident statistics are analysed and discussed by the area managers and their superiors during meetings held daily.

Another managerial practice worth mentioning is the warm-up gymnastics in which all the workers are required to participate. Some are enthusiast, some embarrassed, and other just sceptical. They participate only because they cannot hide from the eye of their managers. Only episodically, and that is a minority, some employees expressly avoid taking part in the warm-up. This soft insubordination, evident and visible, is usually ignored by the area managers¹⁹³.

Managerial discourse is based also on videos that recruits have to watch during training. For instance, during both trainings I had at Amazon France (July 2018 and October 2019) we watched several videos:

Like in 2018, we are brought to the “school”. The first thing we do is to watch several videos:

- 1) Animation movie showing small boxes (*Paul le carton* and his friends) singing and travelling all over the world, transported by a conveyor. A second video showing a mom ordering on her smartphone a gift for her daughter on Amazon. A third video describes the plan for the training day: there is a cartoon

¹⁹³ It is important to notice that the duration of the warm-up is one, maximum two minutes and this makes question its real effectiveness – i.e. the prevention of muscle injuries – and leads one to wonder whether such a ritual does not fulfil other functions, i.e. providing an alibi for management in cases of accidents and to extend management's control of management over workers' bodies.

with a road with several curves; at each curve there is a specific moment of the training; then a straight road and the last stage at the end of it. A fourth animation clip explains the rules on dangerous items (the so-called “Hazmat”, from hazardous materials).

- 2) Explanation of the basic rules of Safety: ready, steady go.
- 3) Two more videos celebrating diversity, especially gender equality (“here both women and men can work and contribute”).

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 6 - ORY1, October 2019

5.1.3.2. *Quality*

Apart from safety, quality is another principle that management tries to infuse into the new workforce. This also passes through videos that lecture the workers over the importance of quality in the name of “customer obsession”:

During the recruiting session, trainers show us a short video with the purpose of explaining the importance of “quality”. The video displays two children and their mom. Actors do not speak, there is only emotional music in the background. The children ask for a doll for each one. Dolls must be of a given colour. The mother orders the dolls on Amazon’s website. The video shows a picker receiving the order on her scanner. The picker retrieves the first doll with the right colour, but he makes a mistake with the second doll: the model is correct (this is why the software recognise the correct barcode of the product), but the colour wrong (colour is not registered in the informatic system, so the good choice depends on the picker). The dolls are processed through the warehouse, the error is not detected, and the items are packed, shipped, and delivered. When the second child unpacks her gift and figures out that it is not her doll, she starts crying. The trainer watches the video with extreme seriousness. Then he explains to us the importance of quality: “you are required not simply to handle items, but also to check that they are the correct object for real. Otherwise, for example, children somewhere in the world will cry making their parents unhappy”.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 7 – ORY1, July 2018

Another principle on which trainers and managers insist is that workers must care about quality because it affects their co-workers downstream in the process:

Keep in mind that if you do not stow correctly or if you pick the wrong item, then this has consequences on the colleagues of pick or pack. You should consider them *as your customers*: pickers are the customers of stowers, and packers are the customers of pickers.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 8 – ORY1, July 2018

In other words, customer care is transferred into the workplace to regulate the relations between workers of different departments. Like safety, quality is in fact a matter of procedure. Workers are told incessantly that there is a specific sequence of physical and digital acts to accomplish, and this would prevent them to make errors. An inventory error upstream risks to be more difficult to solve

downstream. Thus, recruits are also reminded that each error detected downstream can be traced back to the source and the worker at the origin considered responsible. Management tries to establish a mechanism of individual accountability based on the digital tracking of operations.

5.1.4. *Satisficing as a form of coercion in the labour process*

If during the training management defends a series of organisational principles, direct observation of the labour process shows another practice. Formally, safety and quality are the priority, but in fact, workers are rapidly pushed to pursue productivity targets in a way that jeopardise compliance with safety and quality norms.

This is a particular form of satisficing. Satisficing is a term introduced and discussed by the political scientists and sociologists of the 1950s-1960s such as Herbert A. Simon, James G. March and Michel Crozier recently relaunched by the sociologist Matt Vidal (March and Simon 1958; Crozier 1963; Vidal 2022). By this term, Vidal refers to an organisational practice by which managers with moderate aspiration levels respond to conflicting pressures by settling for good enough rather than complying with formal organisational principles. Organisations, in this way deviate from formal best practices. Management's attitude in front of making out studied by Burawoy can also be considered as a form of satisficing (Burawoy 1979a). Other examples of satisficing can be found in other foundational works of organisational theory, such as Gouldner's (1954; 1955), Selznick's (Selznick 1949), and Crozier's researches (Crozier 1963; 1964; Crozier and Friedberg 1977; 1980), all focusing on the gap between formal and informal power in organisations.

5.1.4.1. *Productivity vs safety*

From the third day on, temporary workers are expected to be "autonomous" at work i.e., able to repeat the sequence of tasks of their job. For a few days, during the shift, recruits receive regular visits of trainers. Trainers are equipped with a tablet and a specific learning software: they follow the new workers for a few minutes, take notes and then make them take another test to check whether they have absorbed the procedures.

On my fourth day, I am reached by a trainer that I haven't met before. He is kind, as most of the trainers that I have met. He tells me "I am there to make sure that everything is going fine for you. Please, just keep on picking, I am just checking if you have well understood the job". I pick a few items, feeling a certain pressure and trying to do it fluently and quickly. Then he stops me says that everything is fine, he gives some "tips" to "help you do it better", and then he starts talking about productivity. He explains in a very

simplified way, how productivity is calculated (“Productivity is the number of objects that you pick in an hour. You can see your rate on your scan”, and he shows me how¹⁹⁴). Then he leaves me.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 9 – ORY1, July 2018

The hierarchy of norms starts shifting. Trained to respect safety before quality and quality before productivity, temp workers have to face new injunctions. Progressively, team leaders take over the supervision from trainers and something shifts in the scale of priority: productivity becomes central at cost of marginalising quality and safety. Managerial’ attention for productivity is observable in everyday life of the warehouse, for example during the briefs before the shift. Managers emphasise not only safety, but also productivity. Temp workers are the most exposed to this double injunction.

At Amazon, productivity is also a matter of procedures. Let’s go back to the excerpt discussed above (Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 3). The team leader explains that there is a curve of productivity and that after a short period of learning, each individual worker is expected to reach a certain threshold of productivity. Again, the process is described as natural and technical, based on statistics. In Amazon’s irenic vision, procedures ensure that work is done fast, well and safely. In fact, these three principles can hardly coexist, as progressively management start privileging one on the others. This is confirmed by an internal report produced at the request of the CHSCT of the MRS1 site:

The reality on the ground, however, seems more ambiguous [from the principle described by management, *author’s note*], due to the need to meet ever-increasing demand. as one manager summed up: “[...] what I do have to do is get the orders out the door”. The managers themselves describe the contradiction in the system: “We force them to respect safety, but employees are looking for speed above all, because they are scrutinised”.

*Fieldwork Written Document 6 – Internal Report, MRS1, 2018*¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ In fact, the rate is expressed as the percentage of the average of the hourly rates of the single worker during the day of on the expected rate set by management.

¹⁹⁵ The report was ordered by the CHSCT in 2017, under pressure of the local CFDT union section. Until 2018, the various aspects of employee representation were carried out through the auspices of works councils (CE, *Comités d’entreprises*), staff representatives (DP, *Délégués du personnel*) and hygiene, safety and working conditions committees (CHSCT, *Comités d’hygiène, de sécurité et des conditions de travail*). Each of these joint bodies were composed of members elected by company staff and each had the legal personality to take legal action (Howell 1992; Contrepois 2022). Under French labour law, namely since the Auroux Laws of 1982, the CHSCT had the right to resort to an independent expert, consultancy firms regularly registered by the Ministry of Labour, to run inquiry over working conditions. The CE could require an expert report on economic and accountancy matters. President Macron’s labour reforms, which passed into law in December 2017, profoundly modified this system. They did so primarily by replacing these three institutions with a single entity, the social and economic committee (CSE, *Comité social et économique*). CHSCT functions are now incorporated into the CSE, resulting in a reduction of organisational resources for worker representatives. For an analysis of the impact of the merges on worker representation at the firm level, see (Pélisse and Wolmark 2021; Contrepois 2022; Michelin 2022).

What is the genesis of this unbalance between productivity and safety? Even if the structural reasons are in Amazon's profit strategy, at the workplace level they are to be found in the everyday practices of supervisors, especially in one-to-one interactions with temporary workers. During the day, workers, especially temps, receive regular visits (usually every week) from their team leaders. After ritual pleasantries, the supervisor stops beating around the bush and gets straight to the point: evaluation. The supervisor explains that there is a curve of learning. Within a certain period, a temp worker was expected to reach the production rate¹⁹⁶. Then, he/she reports the productivity statistics to the worker. The tone is kind: the worker is congratulated when his/her rate is on the average and encouraged to do more. Managers define this behaviour as "*accompagnement bienveillant*" ("benevolent support").

From the third day on, the bar of productivity is set higher and higher for new recruits. This is a crucial mechanism, typical of scientific management even if disguised in "lean" terms ("continuous improvement"): the firm tries to constantly raise the bar of productivity rate by pushing single workers to overperform the required average. In this way, management can transform that overperformance in a new level that all the rest of the workers are pushed to meet. Drawing on Streeck's analysis of lean production in the German car industry we can describe Amazon's continuous improvement as follows:

Efficiencies resulting from organizational learning must therefore be used to increase output, not to underwrite relaxation of effort. Management must set production targets high enough for frontline workers to be forced to devise efficiency improvements, and targets must be moved forward to maintain the pressure. 'Permanent improvement,' in other words, requires that the organization always operate at the limits of its capacity and be driven beyond these by management continually raising production targets as new capabilities develop (Streeck 1996, 141).

The pursuit of continuous improvement unfolds at site as well as the whole network level. As summed up by the CHSCT report:

Apart from personal feelings, numerical indicators provided by employees during interviews seem to confirm that expected productivity is increasing or remaining high, whereas the evolution of equipment or processes does not allow for such margins of progress.

¹⁹⁶ How is this rate set? According to what criteria? the lead does not explain how the rate is defined: it is just presented as a natural fact (and indeed it is an external constraint). During interviews that I made with Amazon representative, they declined to answer this question. Drawing on direct experience, I suppose that the rate corresponds to the ratio of the individual worker on the average ratio of the team. The team level rate, instead, is compared to a predefined rate calculated by algorithms according to the volumes of commodities that the company plans to ship. For what concerns the duration of the curve, according to internal sources, the duration of this "curve" was of three years. Progressively, since 2010, it has been reduced. When I started my ethnography, it was of two weeks.

- In preparation, for example, productivity has been increased from 60 UPH to over 96 at Amazon Europe's request, because this productivity would have been achieved on other sites and the size of the goods handled allows it.
- The site is full, and the stowers' targets have not been lowered as a result.

Employees remark that new arrivals are more evaluated and pushed for productivity than in the past, whereas not so long ago, in initial training, the priority was on respect for safety and quality.

- As part of the recruitment process, the first day of induction is devoted to safety, with a tour of the site, the presentation of various posters outlining all the “safety” and “smart” (gestures and postures) rules to be adopted when handling materials, and the showing of a film presenting all that is safety and smart. Training in the 4 main processes, which consists in presenting the important stages, the key points and the reasons why this or that action is deployed, only takes place on the second day. It is during this second day that the productivity objective is introduced.
- And yet, according to veterans and trainers, “prod” has become a priority in past messages.
- The coaches, who follow the newcomers much more closely than in the past, give them tips on how to achieve or increase productivity, and look for any obstacles.

[...] Employees feel that controls have become permanent: in particular, productivity is communicated to new arrivals on a daily basis. New arrivals normally have a “learning curb” that gives them three weeks to reach 100% productivity. However, this period is no longer respected.

Fieldwork Written Document 7 – Internal document, MRS1, 2018

The report concerns the site of MRS1, but it confirms the dynamics I observed in ORY1 and other sites. The excerpt above points at (1) the progressive intensification of work in French warehouses, prompted by the increase in sales and by the continuous improvement strategy adopted by management at the local and European level; (2) the progressive intensification of personal control, precisely to enforce the technical coercion of the algorithms.

The report also illustrates that the main target of this managerial practice are temporary workers. The reason is that their precarity makes them more receptive to managerial command:

Achieving and maintaining productivity is also an issue for **temporary** workers, who are given their productivity indicators every day. Temporary workers, most of whom are aiming for a permanent contract, can push their targets upwards by pushing themselves to the limit, putting additional pressure on permanent employees. The latter understand this attitude, which is to their detriment, but regret that temporary employees are unaware that such rhythms cannot be endured over the long term. [...] Lastly, for the **senior staff** [bold is original, *author's note*], the indicators are more likely to be given on a weekly basis, and particularly when there is a drop in performance. According to employees, these practices depend very much on the leads, i.e. local management

Fieldwork Written Document 8 – Internal Report, MRS1, 2018

In sum, permanent workers are not under the same direct pressure of management. However, they suffer indirectly from it, for temporary effort constantly keep high the bar of expectations. This dynamic is typical of a dualised internal labour market, an issue that is intertwined to the labour process, but that we will analyse separately in the second part of the chapter. Coming back to the internal document report, it is important to also remark that, according to workers, team leaders have a certain latitude in enforcing control over permanent workers, probably because permanent workers enjoy stronger employment and benefit also from stronger ties with co-workers or supervisors. Thus, on the one hand permanent workers suffer from indirect pressure of temps; on the other hand, are protected from the systematic pressure that managers exert on temps.

How is this pressure exerted? The report does not explain it, but I could observe it directly during my ethnography. The usual script is the following: the supervisor alludes to the possibility of a prolongation of the assignment if the worker's productivity rate remains high. *Vice versa*, when the rate is not good enough, visits become more frequent to increase pressure. The tone remains gentle, but the pressure from management is significant:

First week, one of the PGs in my team, Elias, 5 years seniority, comes to see me and gives my daily productivity and quality report. I see him on the blue badge framed in yellow, he comes with his *cow* (the trolley computer cart he works with), greets me and tells me that we are going to see together the errors. He looks at the screen, on which I dare to cast a glance: on the graphical interface appears my photo, my "login ID" (my code name and barcode) and the number of errors made in the week:

PG: "You made 6 errors last week" [He says after consulting the interface. By clicking on a drop-down menu, he can see the details: the bin in in question, the identity and number of articles and probably also the time of the operation]. "You have 4 items scanned but not found in the bin... and 2 extra, items you put in the bin but did not scan".

Author: "Oh, I am sorry".

PG: "Don't worry, 6 errors in 3 days is not that bad for a beginner.... I can see that you understand the mechanism... there are some who have dozens of errors, it means they haven't understood and so we'll give them coaching" [the repetition of the training].

Author: "OK".

PG: "However, little by little you will start to make fewer mistakes. the important thing is that you stay focused and make the correct gestures: take the article, place it in the bin that has the appropriate space, but don't leave it until you have scanned the barcode of the bin and given the OK; otherwise, if the system cancels your last operation and you have already left the article, you are no longer sure which article is the good and you risk stowing the wrong one".

Author: "Yes, yes, I understand, but you know how it is, you also have to do good productivity".

PG: “Yes, yes... in fact you have to find a balance... *you don't have to do over-quality either (“sur-qualité”)*, otherwise your productivity drops. However, six errors are not that bad for a beginner”.

The discussion then continues, focusing on the conflict between quality and productivity, scanning in batches: the PG explains to me that the training department for three weeks restricts the multi-stow functionality of new stowers.

[During stow, it is quite frequent to process a box with dozens if not hundreds of copies of the same item. If there is enough space in the bin, then dozens of copies could be stowed simultaneously with only one scan and adding manually the quantity of items. This allows the stower to hugely increase her/his UPH rate (and therefore general productivity). However multi-stow is also a source of inventory errors: because the worker counts manually the copies without scanning each one. Thus, at request of the ICQA department, unexperienced workers are prevented from stowing many copies of the same item simultaneously: this function is deactivated by the manager. Only after three weeks of work this function is unlocked by the manager. The trainer explains that the production managers insisted that this period should be reduced to two weeks, because it affects productivity badly; yet the training department asked for a period of at least six, since errors are too frequent. The three weeks seems to be an intermediate solution.]

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 10 – ORY1, October 2019

There are three elements that emerge from this observation. First, the imperative of productivity can easily collide with the needs of inventory (quality), the former defended by production departments (inbound in this case), the latter by training and ICQA department. Second, managers can restrict workers’ self-latitude by changing a simple option in the WMS software. Third, for what concerns the problem of mobilisation, the excerpt illustrates the informal enforcement of the productivity imperative: the temporary workers are instructed by the supervisors not to do “over-quality”, in other words to adapt it to the need of achieving the productivity target.

During these informal discussion, new temps whose rate has not yet reached 100% of the target are informed that his/her rate is not so good. However, the supervisors usually add, “this is not a big deal”, provided that they aim to improve their rate. Management wants to show a certain tolerance when the workers are in their first week. After all, according to managers, there is a “natural” period before the temp workers become fully productive. Yet, after the first week elapses, pressures become more insistent. If no progress is made, a set of procedures is initiated. First, the worker enters a program of “coaching”.

Coaching is not a casual term. It is a pure product of the “new spirit of capitalism” described by Boltanski and Chiapello. In the managerial doctrine of post-fordist management, coaching addresses the problem of workers’ mobilisation:

... firms are going to become “learners” (*apprenantes*), skills management is going to become a key issue, and some new professions are conjured into existence, like the *coach*, whose role is to provide personalised

support, making it possible for everyone to develop their full potential. In the version that strives hardest to give “coaches” an institutional position, the latter are responsible for training. (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 128–29).

The new manager is a coach: the coach does not seek to force, nor to persuade; rather, it governs through charisma, *exemplum*, the power of “inspiration” instead of the authority of roles:

Managers do not seek to supervise or give orders; they do not await instructions from management before applying them. They have understood that such roles are outmoded. They become “team leaders”, “catalysts”, “visionaries”, “coaches”, “sources of inspiration”. [...] “*Cadres*” must turn themselves into “sources of inspiration”, “coaches”, or even “leaders”, whose trademark characteristic is that they formulate exciting “visions” which make people aspire by themselves, since it is no longer legitimate to force them to do so. (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 130–31 and 619)

Confronting this doctrine with Amazon’s corporate ideology, one could say it is a match. Amazon’s cult, infused with the Californian ideology, emphasises precisely those above-mentioned elements (initiative, charisma, inspiration). However, the way how coaching is *actually* deployed in Amazon logistic workplace shows how this new ethos of capitalism is put at the service of *old-school scientific management*. When workers underperform, especially the new ones, trainers are sent to them to revise all the basics of the job, to make sure that the worker has really understood the sequence of tasks. Trainers describe their job as tight monitoring of workers:

Employees identified as low performers are monitored by instructors for several days. This involves reviewing all processes with them, analysing them, and giving them “tips” on how to improve. Where possible, for example on the pack line, we place them next to co-workers with high rates (“top performers”) so that they can see what the right cadence is and try to follow it. In the aisles, we show them the walking pace: a support coach picks in their place to show them how to walk, how to pick faster etc... After a few days (usually 3), they are encouraged (“*challenges*”) to increase their productivity to show that they can surpass themselves. Finally, usually after a week, the area manager (more rarely the ops manager) interviews them.

Fieldwork Written Document 9 – Internal Report, MRS1, 2018

To workers, coaching is presented as a *rational solution* to low productivity of the single worker. If a worker’s rate is low, it must be because the workers has not *learned* the procedures. The solution is to set up an individualised training. Despite the apparent benevolence of management, coaching is conventionally considered by workers as a humiliation, because if a worker cannot master such simple procedures, then he or she must be dumb. A worker accepts without the enthusiasm expected by the managerial doctrine. One day, during my assignment in France, I was approached by a team leader

who wanted to discuss my performance. My rate was good enough, but the conversation took some minutes. During the discussion, a young colleague walked by, she continued picking articles a few metres away, and then she shouted out at me, kidding: “*tu te fais coacher?*” (“are you being coached?”). I and the team leader were quite embarrassed, and the team leader immediately denied, “No! No coaching at all!”; I did not reply.

Apart from the humiliation, coaching is another way of exerting pressure on the worker. The worker under coaching must endure increased monitoring from supervisors. The following excerpts are quoted from the CHSCT report, but other examples can be found very easily in the press, online and in social media:

- “When someone doesn't make their own rate, they stick them with someone who follows them. They take a list of those with the worst productions and follow them, giving them recommendations”.
- “If you stop for a while, even to go to the bathroom, they're all the time asking, ‘You didn't make your production, you took a break, where were you?’”
- “When you're identified as a low performer, you're constantly monitored for a week by an instructor”.
- “When I have to coach low performers and show them the processes again, even though some of them are much older than me, I'm ashamed! There's no empathy, and age is not taken into account in the targets to be reached”.

Fieldwork Written Document 10 – Internal document, MRS1, 2018

If, after the coaching, the temporary worker keeps on failing in meeting the rates, then his assignment is terminated in advance. This is confirmed by internal reports:

It's only when the situation (“performance”) doesn't improve or worsens that measures are envisaged, since, by management's own admission, the company won't accept below-average employees for too long. We note that at this last stage, management considers that the employee's responsibility is engaged: “In general, it's personal”.

Fieldwork Written Document 11 – Internal document, MRS1, 2018

Temporary workers are also suggested by instructors and by supervisors to show their zeal and interest in productivity. For instance, they are invited to ask their supervisors about their performance. Thus, at the end of the shift, it is possible to see a queue of temp workers waiting for their daily report. As a permanent worker explained the CHSCT report:

We ask managers for information on our productivity when we have the impression that things haven't gone well, to find out, especially when we're new to a process... We prefer to check to avoid getting remarks, because they don't wait to come to you. We're afraid of being fired, especially if we're temps.

Fieldwork Written Document 12 – Internal document, MRS1, 2018

On average, over a couple of weeks, workers get more confidence with the procedures and learn some tips to do the job faster. Some, as we saw, are suggested by trainers and team leaders during the first weeks of work. In the case of picking, the one on which management insists the most is to execute the single task (picking an item) and to simultaneously anticipate the next movement. This is possible because on the screen of the scanner, the software displays not only the position of the item to pick, but also, in the bottom line, the position of the next one. Therefore, management suggests the pickers to place their cart in the direction of the next address. This allows to save a few seconds but “multiplied for each item and for each worker, it means a lot!”, managers say. Another tip is to not wait for the tote to be full before loading it on the conveyor; instead, managers and team leaders suggest, “it is better to unload it when you are passing by the conveyor, whether the tote is totally, or half filled”. Finally, there are other tips that are not recommended by management but that a recruit can learn by observing senior colleagues or discussing with them. There are basic tips such as using a third tote: this is formally forbidden according to safety rules, but tolerated by management because it increases productivity.

Management also organises challenges to foster workers' motivation. During my assignment at Amazon France, there was one who was particularly used by management and that we have already met: the “fast start”. The fast start is a challenge in which at the beginning of a shift a countdown of 60 seconds starts: workers have to fan out and walk as fast as they can to their work area and pick (or stow) their first item before the 60 seconds elapse. It is a way for management to push workers to start the shift at a rapid pace. There is not a specific prize for the winners of the race. The goal is just not to fail it, because workers who do not achieve the fast start receive feedback from management. For temporary workers, achieving this goal matters, as they understand that from this depends the continuation. Of course, workers are not allowed to run and must go fast while respecting safety rules. In fact, workers who engage with the challenge are likely to infringe one of the numerous safety rules. Workers, especially temps, must deal with these two contradictory injunctions.

* * *

In general, I observed, people are used to break many of the safety prescriptions: they pull the cart instead of pushing it; run instead of walking; lift heavy loads without squatting in order to save

time and increase their rate. This shows that the urgency of processing orders as fast as possible regularly prevails on the rhetoric of safety and quality, especially during the peak season and even more when trucks are scheduled to leave the warehouse, but certain items have not been processed yet.

Why do workers break these procedures even though they are constantly reminded to respect them? Because while reminding safety and quality rules, management pushes them to care more about productivity. This is stressed also by the CHSCT report:

While management, in particular directors and managers, insist on giving priority to safety and quality (based on the company's culture of customer service), it must be said that on the ground it is achieving and maintaining production that is uppermost in people's minds. Employees note a gradual change since 2010, which has led to production being given priority, a priority apparently conveyed by the proximity management: "Productivity is the only thing that counts now".

Fieldwork Written Document 13 – Internal Report, MRS1, 2018

Such a dynamic exceeds the simple technical/digital coercion of the labour process. The informatic system frames tasks rigidly, but its prescriptions do not cover any task at 100%. There are still small spaces of autonomy that the workers use to circumvent formal (digital) procedures. However, the relevant point is that these niches are exploited almost exclusively at benefit of productivity. This is possible because of the political coercion enforced by management (policing) on the workers.

The question is then: why these rules, especially safety rules, exist if they are constantly infringed? My argument, that I have also developed elsewhere (Massimo 2020b), is based on the classic distinction between manifest and latent functions made by Merton. The manifest function of safety rules is to avoid accidents, professional diseases, and their consequences (Merton 1949). There are then two latent functions. One is a form of legal *endogenisation* (and conflict domestication) through formal compliance (Edelman 1992; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Drais and Pélisse 2017): by stressing the role of safety, Amazon protects itself against any reproach or claim, whether they come from inside or outside the firm. The second latent function is to increase coercion over workers. The managerial discourse, by giving such prominence to safety, brings much of the operations and relationships that take place in the warehouse back into this realm, codifying behaviour as much as possible and thereby extending coercion over workers. In one of the extracts from my fieldwork journal above, this function is suggested by the team leader's expression ("you will be our eyes and ears"). During the briefs, managers also invite people to report the risky or irregular behaviour adopted by colleagues:

Area manager: We urge you as always to respect the safety rules, but not only you as individuals, because you also have a responsibility towards your colleagues. So, if, for example, you see a colleague who is not holding the ramp while going down the stairs, you can and must tell him or her... as long as you do it politely, of course. Or you can report it directly to your leads.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 11 – Mid-Shift Brief, Picking, ORY1, July 2018

On another occasion, I was reported by a safety manager in charge of safety who for days monitored the work lanes and noted improper behaviour:

Stow shift, after break. Caught up in work and under pressure to stock as many items as possible, I pay no attention to the safety rules: instead of pushing my big stow trolley, I pull it with my arms while marching backwards. I don't even notice that there is a team lead patrolling the picktower. I had already noticed her in the previous days because she was not engaged in a specific activity, but rather seemed to be policing the floor. When I raise my head I find her in front of me at the entrance of the aisle, between the two shelves, staring at me.

Author: Good morning!

Team Leader: Good morning!

[Silence].

Author: Is something wrong?

TL: Well yes, there is something wrong! But first let me introduce myself. My name is Marie and I'm the safety manager. My job is to make sure that you are all able to work safely.

Author: OK... Very nice to meet you.

Team leader: So, I noticed straight away that there was something wrong with the way you work.

Author: [I realise what the problem is] Yes, I know, I was pulling the cart [*the trolley at Amazon should never be pulled or dragged, but always pushed, because it allows you to control it better, but it's a rule that is systematically violated*].

TL: Ah, on top of that you knew it! You know why safety is important, then.

Author: It's all clear.

TL: It's to prevent you from getting hurt. A full cart can weigh up to a hundred, two hundred kilos. So, to manoeuvre it you need caution. If you drag it, you make improperly twist your shoulder and spine, and you don't control it properly... well... you take the risk of hitting your foot on it and 200 kilos on your Achilles tendon can hurt you a lot.

Author: I know, but I was caught up in the rush of work.

TL: The job shouldn't be done in a hurry, you've been told.

Author: Yes. I'll be more careful from now on.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 12 – ORY1, Stow shift, France, October 2019

This excerpt shows how even the protection of worker safety becomes a form of persuasion under threat, a form of policing. Safety rules, therefore, are presented as a health protection policy,

but under the pressure of Amazon's profit strategy turn into a device for monitoring workers' behaviour. On the one hand, it legitimises the work process; on the other hand, since it is *de facto* subordinated to productivity, it increases coercion.

5.1.4.2. *Productivity vs quality*

Another consideration must be made on the way how Amazon define quality targets and how it deals with the relation between quality and productivity. Like safety, quality is negatively affected by the pressure on productivity. Managerial injunctions to process items as much fast as possible force the workers to overlook quality standard procedures. There are many examples of this conflict.

As we saw in the description of Amazon's labour process (Chapter 2), workers must inspect an article (to verify that it is the good one and that it is in good conditions) before processing it. Pressure on rapidity make them inspect too quickly, so the risk increases of either processing the wrong item or a damaged one, or in the wrong quantity. Managers monitor quality and can trace the causal chain of the errors. Thus, when an error occurs, they handle the single worker accountable.

Excessive pressure on productivity increases the number of inventory errors and exposes workers to work-related psycho-social risks. Another example concerns stowers. For the warehouse operations to be as much profitable as possible, management tries to fill its storage space as much as possible. This happens especially during peak. I worked as a stower during the peak seasons. Between October and November, the focus is on the storing of commodities that will be sold on Black Friday and around Christmas.

One of the problems faced by stowers was the excessive filling of storage space. As stower, we had to respect a certain productivity standard (around 300 items stowed per hour), but store capacity was at its highest and we lost a lot of time looking for a bin with enough space to receive another item. Thus, our productivity rate decreased dramatically. Stower competed for any inch of space available and filled bins at an unreasonable level. To save storage space, bin boxes had been introduced globally by Amazon years before. Bin boxes consist of cardboard-drawers where items (especially small items or items with an irregular shape) can be stored in bulk. They were placed in the mid-level of the shelves and on the floor-level. However, these boxes were increasingly full, making it impossible for the stowers to put anything in them; the pickers often have to empty them in order to find the required item. This was not only a major waste of time but also a source of errors and missing items (which also makes it harder to achieve quality targets). It was also harmful for workers' bodies, for the boxes could be very heavy: pickers and stowers could receive a harm-tendon

injury trying to pull a heavy drawer; in addition, pickers often had to spend minutes and minutes squatting (or kneeling) while searching for the right item¹⁹⁷.

In the interview excerpt below, an Amazon worker and SUD unionist in ORY1 explain that they signalled this disfunction to the General Manager (GM) of the site, emphasising the major risk for health and safety, as well as the overall impact on quality. Management took some “measures”:

[...] but it depends on *what* “measures”. At ORY1, the GM chose to reinforce the ICQA teams to correct the deviations from the stow method, but we continued to suffer from these deviations and the inherent degradation of conditions. ICQA corrects the inventory errors but not the source of the errors. Therefore, when the corrections are made on one side, the stowers start their errors on the other side and re-fill in the same way the freed and corrected bin. Thus, the situation remains the same, work area degraded, impact on safety, impact on damaged items and productivity. and productivity. A lot of time is spent by stowers finding space for the stow; by pickers searching for items or even just physically opening bins; and by ICQA people making inventory corrections. We insisted every month on having updated stow rules, *andons*¹⁹⁸ that correspond to the reality on the ground; we demanded to have the accident situation monitored in order to arrive at corrections. We therefore had to continue the fight: you can call it “Picking against the *Bulk-shit*” [in English]. One of the problems observed is the follow-up of instructions from the GM to the workers. The management has got into the habit of deviating from the rules simply to make money. *Stow is no longer about filling bins properly but to empty carts! No matter how.* The formal prescriptions are usually changed by the lead, or the PG or an instructor, who shows a technique of his or her own, or simply by another associate to “save time” and empty the cart more quickly. Management tolerates forbidden practices to the point of generalising them, which indeed has an impact on our safety (and on productivity, since pickers are slowed down if bins are too full). The stower stows badly but on time, and those who come after him suffer the accidents, the drop in productivity and the negative feedback. However, there are rules that we could use to protect our safety: if I take an item out of the bin that is not intended for my picking, the official rule is that I have to put it in the Amnesty Bin¹⁹⁹. Except that now the articles that we get out of the bin are a lot. Another “European” security rule states that it is not useful to overfill the bin boxes. You end up in situations where you can’t open them, or close them, or just take the items out because you have managed to put in items that are bigger than the bin, or items that don’t belong there. In these cases, we make “Safety Saves”, we take pictures, we alert the leads and managers. And to make things clearer, I note down in a notebook during my shift (3 hours) and on my picking path the number

¹⁹⁷ As we are going below and discussing it under an industrial relations politics perspective in Chapter 8 (par. 8.1.3), French unions engaged a battle with management to change this aspect of the organization of work and partially obtained what they demanded.

¹⁹⁸ The Japanese term “andon”, is derived from the toyotist/lean jargon. In manufacturing, it is a system which notifies managerial, maintenance, and other workers of a quality or process problem. Likewise, in Amazon it is a procedure to alert management about errors and disfunctions.

¹⁹⁹ In Amazon FCs, the amnesty bin is a blue-coloured case placed at the extremity of the aisle. Its function is to store items that have fallen from the shelves and that it is not certain to what bin they belong. To prevent the risk of putting the item back in the wrong bin (which would multiply inventory errors), the procedure requires that the item is placed in the amnesty bin. ICQA team regularly inspect them, retrieve “lost” item, put into a regular bin and correctly register the new location.

of bin boxes opened, the number of items put in Amnesty Bin, the number of bins that are too heavy, the number of damaged bins, the number of water bottles found in the bins. When I show the result, it explains a 30% drop in productivity. I come back from holiday and, surprise from the boss! I finally have the update of the stow rules I've been asking for since March. It remains to be seen whether this will be applied in the shelves.

Fieldwork Quote 96 – Amazon worker and CHSCT member for SUD, man, French, ca. 45 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, February 2018

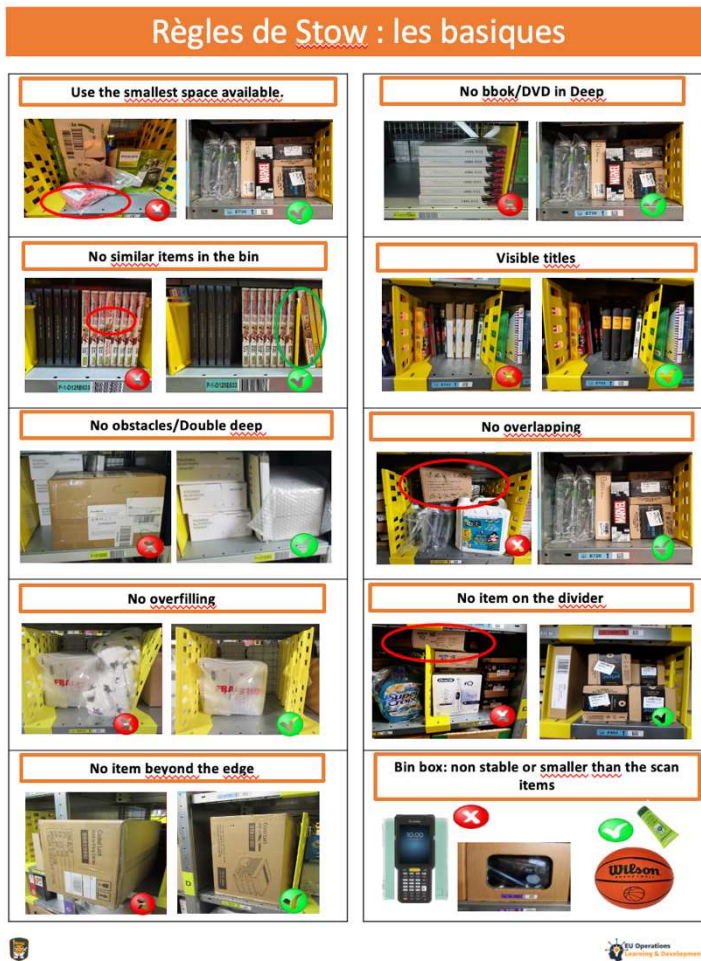


Figure 49 – Rules of Stow in French warehouses

Management reminds the stowers about the respect of these rules, but their respect in practice is subordinated to productivity results
Source: Fieldwork

The argument of this worker and unionist is that the company does not care about it. On the one hand, shop-floor management is pressured to privilege productivity instead of quality and, anyway, the scale of volumes handled by the company is so high that inventory inefficiencies and squandering are considered affordable by management:

Worker: As a result, such a bin-box system increases the number of damaged items... for to pick the item, you have to take everything out and that's it... anyway, they do not care too much about these damages...

it's in their percentage of lost profits. [...] Their system is based on the calculation that below a given percentage, it's insignificant and above that it becomes worrying. When it becomes no longer profitable, that's when we solve the problem and start to deal with it, but as long as it's insignificant, it doesn't matter, at least it is what they reckon.

Author: So, for them it's more important to use the space as much as possible, even if it is less efficient?

Worker: For them, the challenge is to optimise the space, operating at full capacity, to send as many articles as possible with as few manipulations as possible, but quickly, minding the quantity... at the end of the day it is what it matters... it's better to send 500.000 articles with 20.000 defects, or even 50.000, but at least you've sent 500.000 articles, it doesn't matter, you don't care too much about the defects...

Fieldwork Quote 97 – Amazon worker and CHSCHT member for SUD, man, French, ca. 45 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, February 2018

On the other hand, for what concerns the impact on workers' health, the responder says that these disfunctions are harmful. This in turn pushes the workers to quit Amazon after a few years, thereby favouring the renewal of workforce:

With this system, you're going to break the associate's body, if possible in less than three years in fact. Because once they're physically worn out, they'll want to quit. And Amazon will be able to recruit a temporary worker who needs to work, so he'll run for a job and what's more, he'll be hired and paid less because after three years the seniority bonuses start to become interesting, well a bit more interesting... all that is a cost. And their principle is to reduce costs as much as possible. And one of the solutions is to limit seniority. For an employee who comes to work, he's still thinking in terms of "I'm going to build a house, so I'm going to settle down, so I want to keep my job for a long time". It doesn't match well with "we're going to wear you down for three years and then you're going to leave".

Fieldwork Quote 98 – Amazon worker and CHSCHT member for SUD, man, French, ca. 45 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, February 2018

Coming from a senior worker and union activist such an account must be critically scrutinised. For instance, it is not sure that temp workers are cheaper than permanent ones, since many variables account for the final cost (Box 8). It is true, that Amazon encourages turnover but, at the same time there are bonuses and other provisions (some established by the sectoral collective agreement, some unilaterally conceded by Amazon) that improve the real wage of senior permanent workers (see par. 5.2.4). In any case, what matters here is that such a critical gaze on the contradictory policies of the company was widespread in the workforce, not only among unionists.

Finally, in the French workplace I observed another endemic deviation from formal rules, which was the result of managerial pressure for productivity and of the individualisation of performance assessment. ORY1 was equipped with a one-way conveyor, set only to bring outbound totes. The inbound supply of items, from receive to stow, was carried out by a special team of labourers, a couple

of senior workers and half a dozen temporary workers. The job is considered low-skilled, and it is quite physical (handing over carts from the buffer area of the receive department to the stowers) but at the same time it is not very proceduralised (the only rule is the “FIFO”, “First In-First Out” i.e. the first cart coming from the receive area must be immediately sent to stowers, then the second etc.). The execution of these tasks is carried out without digital devices, so it remains out of the direct supervision of algorithms. These workers have a certain self-latitude in distributing carts to the stowers, a practice that reproduces informal micro-alliances between small groups of workers (Massimo 2020b). In particular, labourers can decide, informally, to derogate from the FIFO and to assign autonomously the “good” carts – i.e. those with small objects, possibly of the same kind, because they are easier to handle and to stow, thus increasing the stower’s productivity rate – usually to “friends”. This creates occasional protests from workers who are excluded from this informal exchange and the periodical intervention of managers who scold the workers and sometimes write them up.

What emerges from these statements and from my direct observation (see also Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 10) is that management in practice accepts inefficiencies, for they are the result of contradictory pressures. These inefficiencies can potentially undermine the viability of the whole organisation, for, differently from safety, quality is intrinsically linked to the productivity of the whole system. If workers do not follow correctly the task procedures – and this does not happen by chance, but because in most of the cases they work under pressure – then inventory errors are likely to inflate and this has a direct impact on the entire work process. If the number of workers allocated to solving and ICQA goes under a certain proportion of the production workers²⁰⁰, then it would become harder for them to correct the errors. If production workers work too fast and make errors, and if the number of inventory workers is not adequate to the needs, major problems ensue from it: virtual inventory and actual inventory do not match any more, pickers struggle to find the correct item in the bins, packers receive the wrong article, or even worse the wrong items are shipped. The entire chain of fulfilment gets disrupted if errors exceed a certain threshold. In other words, neglecting quality in favour of productivity results into productivity losses that offset the previous productivity gain. Therefore, it is critical for management not to exceed a certain threshold of quality inefficiency. If the rate of errors increases alarmingly, then management intervenes either by reallocating the workforce or by enforcing the formal standards on quality.

²⁰⁰ In France, according to information collected with senior workers, non-directly productive jobs (ICQA, replenishment, runners) represent must be kept by management under 10% of the whole workforce employed at a given moment.

Coping with this “dilemma”, Amazon management satisfices twice: first, they deviate from the official best practice by informally encouraging workers to put productivity before quality; second, when this routine threatens productivity standards, they adjust the routine to the formal standard.

However, differently from traditional conceptions of satisficing (March and Simon 1958; Burawoy 1979a; Vidal 2022), satisficing does not translate necessarily in greater margins of autonomy for workers. On the contrary, what we can observe from the case of Amazon is that the gap between formal prescriptions and work practices turns into a “disciplinary” pattern where managers can decide whether to enforce or not the rules, thus increasing its discretion.

Management has responsibility over these adjustments, this does not mean that workers do not feel the consequences of this contradictions: during briefs or one-to-one meetings (see excerpts above) management never ceases to remind workers that they have to respect quality standards but at the same time the exhort workers not to give an inch of productivity. Workers are then exposed to the paradoxical injunctions of an arbitrary management that, on the one hand, encourages them to deviate from best practices and, on the other hand, periodically repress these deviations. Accountability for maintaining the required levels of productivity and quality becomes a stress factor for shopfloor management, which in turn transmits it on workers.

We have seen so far that such arbitrary style of management exposes workers, especially temps, to discretionary enforcement of rules. Workers are thus taken in the middle of contradictory pressures. We will see that a similar dynamic takes places in Italy. In both the French and the Italian site, the Taylorisation of the work process combined with discretionary management creates tensions. However, in France these tensions tend to produce contention in the workplace, while in Italy tensions produce a quiet politics of arrangements. In the next section we will focusing on the forms of workplace contention that emerge in the French workplace.

5.1.5. French variations: contentious coercion in the workplace

As we have already seen in previous chapters, Amazon’s labour process in this second phase reached an unprecedented level of standardization. Observation of interaction in the shopfloor, however, shows also other things. The fragmentation of tasks, typical of digital taylorism, is compounded by the production of norms and procedures. Some of them are inscribed into the software that regulate flows and allocate tasks to the workers. The software decides in what order and in what quantity a worker must handle an item, and each act is broken into micro-tasks. This makes labour coordination easier and constant monitoring possible. Division of labour and proceduralisation constitute the pillar of technical coercion: the rigidity of prescriptions and the constant monitoring of work are a driver of labour productivity. Technical coercion, in other words, structures worker effort.

However, direct observation shows that this form of coercion which becomes dominant in Amazon's algorithmic bureaucracy, is enforced through direct supervision.

Despite the centralisation of control over the labour process dispossessed proximity managers of most of their power over production, they kept a major role in securing coercion²⁰¹. Twice a day, at the beginning and in the middle of the shifts, managers brief their teams about the productivity and quality target. They remind safety rules. After studying the flows of orders that are centrally planned by the algorithms, they do the "staffing" i.e., they allocate the workforce according to the expected needs. During the shift, supervisors monitor their teams from their laptops, scrutinising in detail the working performance of individuals; they walk through the aisles and search the workers for summoning them or congratulate them; when there is a need to find workers for voluntary extra-time, they walk through the picktowers taking single workers aside and trying to persuade them to enrol. At the end of the shift, they receive individual workers who could have special requests or grievances. Also, it is very appreciated if, once a week, recruits go to their team leader or area manager and review their performance together. It is considered by management as proof of allegiance and involvement which should increase the agency worker's chances of get a prolongation of his or her assignment.

Technical coercion, in other words, has its own politics, and that politics also imply the management of conflicts (latent or manifest) that emerge from Amazon's bureaucratized and Taylorised labour process. The shape and the level of this conflict in the labour process, we are going to see, is peculiar of the French context.

* * *

Management's enforcement of coercion over workers is particularly contentious in French warehouses. Managers pressure over workers emerged already in the previous section of this chapter. Since the first weeks, managers exert pressure on workers so as they meet the required level of productivity. As we are going to see, this happens also in Italy. A certain level of direct supervision is necessary to make the workforce adapt to the rhythms of world imposed by algorithmic management and Amazon' profit strategy.

As we will see comparing the French and the Italian case, the enforcement of coercion is much more contentious in the former than in the latter. Furthermore, this contention in the labour process is exerted quite unilaterally by management on the workers, whose reaction is rather bounded to individual hidden resistance rather than collective response.

²⁰¹ Both in France and Italy, workers stressed that the role of their management was not to intervene on the standard of production. In practice, the workers say, managerial jurisdiction seems limited to the management of the workforce: staffing, shift scheduling and monitoring workers' performances.

5.1.5.1. *Managerial contention over working time*

Conflicts over working time are intrinsic to wage-labour relations and grounded in the history of class relation in the labour process (e.g. E. P. Thompson 1967). At Amazon France, the definition of worktime is arguably the main issue of contention between managers and workers in the labour process.

Underneath an appearance of peace and quiet, a deaf struggle on working time takes place in the whop floor. Since the beginning of an assignment, I noticed how workers are instructed about the importance of punctuality. To reinforce the discipline, a bonus of €150 was introduced for all the workers coming at work every day during the first two weeks of December (*Capital.fr* 2019). “Punctuality is essential”, told the agency recruiter to us at the end of the training. Punctuality means that workers are expected to be logged in and ready to work by the first minute of the shift. Management is particularly insistent on this: “every second matters”. Especially during peak periods, managers remind the workers about the importance of not losing a moment:

Brief after the break. Anna, the area manager makes her usual speech. Then she says: “Finally, let’s talk about working time. I’ll say it again: the break starts at 10 sharp. It doesn’t start at 9.57 or 9.58. So please don’t leave earlier. We are 50 stowers in this shift. If each of us loses two minutes, that’s 200 items that aren’t put away. So, if we can avoid wasting time on this, it’s time saved for improving our work, safety etc. [It is the classic argument: I have the impression that managers are trained to repeat it over and over again.] Report any anomaly, incorrect behaviour etc. to us... So! Are you with me? And off we go!”

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 13 – ORY1, October 2019

Since “every second matters”, Amazon introduced a metrics to monitor recording during the number of minutes during each shift when workers have shown no measurable productivity: “Time off task” (ToT). As we saw in Chapter 2, almost all the physical tasks that compose production jobs (receive, stow, pick, pack etc.) are registered by the worker through their digital devices. This allows the worker to complete their series of tasks and to the central warehousing software to update inventory almost on real time. This also allows management to track workers. Therefore, it is clear since the beginning to Amazon workers that every minute spent not executing any operation is measured by the digital devices. Management pays a great deal of attention to this question, not only in Europe but worldwide (Delfanti 2021b; Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova 2022; Kassem 2023). If a worker is logged in (so he/she is expected to be on a certain task) but has not registered any operation – for instance because he/she is going to the toilet, or chatting with a colleague, or just taking a short break from work – the system automatically signals the ToT to area managers and team leaders. If a worker logs out one or two minutes before the scheduled end of the shift, he/she is

considered in ToT. In that case, the worker is subject to warnings (first with an oral rebuke, then with a written warning notice) and sanctions (from suspension to termination).

One of the missions of shop-floor management is to monitor ToT and to keep it under a certain level. The methods for making workers respect the time schedule include repeated benevolent reminders, but in France supervisors can be very stern in enforcing such a rule:

I am working as a stower. The process guide, Malila, comes along and says: “Come with me”. I don’t ask why and just follow her – after all it’s not bad to take a break. Kevin, the team leader, is waiting for us with some other temps who have also been summoned. Malila asks why we have been called in. Kevin replies: “He [i.e. me] missed the fast start”. “But he’s just in his second day!”, she replies. “Look Francesco, I’m defending you”, she jokes. Kevin turns to us temps and says: “So, I had you called because it’s part of the follow-up”, he says as if he wanted to justify himself behind a rule. He looks embarrassed, he has to explain to us that he has to monitor our work and that there is a two-minute “fast start” and that if the software signals that we’re using more time he has to check: “maybe there’s been a problem, maybe people go to the toilet at the very beginning of the shift... so I’m going to talk to you one by one to find out if everything’s OK”. So, he talks to us individually to hear our explanations. When it is my turn, I tell him I was waiting for my cart, which is why I hadn’t started stowing yet. He doesn’t say anything, just records my login number and then lets me go.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 14 – ORY1, October 2019

Such episodes are frequent in Amazon’s French workplace, especially during the peak season, when pressures increase over workers but also over managers. Management’s action is triggered by the software, which automatically signals ToT. Once the notification received, management is expected to intervene on the workers. Technical coercion shapes not only workers behaviour but also managerial control.

A couple of hour later, management notices that ToT metrics are still poor and deems it necessary to warn the entire stow team. The team leader gives a stern speech during the brief:

Kevin, the team leader, starts the brief by shouting at two co-workers who have not showed up on time after the break. Then, he shows us that this morning’s production results are very poor. He shows us the productivity curve on the big screen installed in the briefing area. Not easy to interpret from a distance, but he sums it up: “It’s not going well”, he says. “And why is that? We’ve looked into the problem and the cause is that *some* people [he pronounces that as if he wanted to say that they know whom they are talking about] don’t get to the brief on time, they don’t take the time to look at what stow zone they have been assigned, so they don’t know which zone to go to stow and at the end of the brief they crowd in front of the board to check it... so they slow everything down”. He stops talking for a couple of seconds and look at us, then he concludes: “So, from next week we’re going to flip the board over at the start of the briefing, so that the latecomers won’t know which zone to go to, they will have to come to us and ask, and they will be

called to order". Then he tries to temper his intimidating tone, invites us to do our best and lets us get on with our work.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 15 – ORY1, October 2019

The excerpt shows how much management is ready to escalate contention in order to make workers respect a tight work schedule. The problem is that the definition of work-time given by management is not necessarily the same of the workers, which is a classic problem in labour sociology and economics (see Introduction to Part II).

According to management, workers must be already logged in and ready to start picking (or stowing or packing etc.) when the shift starts. However, this imply that all the tasks of preparation would be not considered as working time and, consequently, would not be remunerated. Before logging in, a picker (or a stower) must leave the dressing rooms and walk to the brief area on the floor. The clocking in machine is positioned there. At ORY1, it takes between 3 and 5 minutes: all this time is "lost" by the workers. Once arrived, the worker punches in. Then, the picker must find and take a scanner in a shelf located in the brief area, take a battery from the charger, insert it in the scanner. Sometimes, especially during peaks, it can take longer to find a scanner or a fully charged battery, because it happens that workers from the previous shift did not correctly put the battery of their scanner on charge. Then the workers must login, launch the software and select the picking process. All these micro-tasks must be repeated in reverse at the end of the shift or right before the pause. When it is time to leave the floor, the friction becomes even more abrasive. First, because the workers cannot just leave the picktower and go to the break room. They have to drop the tote on the conveyor, park the cart in specific areas, and walk to the brief area, which takes up to 5 minutes (especially if they are on the 4th floor of the picktower). In this way, workers lose up to 5 minutes more. Then they must disassemble the scanner, put the battery on charge, punch in, walk for another 3-5 minutes to the break room. However, there is another obstacle: metal detectors. If traces of metal are detected, the machine sounds, the worker is stopped by private security agents and searched. This means that the worker loses from 5 to 10 minutes. Finally, the workers reach the breaking room. The break lasts 30 minutes, so they are left with just 15 minutes to go to the toilet, queueing up to buy a snack, consuming it, possibly smoking a cigarette, making an urgent phone call and, on top of that, go back to the floor, because they must be on time for the start of the brief.

By forcing workers to accomplish these micro-tasks out of the time of the shift, Amazon's managers constantly try to unilaterally expands working time. Correspondingly, workers try to preserve their break time by accomplishing these tasks during the established worktime. In France, what is particularly evident is that management does not tolerate this resistance. Managers demand that workers leave work only when it is the time of the break, not a minute earlier. Usually, they push

kindly but insistently; however, many times they do not hesitate, as we have just seen, to scrutiny, summon, and threaten workers. Supervisors let the workers understand that they can check if a worker is logging out earlier, and this message is particularly persuasive for temp workers, whose assignment depends on the decision of managers; they can also resort to personal monitoring and send a team leader to control the aisles. Management's intolerance for ToT intensifies during the peak season. For instance, at several occasions, I noticed a safety manager (the same who caught me pulling my cart, see Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 12) patrolling the space around the clocking in machine, she was there to "ambush" the workers that left work earlier in order to report them to managers. In peak periods, there is only something worse than showing late at work or leaving earlier than the time expected by managers: absenteeism. The recruiters make it clear since the first day of peak: better coming late at work than not showing up at all:

At the end of the day's training, the agency's recruitment officer gives us a summary and some final recommendations: "*Punctuality is essential. You must let us know if you can't make it. It's better to be late than absent. In the event of absence, you have 48 hours to return the proof of absence to the agency. The proof must be a certificate, not prescriptions!*"

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 16 – ORY1, October 2019

To fight absenteeism, management leverages on temp workers' vulnerability in the labour market. However, since many workers are permanent, i.e. with a relatively secure job, the company usually offers a presence bonus at every peak. The goal is to encourage people to show up at work in a moment where the company has desperate need of workforce to cope with the peak in orders. In this respect the fact that management suggests workers to show up at work even if they are late hints at the hold of technical coercion on workers once that they are in the workplace.

5.1.5.2. *Worker's reaction: not-so-hidden resistance*

Managerial pressure generates frustration among the workers. It is a matter of discussion every day at the beginning, during the pause, and at the end of the shift. As we are going to see in Part III, French unions harshly criticise Amazon's policy on worktime²⁰².

How do workers react to management's pressure? Part of the workforce just comply in front of managerial pressures. Given their precarious conditions, many temporary workers feel exposed to the pressure of Amazon management. Since the first days many temporary workers absorb the rules, and usually comply, although out of fear rather than commitment. This is confirmed by the CHSCT report

²⁰² In Part III we will see how certain unionists, namely the head of the CFDT union section, engage individual but open battles against management in the workplace, but such episodes are quite rare.

on MRS1, who quotes the statement of employees for which “the key is to go unnoticed, to be docile, ‘not to make waves’”. These are some workers’ statements reported:

“At Amazon, if you want to succeed, you have to keep a low profile, you have to keep quiet. You might not do anything, but you mustn’t upset anyone”.

“When they see that people are getting more assertive, that’s not good, they don’t want rebel people, you say nothing, you point, you work”.

“It’s sometimes complicated to get your point of view heard they don’t like it when you stand up to them, even if they’re wrong”.

“Some people don’t meet the productivity target their own thing, but they’re very docile and we never say anything to them”.

Fieldwork Written Document 14 – Internal Report, MRS1, 2018

These are statements that we should handle carefully, given that we do not precisely know the social characteristics of the responders, especially whether they are unionised (what we know is that they are permanent workers). However, they match with my own observation in the fieldwork. Both sources agree in signalling how the system of managerial supervision exerts coercion at least on a part of the workforce, including the permanent workforce. Interestingly, the interviewed workers state that management tolerates lower productivity more than overt insubordination. It is puzzling, since I have insisted on the great deal of attention that management pays on productivity. This suggests that Amazon management sacrifices not only on quality and safety but also, and to a certain extent, on productivity. The condition is that this does not lead to overt defiance. In this respect, such findings echo the argument that the priority of management is to keep control rather than promote efficiency, since the former is the source of profit, not the latter (Braverman 1974; Marglin 1974; Montgomery 1979). Such interpretation is also reinforced by the tendency of supervisors to prefer tardiness to absenteeism (see 5.1.5.1).

In fact, in the daily life of the workplace, management in Amazon France has to cope with forms of insubordination that are rather overt. Another part of the workforce – especially those who are more experienced, more protected (blue badges), or simply more defiant – resists *individually* and *quietly*. Here is an example from my fieldwork journal:

As the pause or the end of the shift approaches, these workers monitor time on the scanner; according to their position in the picktower, they estimate the minutes needed to be in the break room on the sharpest time; a few minutes before the formal end of the shift, they leave their workstation or the picktower and walk to the brief area to put down the scanner and accomplish all the secondary operations so as they have enough time to enjoy their break.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 17 – ORY1, October 2019

Such a form of (mis)behaviour remains a rather “hidden” resistance (J. C. Scott 1985; 1990). The conflict does not translate into a collective mobilisation, even if workers carry it out simultaneously but individually. Workers do not organise it before, nor discuss it after. It is rather a misbehaviour that workers learn mimetically, just imitating their colleagues. But what is the justification of this silent protest?

On the one hand, these workers are uncommitted to managerial objectives. On the other hand, they must consider the behaviour of manager, which consist in arbitrarily expanding working time, is considered illegitimate, as it is not inscribed in any company rule or collective agreement. However, the level of coercion and the threat of retaliations is high enough to inhibit overt rebellion.

There are other forms of (mis)behaviour which certain workers carry on overtly, but always individually. Certain workers, for instance, can stick to safety rules to reduce their working rhythms; other can remain sit in the break room until the last second of the break and only then come back to work (see, for example, Box 18). Workers who carry on these forms of protest, however, are a few and in most of the cases are unionists²⁰³.

* * *

To sum up, we have seen so far that Amazon labour process in France in this second phase is characterised by technical coercion but also by the enforcement of this technical coercion through management personal supervision. The labour process is also concerned by a series of contradictory pressures, namely the one between safety and productivity, the one between quality and productivity, and in the end, we saw the one between control and productivity. Management deals with these contradictions by satisficing. These contradictions, even if they carry on the specificities of Amazon corporate culture and economic model, are in fact typical of capitalist class relations in the workplace.

What seems specific of Amazon is that satisficing does not turn necessarily in larger autonomy for the workers, as predicted by influent scholarship (Vidal 2022). Quite the opposite, satisficing augments the constraints on workers. Employees are left alone dealing with contradictory pressures and whatever the decision they take, whether privileging productivity or safety or quality, they are exposed to negative feedback in any case. It this exposure to unilateral managerial discretion that diminish workers capacity to resist, since there is no joint regulation of these problems. On the other

²⁰³ We could also add pilfering, which is endemic in Amazon warehouses. Although it would be debatable to consider pilfering a protest, it is with no doubts a sign of refusal of the company’s goals. Avoiding pilfering, as showed by the presence of metal detectors and the frequency of body searches, is an obsession of management. The company spends an unidentified but certainly massive amount of money to prevent workers from stealing products.

hand, these contradictions create tensions and some forms of resistance. Contention develops especially over working time, an issue to which management pays a great deal of attention and mobilises a series of coercive mechanisms to ensure worker obedience. Worker's resistance, on the other hand, can merge in overt forms but in most of the case it unfolds at an individual scale.

We will see in the next chapter, that in Italy the pattern is very similar. However, it is also true that management's attitude to workers resistance is less tolerant in France rather than in Italy. From the excerpts it emerges that French management is much less confident in its authority than, as we will see, the Italian one. My argument is that unions play a role in this difference. I will discuss this role in Part III.

To conclude this section of Chapter 5, I will focus precisely on management to better understand its attitude in the French fieldwork. We will see how management deals with the tensions produced by the contradictions of the labour process and by satisficing. To prevent these tensions to coalesce into workers collective mobilisation, management unfolds a repertory of action to domesticate potential conflict in the labour process.

5.1.6. The limits of corporate ideology in front of the deterioration of labour relations

As we saw, the pressure of Amazon's profit strategies flows downstream from corporate headquarters in Seattle and Luxemburg to the subsidiary management. In the national subsidiary, management is held accountable about the enforcement of the profit strategy in the workplace. His work is monitored through metrics and regular audits²⁰⁴. The problem for local management is that, as we saw, the organisational directives cannot be completely secured simultaneously. These contradictions and the frictions in the labour process contribute to a deterioration of relations between management and to a crisis of moral among Amazon workers.

The HR tools deployed by management during the start-up labour regimes, namely gamification and events, are no longer effective in mobilising the workforce. An inquiry commissioned by the Works Councils in 2018 surveyed Amazon Workers in the MRS1 FC. Interviewed about the prize of "associate of the week" or "top performer", "employees are quite disillusioned"; on top of that, they "insist on the opacity of the procedure of attribution".

Similarly, workers that I met in the fieldwork regularly complained about favouritism ("*pistonage*") in the distribution of rewards and promotions. Apart from these critiques of organisational clientelism – quite common in most large organisations, but that nonetheless

²⁰⁴ Such a reduction of latitude for management is on the open hand a source of stress for supervisors, but also an alibi for them to justify their decisions.

undermine the meritocratic discourse of Amazon – workers stress the gap between the rewards and the effort required by the company.

In the internal report on the situation at MRS1, working condition in the warehouse are defined by interviewed workers as “very deteriorated”, as a result of psychological pressure and lack of autonomy at work. The most touched group of workers are those employed in the core processes: inbound, outbound and ICQA; among them, those accomplishing the de-skilled tasks (pick, pack, stow etc.) suffer most. A survey carried on among the workers of this site reported that over 60% felt a lack of “recognition” and of possibilities of promotion. Almost 60% declared that they felt they were not being treated fairly in the enterprise, and almost 80% responded that people on site were not treated fairly.

Another symptom of the deterioration of working conditions is absenteeism. Another internal report, required by the works council and released in 2021, reveals an increase of absenteeism between 2017 and 2019 in all FCs. Three types of causes are considered: work-related and commuting-related accidents; professional diseases; ordinary diseases. In terms of days lost, absenteeism for these three reasons grew by 91% (more than the growth of the workforce i.e., 43%). The most significant increases concern professional diseases (+47%) and ordinary diseases (+27%). In terms of rate, absenteeism went from 7% to 8,8%.

According to the report, management attributes part of the absenteeism to the (mis)behaviour of permanent workers with one year or more of seniority. These workers have no waiting day (*délai de carence*) in case they call in sick, so that could encourage absenteeism according to management. According to the report, instead, absenteeism is to be linked to working conditions²⁰⁵.

Data contained in reports do not single out days lost for strike, so days lost for strike are considered as any other day lost. Now, it is likely that strikes are a significant part of all days lost. It is important to notice that since 2018 every day unions notify management with a call for strike (we will discuss the strike dynamic in Chapter 8). The fact of declaring a strike allows workers, even individually, not to show up at work, thus increasing absenteeism. In this respect absenteeism is part of the crisis of labour relations.

* * *

²⁰⁵ According to available data, absenteeism also varies across facilities: those with the most numerous and the oldest workforce tend to have over-the-average rates of absenteeism. In 2019: MRS1 10,7%, LIL1 had 10,4%, LYS1 9,2%, , ORY1 7,6%.

In front of these workplace frictions, symptoms of a broader labour crisis, what is management's response? Local management is instructed in HR techniques which should help facilitate the relations with worker and foster their morale.

Apart from the rhetorical apparatus management continues organising recreational moments. One example is the “disguised days” during the week of Halloween. Management tried to motivate workers to take part to the “party”, even if quite unsuccessfully:

It's Halloween, and during the previous days management has invited workers to come to work in costume. All the managers and team leaders are dressed up. Only some of the employees are. Samuel, a team leader, has a sort of pulp at the back of his head with long tentacles at the front that come from his forehead... another is dressed as a monk. Fabien, the GM, has chosen a simpler option: a cleaver that passes from the right to the left of the head. Kevin, another team leader, at the top: his face is very finely made up... I hear him reveal to a colleague: “You can do that in fifteen minutes”... I am very surprised by the fact that toady he got up 15 minutes before for that. I, like most of the workers, do not participate to the contest. After all, nobody is forced, even if good reasons are given to the workers to participate: one is “to have fun” and get out of the routine; the other is just zeal. Most workers, however, and especially temps, do not wear any costume. Some look at their disguised colleague with disdain.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 18 – ORY1, October 2019

Before I started my assignment, workers told me, every week the most productive workers were praised as “top performer” or “associate of the week”. The reward was a gift voucher or snack offered by the company: “Not that big of a deal”, many workers comment. When I started my assignment, however, this form of reward seemed to have disappeared.

Instead, management continued giving small rewards and gifts, for instance during the Prime Day: at the break as we left the picktower, team leaders stood in front of the workers and distributed bananas. It was perceived by many colleagues as outrageous. Another day, management decided to distribute small chocolate eggs to the worker, so before leaving the brief area, many workers crowded around the desk to get their chocolate egg.

During my first assignment in France, in summer 2018, the company had contracted a local company to install a small beach in the parking lot, with sand, a few loungers and even a *pétanque* strip. Workers deserted it: I have never seen a colleague enjoying the installation and spending a longer time than a cigarette and small talk.

The famous “have fun” were still organised by managers, periodically. The “all hands” were also still in place. The importance of these events was still emphasised by management. I happened to take part to an “all hands” during Peak 2019. Participation was compulsory and after all a break from work was always appreciated by the workers. Involvement however was not particularly high:

At one moment during the shift, we received a message on our scanner: “please, leave your workstation, logout and go to the break room for the “All hands”. Leaving the picktower, I saw the whole mass of workers flowing together from all points of the warehouse and reaching the break room. During the march, team leaders and supervisors distributed candies and little snacks. The murmuring of the crowd could be heard distinctly. The “All hands” is a gathering with the aim of celebrating the company and its “missions” but workers did not seem particularly excited. The feeling that one could grasp the most was relief for an exceptional break from work. I took a seat with my colleagues and then we were asked to be quiet and listen to the motivational discourse of the General Manager. We listened to it patiently, enjoying the moment of idleness, even if our mind was expected to receive the message of the company and celebrating Amazon together. Indeed, nobody seemed to care that much, and everybody knew it, also management. However, everybody found his/her convenience in participating to the ritual. Managers because such was the will of the company, workers because it was better than picking or packing items. This is what remained of the “glorious” past of Amazon’s origins: a routinised ritual supposed to cement unity and foster motivation but that was experienced as a not so unpleasant *corvée*.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 19 – ORY1, October 2019

Apart from these kinds of company gatherings, Amazon’s HR textbook included a series of instruments for encouraging the “expression” of workers (the so-called “voice of associates”). Most of them are imported from Toyota-style repertoires: the “Gemba”, meetings between managers, team leaders and some selected workers in which organisational issues are discussed, especially for what concerns safety; Kaizen groups, meetings for developing ideas to improve the work processes. During my assignment I did not have the opportunity to hear about such meetings, but a colleague of mine, who worked at the docks, told me that he used to take part to them. “Why do you go there?”, I asked. “Because it is quite interesting, and they give you the... I can’t remember their name... the Swags, the coins: you can buy stuff at the store with them”, he answered.

As if the company admitted the bureaucratisation of personal relations between workers and managers, Amazon introduced a permanent survey of its workforce at the global level, called “Amazon connection”. In similar forms such a device is typical of American transnational firms, including in the logistics sector (Ferner et al. 2006). Every day, at the beginning of the shift, workers log in and before entering the process they are asked a couple of questions about work: if they feel that they are motivated; if they consider that safety rules are respected; if they are happy about their relationship with management etc. Answers are given anonymously (during the training, instructors stressed this point, adding “It allows you to say whether your manager is not good”), and responders are also allowed to refuse to answer. Results are analysed at the central level and used by corporate management to compare the morale in every facility. In this respect, Amazon Connection is another form of centralisation of control, whereby local management is put under scrutiny. Results are also

displayed in the screens in the brief areas or printed and posted on the walls of the toilets. Negative responses are usually between 15% and 20% of the total.

What is the impact of these policies and tools on workers morale? Do they contribute to increase workers' morale and involvement? How do workers react to these propositions of commitment? Doubts can reasonably rise if we analyse my observations. Demanding from workers their full abnegation and then compensating them with a banana could easily be considered offensive by workers. For what concerns events and gatherings, their impact was negligible in terms of worker motivation. As shown by my observations, this kind of events can break the routine for certain workers but does not heal the pain and the boredom of work, neither reduces the distance between workers and supervisors. Unions, on their part, feel threatened by these policies and consider them ridiculous practices imported from the United States with the purpose of obfuscating the domination of the employers on workers (see Chapter 8, where we will also see that Italian unions seems to be much less concerned by these practices).

What about channels of communication such as Gemba and Kaizen? We saw that workers participate to these meetings and provide their suggestions, either in good will or in order to endear themselves to management (or both reasons). However, the centralisation of the work process is such that there is not much latitude left to management for adapting the work process to the propositions of workers. As reminded by the MRS1 internal report, workers' suggestions seem to be dismissed; "in the end, managers decide", workers state in the document. Given those constraints, workers' propositions that are accepted most frequently are those that do not imply a structural revision of the processes²⁰⁶. Therefore, these propositions are not likely to change the structural problems described above, which are a major cause of workers' stress, injuries, and demotivation.

According to the findings presented in Chapters 3 and 4, these managerial practices were quite successful in securing worker involvement during the first phase. In the second phase, however, their impact is much less influent. In the labour regime that followed during the second phase, most workers seem to be indifferent to these managerial practices. Indeed, workers feel that their effort be not adequately recognised. They would prefer bonuses and better wages than "candies, free coffee, and other mock compensations"²⁰⁷. However, as we saw, the productivity bonus that Amazon had offered to them since the beginning of Amazon France, had progressively declined and was finally replaced by a flat bonus in the form of an extra-month (see Chapter 3)²⁰⁸. As in the case of safety

²⁰⁶ The organisation of shelves (see the paragraph on quality and productivity) and the whole management of the pandemic crisis at Amazon France are a case in point. I will discuss them in Chapter 8.

²⁰⁷ Conversation with Amazon Worker during Prime Day 2018.

²⁰⁸ Even if, I remind it, it was not a real extra-month salary but a bonus (without social security contributions).

policies, these practices of involvement do not seem to deliver their official purpose i.e., to foster workers' motivation. Quite the opposite, in many cases, they seem to be a source of discontent and disillusion. This kind of policies is, first, less and less affordable, because of union pressure and the critical size attained by Amazon that makes direct relations unviable; second, less and less necessary, for work is more and more guided by procedures than by workers initiative. I do not intend to dismiss the effectiveness and influence of this ideological device, but evidence supports the idea that they are no longer crucial to securing worker effort. The further analysis of the internal labour market will also show that they are not even decisive to secure workers de-mobilisation which in this second phase becomes more a question of economic coercion.

5.2. *Internal and external labour market. The politics of economic coercion*

Apart from technical coercion in the labour process, worker effort is secured by economic coercion. Economic coercion is underpinned by the construction of a dualized internal labour market into the warehouse. During peaks, as I will show, temporary workers are the real engine of Amazon production process. The differential of employment protection between permanent and temporary workers, make them more exposed to managerial pressure than permanent workers. However, this is not the only crucial point. The segmentation of the labour market has also political implications, as it breaks horizontal solidarity among the workforce and prevent the workers to mobilise collectively as a group with its own identity and interests. Thus, not only labour power is mobilised through economic coercion (especially in the case of temp workers), but it is also political demobilised. Amazon's internal labour market is diversified enough to offer some, even if narrowed, options to the workers: on the one hand little, but concrete, possibilities of promotion; on the other hand, it offers possibilities for exit. In both cases, workers find good reasons for not getting involved in processes of collective mobilisation and for pursuing instead an individualised strategy of "survival".

The dualised labour market is also the product of the interaction between Amazon policies and the French regulation of work and labour markets, with its own specificities. Some of these institutions, namely those who establish a separate regulation for temp workers, not only do not constrain Amazon's management of the workforce and employment but also exacerbate some of these effects.

Since the middle 2000s, Amazon's sales worldwide have never ceased to grow, and French unions kept on claiming for wage increases consistent with such a growth. The company, however avoided to concede major increases until the global pandemic of 2020.

5.2.1. The “grand divide” between temporary and permanent workers

In Amazon warehouses, an internal labour market exists, and it is dualised: there are (1) a “core” of permanent, usually full-time, employees and (2) a “periphery” of temporary workers recruited during peaks of activity. Such a pattern exists in the US and the European countries where the company established its plants, even if with some nuances depending on local specificities²⁰⁹.

Amazon is not an exception: since the beginning, Bezos’ company has used agency work to fill its warehouses during seasonal peak of activity, in the US (Spector 2002; Stone 2013) and in most of the countries where it runs logistics operations (Boewe and Schulten 2019).

For what concerns Amazon France, the company manages its workforce through a clearly segmented labour market. We have reliable data on temporary work since the 2010s. In terms of the total mass of wages paid by the company, between 2012 and 2016, temporary work accounted for over 40%, and in 2016 superseded permanent work with 54%.

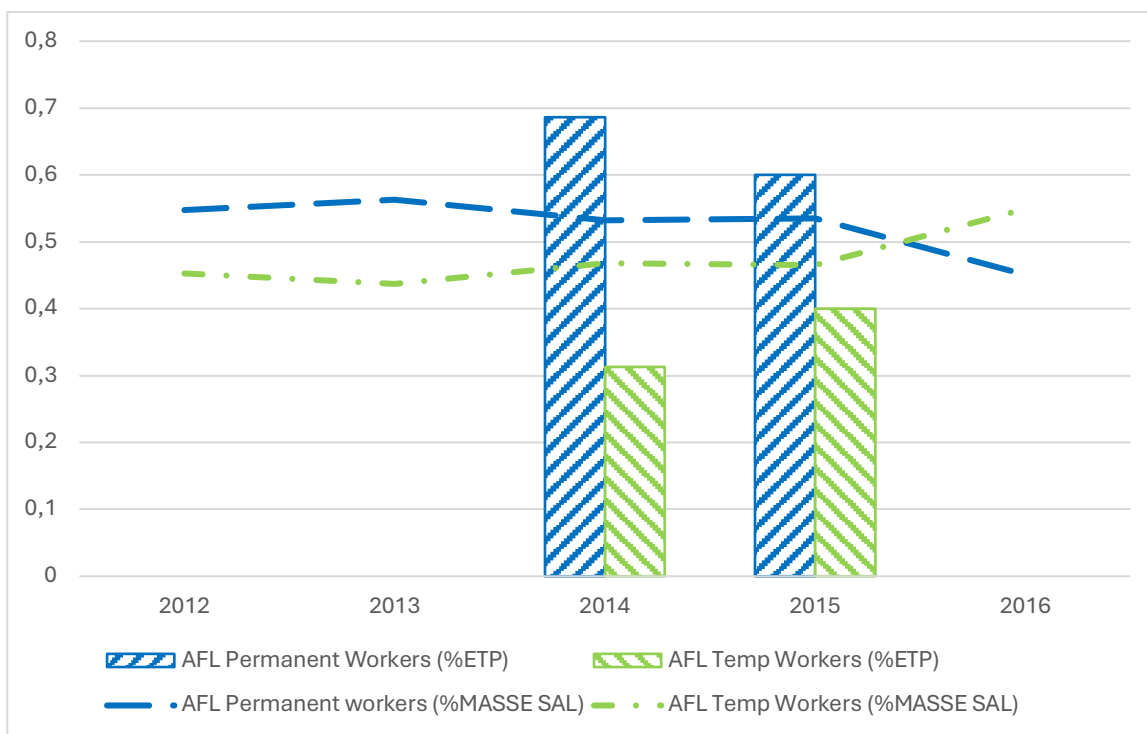


Figure 50 – Proportion of Temporary Work at AFL in two measures (2012-2016)

Source: Internal reports

In terms of ETP (full-time equivalent), the proportion of temporary work increased from 31% to 40% between 2014 and 2015, but we lack data for 2016.

²⁰⁹ In Germany, for instance, Amazon recruits its seasonal workforce mainly through fixed-term direct contracts, while in UK, Poland, France, Italy and Spain, casual workers are recruited through agencies (Boewe and Schulten 2019). I remind that in Italy such a pattern is at odds with the dominant practices of labour outsourcing (see par.4.2.1).

In 2021, the rate of temporary work over the total workforce in AFL’s site varied according to the specificities of different sites (sort/non-sort, size, age). The rate, for instance, was less than 40% in BVA1 (non-sort, less subject to volumes fluctuations) and MRS1 (sort, a relatively small FCs); over 50% in LIL1 (sort, a relatively large FC) and ORY4 (sort, the new robotic FC opened in 2019, and therefore with a physiological higher level of temps)²¹⁰.

Table 16 – Proportion of temporary workers in French FCs

Source: Internal reports

Site	Temporary Work Rate in 2021
BVA1	37%
LIL1	53%
MRS1	37%
ORY1	48%
LYS1	47%
ORY4	52%
CDG7	NA
ETZ2	NA

In terms of employees, data from internal reports released in 2016 shows an increasing proportion of temporary workers between 2014 and 2016.

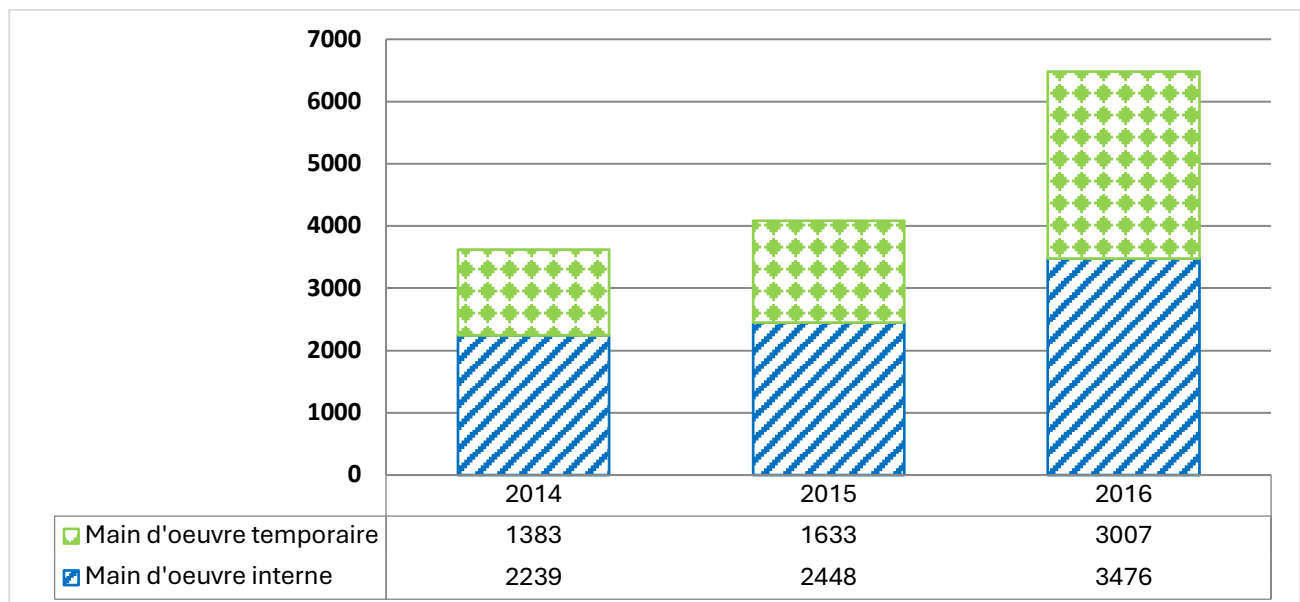


Figure 51 – Evolution and breakdown of the workforce (2014-2016)

Source: Internal documents (2017)

²¹⁰ Internal Reports.

In 2017, a report prepared by the same consultancy firm updated information about temporary work. It showed that in 2016, temporary work covered 60% of the total amount of hours worked, with variations among the different warehouses:

Table 17 – Part of hours worked by agency workers in 2016

Source: Amazon France Logistique, Internal Reports

Warehouse (Year Opening)	Part of Hours
ORY1 (2000)	57%
MRS1 (2010)	62%
LYS1 (2012)	59%
LIL1 (2013)	63%

Box 8 – The socio-economic context of the use of agency work in France: costs and advantages for Amazon

Agency work is traditionally well-established in France (Belkacem 1998; Lapoire 2007; Belkacem and Kornig 2011; 2020), not only in the construction (Chauvin and Jounin 2011) and the car industry (Pialoux 1979; Gorgeu, Mathieu, and Pialoux 1998; Gorgeu and Mathieu 2000), but also in the sectors of warehousing/logistics (Gaborieau 2016b; Benvegnù 2018; Tranchant 2019) and mail order (*vente à distance*) (Lefevre, Michon, and Viprey 2002). These studies have illustrated not only that in each sector the use of agency work takes specific forms, but also that in all sectors agency work plays a major role in the deterioration of working and employment conditions (*déqualification*) of blue-collar work.

The French terrain was then particularly propitious for Amazon, which since the beginning has used agency work to fill its warehouses during seasonal peak of activity. What are the cost and the advantages of this form of employment for Amazon?

Let's start from the costs. Data collected from internal documents suggest that temporary workers would be "cheaper" than Amazon own workers, whether open-ended or fixed term contracts. In 2016, the hourly rate of labour cost for a single worker was €20 for temps vs €24,6 for Amazon's workers directly hired by Amazon (Internal Report, 2017). Calculations on data from another internal report (2021) confirms this tendency: the average unit labour cost of temp workers between 2017 and 2021 is 20% lower than the cost of permanent workers.

Table 18 – Unit Labour Cost of Agency vs Permanent Workers, (€/Unit)

Source: Amazon France Logistique, Works Council Report, 2021

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Average 2017-2021
Agency Workers	0,63	0,5	0,62	0,76	0,76	0,65
Permanent Workers	0,74	0,79	0,76	0,82	0,8	0,78

This could be puzzling, as, all things being equal, one hour of agency work is *on paper* more expensive than an hour in fixed-term and opened-ended employment contract: according to the French law, agency workers must be paid a “end-of-mission compensation” equal to at least 10% of the whole gross wage; furthermore, agencies apply a fee for each recruited worker, equal to the product of the worker’s total gross wage for a coefficient ranging between 1,8 and 2,5 (Lapoire 2007); on top of that, since the administrative and financial sanctions for non-compliance with regulation are high, agencies pay attention to respect most of the rules (Lapoire-Chasset 2011)²¹¹.

Given such a binding regulation and the extra-costs, how to explain the low cost of temporary workers at Amazon? On the one hand, the difference in costs between direct and agency workers is the result of a composition effect: temporary workers at Amazon France are classified at the lowest ranks of the job grid (together with the few permanent workers with little seniority); this matches with evidence of a higher use of agency work for the lower ranks of the workforce in the logistics sector (Tranchant 2018; 2019). On the other hand, *de facto*, agency contract provides a series of financial and organisational advantages that make it more competitive than fixed-term contracts (Lapoire 2007)²¹². In financial terms, higher unit labour costs are offset by the outsourcing of all the administrative tasks of HR management (contracts, pay-rolls, medical control etc.) and all the work of recruitment; always in financial terms, large companies such as Amazon are massive users of agency work, so they can leverage their monopsony power to put agencies in competition between them, thereby obtaining, as it is usually the case, a drastic discount on the fee. In organisational terms, temporary works presents clear advantages of employment flexibility, as, workers can be dismissed much more easily²¹³; finally, and this is evident from our findings, due to their employment vulnerability, agency workers are the most exposed to managerial pressure, so they are more docile and more productive. The combination of this financial and organisational advantages explains the massive use of agency work in Amazon’s French warehouses.

In 2020, another report made new calculations of the average annual ratio of temporary work in 2019, drawing on data provided by the employer. At the national level, the rate seems reduced compared to the previous years, 43,7%. Yet the rate remains considerably high, although it shows significant variations across the warehouses, with the smaller FCs (LYS1 and MRS1) under 30%, the

²¹¹ See also the box on regulation of temporary work in France and Italy in Chapter 5. In fact, the compliance with labour law regulation of agency work varies significantly according to the sectors and the forms of industrial relations. As showed by Chauvin and Jounin, in the sector of construction, agencies are a driver of labour informality, allowing user firms to buy the benefits of an irregular use of temporary work while being protected from sanctions by the intermediation of agencies (Jounin 2008; Chauvin and Jounin 2011). At Amazon, nonetheless, this does not seem the case.

²¹² In her thesis, Mireille Lapoire (2007, 132–36) provides a comparison of the two main forms of employment flexibility in France; fixed-term contracts (*Contrat à durée déterminée*, CDD) and agency work (*Contrat de travail temporaire*, CTT). She concludes that temporary work presents financial and organisational advantages for user enterprises, especially if the user firm is large and if it can put different agencies in competition between them, as it is the case of Amazon.

²¹³ This is not necessary the case of Amazon, which has never resorted to massive dismissal for a reduction of sales. The only major exception was in 2020, during the pandemic. Amazon first used temporary work to keep up the unexpected soar of e-commerce sales, and then, when it decided to shut down its French FCs in order to avoid compliance with tight anti-covid measure requested by judiciary, Amazon could easily get rid of the thousands of agency workers that had been recruited (see Chapter 8).

larger ones (ORY1 and LIL1) between 36 and 47%²¹⁴, and the new robotic FC opened in 2019 (ORY4) with 76%²¹⁵.

Table 19 – Agency Work Rate at Amazon France

Source: Amazon France Logistique, Internal Reports (2020-2021)

<i>Site</i>	<i>2019 (Annual Average)</i>	<i>2020 (End of Year)</i>	<i>2021 (End of Year)</i>
ORY1	36,70%	54%	47%
MRS1	29,50%	32%	45%
LYS1	29,30%	48%	60%
LIL1	47,10%	61%	44%
BVA1	45,80%	48%	24%
ORY4	76,10%	63%	52%
ETZ2	//	//	73%
All sites	NA	56%	50%

Annual averages spread the number of agency workers across the whole year. Data concerning the number of agency workers at the end of the year give us a picture of the real presence of temp workers during winter peaks. By the end of 2020, for example, the ratio of temporary work was as high as 56%.

Labour market segmentation is not only a matter of formal employment contracts, but mainly of substantial division of labour. Temporary workers are concentrated in the low ranks of the workforce: inbound and outbound processes. By the end of October 2020 (so before the very peak of the year that usually occurs in December), temporary work covered between 42% (MRS1) and 77% (CDG7).

²¹⁴ BVA1 is a *non-sort* warehouse. Therefore, the labour process is adapted; for example, most of the handling is made via forklift engines (see Chapter 2).

²¹⁵ This figure is not surprising given that Amazon hires new workers through temporary staff agencies.

Table 20 – Agency Work in Inbound and Outbound Processes (%)

Source: Amazon France Logistique, Works Council Report, 2020

<i>Site</i>	<i>Agency Work Rate</i>
ORY1	55%
MRS1	42%
LYS1	46%
LIL1	60%
BVA1	64%
ORY4	74%
CDG7	77%
Unweighted Average	60%

In these various reports, consultants (appointed by works councils) insist on the *structural* nature of temporary work in Amazon’s regime of production:

With such high levels of temporary workers in the total workforce of the warehouses, most of them years after they opened, the use of precarious labour (green badges, as opposed to the blue badges of in-house employees) does not really seem to be the consequence of strong seasonality of activity as claimed by your management. It’s much more a question of HR management, which involves outsourcing the workforce, enabling the company to save (in time and money) not only on staff recruitment but also on the consequences of workplace risks (sick leave, accidents at work, etc.). What kind of training do temporary workers receive, particularly in occupational risk prevention? What is the future for these thousands of temporary workers? Are they destined to be integrated into the company on a long-term basis, or will they eventually be replaced by robots in the warehouses?

Fieldwork Written Document 15 – Amazon France Logistique, Works Council Report, 2019

On the other hand, the company points at the seasonality of their business to justify the importance of temporary work. Is seasonality a justification of such a massive use of temporary work, as Amazon France maintains? Or this is a deliberate strategy of cost reduction, as the consultants of the works council argue?

5.2.2. *Seasonality at Amazon. Technical imperative or political strategy?*

Seasonality is a crucial element in Amazon’s business, as much as it is in the mass retail industry and its logistics operations (Bonacich and Wilson 2006; 2008; Barnes and Ali 2022). However, it is important to remind that seasonality is not simply an external constraint but a market strategy, whose goal is to increase market share and make sales more predictable. As many other retailers, Amazon

embrace this strategy. However, by inducing seasonality in its business, the company reduces uncertainty for its operations while increasing it for the employees.

Even if we considered seasonality as an external constraint, the question rises of why Amazon deals with it by resorting precisely to labour market dualisation. The company could resort to work-time modulation i.e., company level collective agreement such as the one signed in 2002 (see par. *Adapting HR practices to French collective bargaining*), according to which work time can be annualised and fluctuations in working hours spread all over the year.

Mainstream literature on internal labour market consider it as a rational response of firms in front of labour market uncertainty, especially for what concerns the research of skills and the determination of wages (e.g. Becker 1964; Doeringer and Piore 1971; Williamson 1985). Can we consider that Amazon's labour process implies a major problem of skill and wage definition that requires the organisation of a dualised labour market? Amazon's labour process in the second phase has become so standardised that no specific skill is required. The algorithm-guided tasks only need a worker able to read simple texts, recognise images, insert simple data (like the quantity of an item stowed/picked), walk, and handle objects. Amazon itself claims that "everyone can work for us". For what concerns wages, Amazons problems of uncertainty are minimised by the fact that wages are set at the legal (minimum wage) and conventional level (sectoral collective bargaining).

If seasonality is a self-imposed strategy, if skills are not a major problem, and if wage-setting can be solved externally (through sectoral collective bargaining), what is then the urgent and specific uncertainties that Amazon tries to solve by segmenting its own ILM? There is one left, and that is labour effort.

The most elegant theorisation of this problem has been formulated by the efficiency wage theory (e.g. Shapiro and Stiglitz 1984; Bowles 1985; Akerlof and Yellen 1986; Bowles and Gintis 1990). Because of asymmetric information, employers face a problem of "extraction of labour effort" from workers – i.e., getting workers to work harder than they want to do spontaneously – since the labour contract is neither complete nor costlessly enforceable²¹⁶. According to these theories, employers face a trade-off between spending more money on improving the effectiveness of monitoring or paying higher employment rents (efficiency wage, whose ILMs are the best example). In sum, (a) employers would be eager to grant higher wages to workers in order to retain them and to entice their effort; (b) higher wages would be an alternative to more purely coercive strategies by employers.

²¹⁶ In fact, as suggested by several authors, non-exhaustive contracts provide solutions rather than problems in terms of involvement and adjustment of labour power (e.g. Paradeise 1988; Favereau 1989).

In fact, Amazon's case is slightly different from this conventional vision of ILMs. First, because Amazon's labour process has a degree of technical coercion that secures labour effort with comfortable margins. Second, because in an optimal context (a situation of underemployment in the external labour market) Amazon does not need to grant higher wages to the workers since (the promise of) stable employment is already an adequate compensation. In the next paragraph we examine this specificity.

5.2.3. *The “reverse” efficiency wage of permanent employees in France*

At Amazon, the exchange underlying the ILM is much less favourable for workers than an ordinary ILM situation. While classic ILM theories presume an exchange between higher pay and discipline/effort, in Amazon's ILM the efficiency wage is *virtual*. Permanent workers get a wage that is not particularly higher than in the rest of the economy or the sector. If we compare data available from works council reports with conventional wages and median wages (Table 21), we see that Amazon wages are slightly higher than the minimum wage (entry wage is higher than the minimum wage by around 3%) and sectoral conventional minimum wage (by around 2%). We could add the fact that hourly wages at Amazon for most workers (ranked in the T1 level of Amazon's classification system) are remarkably lower than the median wage in the whole economy (-33%)²¹⁷. In other words, Amazon wages are much lower than the median wage and just slightly higher than sectoral base salary set by the *convention collective*. The only jobs at Amazon with a wage remarkably higher than the sector (but still slightly lower than the whole-economy median wage) are supervising professions: team leaders (T3), earns 27% more than the corresponding level of the sectoral collective agreement²¹⁸. Yet, T3 positions concern between 5 and 7% of the workforce. More recent data (2019) confirms these findings (Table 22).

²¹⁷ Eurostat data for 2016 are not available, I compare here Amazon data in 2016 with Eurostat data of 2014. This underestimates the negative gap.

²¹⁸ I do not have data for managers' wages. Internal reports show high wage dispersion for this category and a gap between male and female managers.

Table 21 – Comparison of Amazon’s, conventional and statutory minimum wages (2016).

The table presents a comparison of wage levels across different grids: the Amazon’s and the various sectoral grids, plus the level of the nation-wide statutory minimum wage

<i>Amazon Internal Level (2016)</i>	<i>Correspondent Sectoral Conventional Level (2016)</i>	<i>Amazon Hourly Wage (2016)</i>	<i>Amazon Monthly Wage (2016)</i>	<i>Sectoral Conventional Minimum Wage (2016)</i>	<i>Hourly SMIC (2016)</i>	<i>Monthly SMIC (2016)</i>	<i>Median Hourly Earnings (Eurostat, 2014)</i>	<i>Median Hourly Earnings (Eurostat, 2018)</i>
T1/0	1	€ 9,94	€ 1507,6	€ 1472	€ 9,67	€ 1466,6	€ 14,94	€ 15,34
T1/1	2 ²¹⁹	€ 10,97	€ 1663,5	€ 1490-1623				
T2 (abolished in 2018) ²²⁰	3	€ 12,39	€ 1879,7	(missing)				
T3	6	€ 14,86	€ 2254,4	€ 1780				

Table 22 – Comparison of Amazon’s, Conventional and Statutory Minimum wages (2019), including seniority increases

<i>Amazon Internal Level (2019)</i>	<i>Seniority</i>	<i>Amazon Minimum Hourly Wage</i>	<i>Amazon Minimum Monthly Wage</i>	<i>Sectoral Conventional Minimum Wage (2019)</i>	<i>Hourly SMIC (2019)</i>	<i>Monthly SMIC (2016)</i>
T1	Entry Level	€ 10,22	€ 1550,1	€ 1530	€ 10,03	€ 1521,22
	> 6 Months	€ 10,73	€ 1627,4	€ 1530		
	> 24 Months	€ 11,48	€ 1714,2	€ 1530 ²²¹		
T3	Entry Level	€ 14,31	€ 2170,4	€ 1863		
	> 12 Months	€ 15,38	€ 2332,7	€ 1863		

Entry wages close to the very bottom and a repetitive and standardised job do not make a blue-collar job at Amazon very attractive, unless the candidate has few other alternatives to escape unemployment and underemployment.

²¹⁹ The vast majority is in level 2. Levels 4-5 has no correspondence, but in 2019 for instance there were employees with levels 4 and 5 (Source: Works Council Reports).

²²⁰ The group included intermediate functions such as Solvers, Process guides and Support lead.

²²¹ The sectoral collective agreement (*Commerce de détail non alimentaire*, CDNA; non-food retail) establishes seniority increases after three years (+3%), six years (+6%), nine years (+9%), twelve years (+12%) and fifteen years (+15%), but calculated on the minimum conventional wage.

Therefore, to this elementary motivation, Amazon adds something else: the promise of professional ascension. This is evident since the outset of my participant observation. During the recruitment session, the agency employee explained to use that Amazon is big and getting even bigger, “so there are opportunities for all those who want to work hard”. In the plant, during briefings, management did not lose any occasion to remember the workers, especially the new ones and the most precarious, that there is plenty of opportunity for them in the enterprise. I had a sign of the influence of this discourse on workers since the outset of my assignment at Amazon:

It is my third day at Amazon. I am going back home in carpooling with three immigrant temporary workers, that I met the day before: Régis from Congo, at Amazon since September 2017, he is the owner of the car, married with three children; Ahmad from Afghanistan, at Amazon since September 2017, single. Ibrahim, another temp from Congo who came with us at work, is not with us, “he is staying for overtime”, says Régis. Khadija, the cousin of Ahmad, at Amazon since the beginning of July, like me, is not with us either, she was late and told Ahmed to leave without her. We discuss about work, about the fact that it is hard, and that people have to walk a lot in the warehouse: “you walk and walk!” says Régis, “even when I was in Congo, I did not use to walk so much”, he adds with a laughter. Then Ahmed tells me, and it says it as if he was delivering a wise advice: “At the beginning it’s picking. Picking is the toughest but, if you work well, if you have a good prod and you make no mistakes, then you can progress”, and he adds: “At Amazon, you can progress a lot”.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 20 – ORY1, July 2018

Ahmad is not the only worker who “wants to believe” that Amazon offers the real possibility of employment security and professional ascension. Any possibility of escaping the most repetitive and exhausting jobs is considered a promotion. In the CHSCT report, experts emphasise:

Despite the often considerable constraints of direct processes that are not subject to productivity and indirect processes, it was clear to us that the employees assigned to these positions felt more protected. The desire to acquire skills in these positions is not simply a question of wanting to rotate through the different processes to avoid monotony and repetitiveness, or for training purposes. It is also an effective way of escaping the pace and pressure of productivity.

Fieldwork Written Document 16 – MRS1, CHSCT Report, 2018

During my assignment as a stower, for instance, after two weeks I strived to move to another job. On the one hand, I wanted to vary my observational points; on the other hand, I really wanted to change. As a temp, I did not have many possibilities, and any other task was good. One day, management called for candidates for cart runners in the stow department and for people working at the dock:

The brief. The two Team Leads, Emma and Samuel, hold the briefing. Samuel announces, “We’re looking for volunteers for cart runners at stow (“*manut*”) and handlers at dock”.

[Cart runners were young workers (during peaks most of them were green badges) in charge of sorting stow carts full of articles (coming from the receive department) and distributing them to the stowers. It was a very frantic and physical work, but it had the “advantage” of providing those workers with a certain self-latitude in distributing carts, since they had no digital devices directly governing their tasks. Working at dock is much mysterious for me: at my eyes dock workers seems to form a small tight-knit group of workers who operate with a certain autonomy; they also operate out of the direct scope of algorithms].

Emma adds, “only boys for the dock”. My colleague Claire is outraged by this as discrimination... “A total discrimination!”, she whispers at my ears. She is not the only one to think so. The leads understand. They start discussing among them and after half a minute, Emma speaks again and says that girls are welcome too.

I think for a few moments and at the end of the briefing I go and sign up. Samuel is taking down the names (and logins) on a piece of paper. In one column it is written “dock”, he writes my name and login and I see that there are already half a dozen candidates registered.

I go back to work.

I bump into Samuel and, as I’m not sure he has entered me for the cart runner jobs and not the dock, I stop him and ask him.

“Yes, I put you in the list for the dock”, he says. “However,”, he adds “you’re at 50% with production and the aim is to get to 60%”.

Then he doesn’t add anything. He looks in the boxes and tells me “This, the big one, you are going to stow them in the orange area”. I go and I can’t find the dropzone. Samuel arrives and tells us to go for team 3 or 4. Samuel’s comment sounds like a warning to me. It makes me realise that I need to move, so I accelerate in the hope that this will allow me to go to the dock.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 21 – ORY1, October 2019

This episode shows how the possibility of promotion is used by management as an instrument to motivate the workers to increase their effort. This is true for temporary workers that strive to get a permanent position as well as for permanent workers that want to move from this job to a “better” one (for instance the few blue-collar jobs that are not under the direct supervision of algorithms or that are less monotonous; or the few blue-collar jobs that are slightly more qualified, such as problem solver). However, the structure of the internal labour market does not allow such an optimism. First, only a tiny part of temps remains at the company after the peak. Second, even when a temp managed to get a permanent contract, possibilities of promotion from T1 to T3 were remote²²². Data from internal reports show the very high proportion of blue-collar jobs and the scarcity of team leader

²²² This has become even more difficult since June 2017, when Amazon France announced to unions that it would stop creating new T2 positions.

positions in the French subsidiary. This reveals the poor chances for a temp worker to climb the job ladder.

Table 23 – Number of AFL’s employees according to CSP

Source: Amazon France Logistique, Works Council Reports

Employees (by CSP in ETP)

CSP	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Blue-Collar	2136	2862	//	3272	4076	5015
Team Leaders	135	150	//	234	257	412
Managers	224	244	//	423	390	478
TOTAL	2495	3256	//	3929	4723	5905
% Blue-Collar	86%	88%	//	83%	86%	85%
% Team Leaders	5%	5%	//	6%	5%	7%
% Managers	9%	7%	//	11%	8%	8%

Data also show the decreasing proportion of managers, a phenomenon typical of neo-fordist labour process according to Aglietta:

Each group, moreover, is collectively responsible for the execution of the production plan, and has charge of the functional services directly bound up with it. It divides up its tasks between its members. Freed from the necessity of making sure that the labour constraint is respected in each individual case, capitalist management can thin out the hierarchical pyramid of command. (Aglietta 1976, 108)

Concerning promotions, data for 2015 shows that just 87 workers were promoted to team leaders, and just 7 team leaders were climbed the rank up to manager (Works Council Report, 2017). However, these are only permanent promotions. In fact, as I could observe in my ethnography and in internal documents, many temporary positions of leadership and management are opened during the peak. Workers can apply and management selects them according to their work performance and their level of commitment at work. Management enjoys a certain discretion in assessing the applications. As several interviewees complained in interviews (and it is confirmed in internal reports), many workers regret that promotions are managed in opacity often according to personal criteria that do not comply with the company’s meritocratic discourse. This does not prevent dozens of workers from applying at every peak season and trying to convince managers to promote them, even though it is for a few months. The workers achieving team-leadership positions are usually the most involved and motivated, as they are grateful with management and hopeful to get a permanent promotion, thus

departing the digital assembly line. However, after the peak most of them have to join again the inferior ranks of the workforce.

Therefore, management takes advantage of the scarcity of good jobs in order to increase workers effort and boost competition among workers. There is no joint regulation of promotions, intended as a regulation negotiated together by management and the workers (e.g. Burawoy 1979a). This is true for internal promotions among blue badges and for the transformation of agency contracts in permanent contracts. The bidding systems works under unilateral control of team leaders' area managers and operations manager, according to the importance of the job. In this way, the very organisation of the labour process and the structure of the labour market contribute to mobilise the individual worker, who can rely only on the benevolence of management instead of a regulation bargained collectively. Furthermore, it promotes individual strategies of escape from the bottom ranks of the labour market, thereby fragmenting the workforce in political terms (see for instance, Fieldwork Written Document 14)²²³. This is true for permanent workers that hope to win the lottery of internal promotion, and for those numerous temporary workers that increase their efforts at work in order to get a permanent contract. The perspective of liberation from the digital assembly line passes through an individual horizon rather than a collective one.

However, there is a paradox in Amazon's management of IML, that is at odds with conventional definitions. As I showed above, permanent workers at Amazon are by no means the most productive. The job being equal – especially the blue-collar jobs of receive, stow, pick and pack – temporary workers are likely to be more productive than a permanent colleague, since they are more exposed to managerial pressure. It is common sense in French warehouses that “green badges work twice more than blue badges”. Given the degradation of working conditions and the narrow possibilities of promotion, permanent workers have far less good reasons to increase their effort.

In other words, the efficiency wage is virtual and reversed. Workers who are needed the most by the company are promised a stable contract, while workers who are less needed are those who precisely enjoy the security of employment. The company has to face the negative externality of its dualisation policy: those workers that manage to get a permanent job, lose the most important incentive to increase their effort. Therefore, the company has to deal with a mass of permanent workers that need to be motivated. Blue badge workers are motivated through the system of internal promotions. However, this policy has a limited reach since workers quickly realise that there are few chances to climb the ladder. Thus, the other solution is to favour the continuous exit of this “worn-out” workforce.

²²³ Of course, there are other forms of fragmentation (on racial and gender lines, for instance). However, they tend to compound the power relations in the labour process and the internal labour market, even though they do not boil down to them.

5.2.4. *The contradiction between reversed efficiency wage and the imperative of turnover*

While in conventional ILMs, internal labour market promotes mobility within the firm and reduces mobility between firms, at Amazon the situation is more complicated. The company has an interest in retaining a few specialised workers (essentially part of the maintenance workers, a tiny proportion of the total workforce). For what concerns the vast majority of its blue-collar employees, the company is quite eager to let them go after a few years. The repetitive nature of tasks makes them harmful for workers who, the higher their seniority, the higher the propension to get sick, as confirmed also by management (see Box 9).

Box 9 – Work-related accidents and illnesses in Amazon French warehouses

The logistics sector is known for the high exposure to work-related accidents and illnesses (Gaborieau 2016b). As one of the largest logistics employers in France and in the world, Amazon is particularly concerned by this problem. The impact of working conditions on workers' health is a reason of complaints for unions and worker representatives (see Chapter 6), which have ordered several internal investigations on these problems.

In the 2018 CHSCT report on the MRS1 site, working condition in the warehouse are defined as “very deteriorated”, as a result of psychological pressure and lack of autonomy at work. The most touched group of workers are those employed in the core processes: inbound, outbound and ICQA; among them, those accomplishing the de-skilled tasks (pick, pack, stow etc.) suffer most. Workers in “support functions” (engineering, maintenance etc) part-time SDJF workers, and supervisors worked under better conditions. A survey carried on among the workers of this site reported that over 60% felt a lack of “recognition” and of possibilities of promotion. Almost 60% declared that they felt they were not being treated fairly in the enterprise, and almost 80% responded that people on site were not treated fairly. Consistently with my argument, over 70% responded that they were satisfied about employment security.

An investigation on all French FC elaborated for the CSE reports data on work-related accidents, emphasising that agency workers are concerned by more than the half of the accidents (which is actually aligned with the high proportion of temporary work). The report also stress that frequency rate of accidents is significantly higher than the national average.

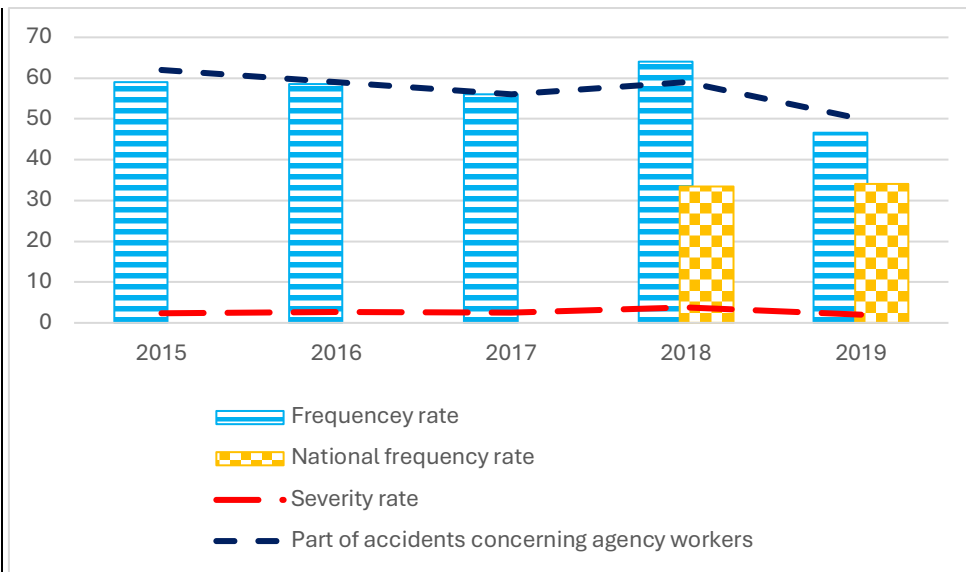


Figure 52 – Frequency and severity of labour accidents at Amazon France Logistique

Source: Internal documents, 2019

Concerning work-related illnesses, there is no data available on correlation with seniority and work-related. However, documents collected on the fieldwork reports that management itself establishes such a relation:

The main cause of work-related illness at AFL is musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs): 15 out of 16 MSDs declared in 23 out of 24 cases in the previous two years. These disorders, the leading cause of occupational illness in France, whose symptoms can be severely debilitating for individuals, are caused by physical constraints (repetitive movements, carrying heavy loads, etc.) as well as organisational constraints (work-related accidents, etc.). heavy loads), but also organisational constraints (working hours that do not allow for breaks in line with physiological recovery needs) and psychosocial constraints (little room for manoeuvre, restricted working hours). Many of these constraints are present in the work carried out in Amazon’s warehouses in France, where the company is committed to reducing delivery times for its customers (Amazon Prime service). *The only explanation provided by your management for the increase in the number of ODs since 2017 and in the number of days lost due to ODs in 2019 is the “seniority of the employees concerned” in the establishment or post. As if working at AFL for two years or more were in itself a sufficient factor to explain the occurrence of occupational illnesses, the consequences of which can be serious and irreversible. What is management's approach to work rhythms, working hours, work organisation and workload? What prevention policy has been put in place to prevent occupational illnesses? Employers have an obligation to achieve results in terms of health and safety [emphasis is original].*

Fieldwork Written Document 17 – Amazon France Logistique, internal document, 2019

Furthermore, when a worker finally manages to get a permanent position, he/she is likely to diminish his/her effort at work. Whether for medical or purely economic reasons, over the long run workers are unable to respect the expected levels of productivity. Therefore, the company has an

interest in constantly renewing its workforce as illustrated by the introduction of specific corporate programs to encourage workers to leave.

Box 10 – Favouring turnover: The “Career Choice” and “The Offer” programs

This strategy is epitomised by two renowned employment policies the Offer and Career Choice. *Career choice* is a managerial policy by which Amazon offers to partially finance the professional conversion of an “associate” that is planning to quit. To apply for this financial help, the worker must present a professional project and submit it to managers. The application is examined and if it respects certain requirements (for instance a reconversion in a profession particularly required in the labour market and with a short training process), Amazon can refund part of the fees and adjust the worker’s work schedule to let him/her. This program was cancelled by Amazon worldwide between 2022 and 2023.

The Offer is a pay-to quit program: a bonus awarded to permanent workers who decided to leave the company. It was not invented by Amazon but by Zappos, the shoes online seller that Amazon absorbed in 2009 (Stone 2013). At Zappos new employees were each offered a flat one thousand dollars to quit during the first week of the job, in order – in management’s intention – to only keep motivated employees onboard. This policy was incorporated and adapted by Amazon after the acquisition. Once a year, after the end of the peak, the company ask its “associates” (permanent workers) if they would prefer to quit. To those who decide to leave, Amazon offers a bonus. Employees are eligible after one year of service, but there is a condition: those who accept “the offer” can never work at Amazon again. The amount of the bonus varied across countries and through time. By 2018, Amazon offered up to \$5.000, according to the number of years of seniority, in the United States. In France, the bonus was introduced in 2015 for an amount of between €2.000 and 8.000, according to the years of service (similar figures exist for Italy).

In Amazon’s corporate HR policies “the Offer” is supposed to encourage unhappy employees to move on, and make motivated workers to confirm their commitment, thereby maintaining a motivated workforce. “We want people working at Amazon who want to be here”, Amazon spokespersons usually state. “In the long-term, staying somewhere you don’t want to be isn’t healthy for our employees or for the company” (CNBC 2018; see also *Harvard Business Review* 2014; *The Atlantic* 2018). In fact, things do not proceed in such a dichotomised way: workers who are not motivated do not necessarily accept “the Offer” (because they could consider that the bonus is not worth the loss of a permanent job), and the fact that they decide to remain could certainly increase managerial pressure on them, but it is difficult to evaluate to what extent refusing “the Offer” implies an increase in worker effort. Furthermore, the level of bureaucratisation of social relations is such that workers each worker receives an email, but he does not have to explicitly refuse “the Offer”. Therefore, it is questionable to maintain, as some social psychologists do (reported in *CNBC* 2018; *The Atlantic* 2018), that refusing the offer to quit turns into a renewal of worker commitment. Perhaps the worker is demotivated but and he/she is just waiting for the good moment to leave; perhaps he/she finds no interests in resigning from a relatively secure job. In fact, it all boils down to the situation in the local and national labour market and to the level of protection of employment in each country. In European contexts such as the French and the Italian ones, the legal protection from arbitrary firing is high enough to allow workers to not apply for the offer without feeling committed to increase their effort. The bonus is just perceived as an incentive to quit – and an expression of Amazon’s economic power (“they are so rich that they give us money to get rid of us”) – but not as a driver of worker commitment.

Finally, according to my observation of the work floor, there is another role of “The Offer” (and Career Choice) that is not taken into account by commentators. Managers with responsibility on the enforcement of these programs increase their margins of action in their relations with workers. It is up to shopfloor and warehouse managers to accept workers’ application; managers can also be allowed by their hierarchy to concede “the Offer” to individual workers out of the yearly window. In the management of this program, shopfloor managers retrieve part of the power that has been eroded by algorithmic management, and they increase their discretionary power vis-à-vis their supervisees. These niches of power set the ground for the instauration of paternalistic and clientelist relations that can reinforce the loyalty of the single worker and break potential horizontal solidarity between co-workers.

In October 2022, “the Offer” was definitively withdrawn in France. The board of Amazon France presented it as a decision made at the corporate level, even if the program remains available for employees in the US and other European countries, including Italy, up to the end of 2023.

Do the degradation of working conditions and Amazon’s specific programs such as “The Offer” and “Career choice” have an effect on worker tenure? Internal reports for the works council provides figures for job turnover at Amazon²²⁴. Between 2016 and 2019, the turnover rates are steadily higher among blue collars and among managers (the category with the highest turnover rate). Team leaders have a lower rate, confirming their crucial role in the continuity of the logistics business. The macroscopic fluctuations of 2017 and 2019 are due to contingent factors²²⁵.

Table 24 – Turnover rates in Amazon’s French FC according to occupational groups

Source: Amazon France Logistique, Internal document, 2019

	2016	2017	2018	2019
Blue Collars	26,3%	23,5%	20,1%	19,8%
Team Leaders	6,1%	20,1%	6,2%	23,9%
Managers	29,0%	38,1%	17,3%	34,2%

Comparing with DARES’ data on the whole economy, the report adds that “turnover rates for employees on permanent contracts at AFL are higher than the average sector average. By way of comparison, the turnover rate for permanent contracts in tertiary with more than 50 employees was 15,4% in 2017” (Works Council Report, 2021). In sum, Amazon seems able to rotate its workforce, even if such a rate cannot be inflated too much.

²²⁴ Turnover rate is calculated with the following formula:

Entry rate: Total number of entries in a given period/Total number employees on average in a given period.

Exit rate: Total number of exits in a given period/Total number employees on average in a given period.

Turnover rate: (Entry rate + Exit rate)/2.

²²⁵ Opening of new warehouses and change in the classification of technicians, that were incorporated to the team leader category.

Yet, turnover is a double-edged sword. There is a threshold in rotation rate after which the organisational viability of the firm goes under stress; after all, even a labour process such as that of Amazon requires a certain level of skill retention, especially for those jobs that are slightly more qualified (problem solvers, process guides etc.). Second, French labour regulation limits Amazon's use of temporary work. Third, despite being less productive, permanent workers are crucial for Amazon's discourse, since they represent the concrete possibility for "committed" temporary workers to get out of precarious employment.

This latter point raises the question of the political valence of the differentiation among workers, especially the "grand divide" between permanent and temporary workers. First, this divide creates a workplace environment in which workers belonging to both categories deem that their own work is not fairly rewarded. On the one hand, permanent workers are likely to perceive temps that periodically pour into the warehouse as "invaders" that occupy their space in the aisles or in the lockers; as "savage" that ignore the formal and informal rules that govern conducts in the workplace; this was evident already in the excerpt that I showed in Chapter 3; to add another example, it happened to me to discuss with a unionised worker that complained about the fact that temporary workers "do not pay"²²⁶ for the canteen but still pay food at the same price of permanent workers. On the other hand, temps can consider that most permanent workers are lazy and privileged, since they do not risk a sudden termination of their assignment; during my presence in the shop-floor the different approach to work was tangible and it was recognised unanimously by actors, whether workers, unionists, or managers, that green badges were "the engine" of the company during peak periods.

Second, this divide is reproduced by the bodies of worker representations and, as we will see in Chapter 8, by union action itself. Temp workers are formally employed by temporary staff agencies, so they are excluded by the main institutions of worker representation in the workplace: the works councils, professional elections, union representatives. Formally, temp workers are supposed to elect their representatives within the bodies of their direct employer, although the precarity of their tenure in these agencies *de facto* exclude them from political representation.

5.2.5. *Economic incentives or economic coercion?*

While ILMs are conventionally considered a way to replace direct control with economic incentives, in practice the two strategies of coercion and higher wages are mutually intertwined. At Amazon for example, the digitalisation of the labour process proves that the company was ready to

²²⁶ Fieldwork Journal, ORY1, August 2018. The worker refers to the fact that the canteen is subsidized by the Works Council of the warehouse, whose budget is funded by Amazon according to the number of its directly employed workforce, thereby excluding temp workers from the calculation (temp workers have their representation bodies inside the temporary work firm and not inside Amazon); in spite of that temp workers are conceded "the privilege" of accessing the canteen at the same condition of permanent workers.

invest massively in technologies of control. At the same time, the company segmented the labour market with agency work because this increased economic coercion on the workforce, thereby compounding technical coercion. Temporary employment is not only cheaper than conventional employment (whether permanent or fixed term), but it is also more vulnerable to dismissal (an assignment can be terminated at any moment). Furthermore, the firm is not the formal employer of the temp worker, and this exempt it from many responsibilities. Finally, most temporary workers strive for a permanent job and this need leads them to increase their effort at work. In sum, far from insulating workers from competitions, ILMs reproduce competition and increase economic coercion and compound it with technical control. At Amazon in particular, ILM does not protect workers from external competition, because half of the workforce is vulnerable to dismissal, and it promotes competition among the temporary workers to secure a permanent job and among permanent workers to get a promotion²²⁷. In this second phase, together, technical coercion (underpinned by algorithmic management) and economic coercion (ensured by temporary employment) secure work effort.

There is, however, another aspect of labour market dualisation, which is the political fragmentation and demobilisation of the workforce. While most of the scholars mentioned above tends to treat ILM strictly as a matter of internal efficiency, typically linked to information costs, training, and turnover, others, especially Marxist but not only, make systematic reference to the class character of these efficiency considerations (Fligstein and Fernandez 1988; Wright 2000), and emphasise the ways in which ILMs are instigated by employers to divide the working class and weaken unions (Burawoy 1979a; Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982)²²⁸. Amazon's ILM is a case in point. Not only the ILM increase pressures on the workforce and contribute to mobilise worker effort, but it fosters competitive individualism among the workforce: the race for mobility that it engenders at the point of production dissolves some of the vertical tensions between worker and management and generates lateral tensions among workers. As explained by Burawoy, "in both these ways the interests of the worker are constituted as those of one individual agent against other individuals, rather than those of one class opposed to another class" (Burawoy 1979a, 107). Yet, differently from the context described by Burawoy, the substantial absence of rewards for seniority – that, in Burawoy's framework, fosters a commitment to the enterprise and coordinate the interests of capitalists and labourer in the generation of surplus value – implies that the coordination of the interests must be

²²⁷ Drawing from the framework proposed by Burawoy and Wright (Burawoy and Wright 1990), we can argue that at Amazon surveillance and threats constitute an effective mechanism for generating work effort because of (1) the low degree of interdependence of workers within the labour process i.e., that most of the tasks are rigidly defined and performed by single workers; (2) the low degree of skill/knowledge mobilised of workers; (3) the relatively high cost of job loss to workers.

²²⁸ This does not mean that unions are fierce opposants of labour market segmentation. Quite the contrary, unions have participated to the co-construction of internal labour markets, especially in national systems with low coverage of sectoral collective bargaining (Segrestin 1975; Thurow 1975; Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982).

achieved by means of economic coercion. At Amazon, a company that emerged and flourished in a context of underemployment and post-Fordist regulation, the means boil down to the promise of security of employment, as it has happened in most industrialised workplaces since the end of full employment (for some examples see, Burawoy 1985, 148–52; Durand and Hatzfeld 2002; 2003, 211–15; Sallaz 2004). In this chapter, however, we saw that security of employment acts in a contradictory way. Those who do not have job security (temp workers) are more likely to increase their effort to protect their employment (and the means of their subsistence); instead, those who benefit from a certain security of employment (permanent workers) are often demotivated (sometimes sick because of the years spent on repetitive physical tasks), therefore less productive, and yet with a relatively secure employment.

This is the undesired effect of Amazon's segmentation of the internal labour market. It is a problem that the company tries to solve by favouring the exit of senior workers, even if this is not possible at the necessary scale since (1) underemployment in the external labour market makes workers adverse to take the risk of unemployment; (2) the regulation of employment in France constrains management's freedom to fire workers. This *impasse* creates a pocket of workers that enjoy stable employment but are too deceived from the company to renew their involvement at work but that are not eager to quit either, given the few chances of finding jobs with better working conditions.

In front of this stalemate, the company makes a sort of compromise: management accepts the disengagement of an important part of its permanent workforce while relying on technical and economic coercion to force the rest of the workforce (most temporary workers and a minority of permanent interested in individual paths of promotion). At the same time, the uncertainty (for all workers) in the external labour market, and the individualisation of career patterns that we saw above, discourage workers from mobilising collectively beyond the “grand divide” between permanent and temporary workers.

In sum, the coordination of interests based on internal labour market described by Burawoy (Burawoy 1979a) has in fact a limited scope when it comes to eliciting worker effort. Instead, we will see in the next session, it is much more effective when it comes to preventing workers' horizontal solidarity and political mobilisation.

5.3. Conclusion

In this chapter, I illustrated the transformation of Amazon labour process and production politics in France, where coercion becomes the dominant factor of mobilisation of worker efforts. In particular, I showed how the mechanisms of mobilisation shifted from responsible autonomy to technical coercion in the labour process and economic coercion in the labour market. The elements

supporting responsible autonomy (from gamification to direct management-workers relations), which in the first phase helped management to foster workers' commitment either disappeared or became secondary.

Technical coercion is delivered by the taylorisation of the work process, with a significant reduction of workers self-latitude in the execution of tasks. This taylorisation was underpinned by a growth of norms and formal procedures, expected to govern the labour process. Management is in charge of ensuring the enforcement of these norms. In order of priority: safety, quality and productivity. By means of digital devices, management is able to monitor workers' performance in real time and to intervene rapidly in case of deviations. At the same time, the direct observation of the work process showed that the actual enforcement of norms of production deviated from formal prescriptions. Productivity becomes the main goal, to which safety and quality are subordinated. This form of satisficing however, instead of increasing workers' self-latitude (as in Vidal 2022), creates more uncertainty for the workers and greater discretion for management. Hence, even deviations from norms turn into more pressure and control on workers. Thus, under Amazon's algorithmic bureaucracy, management's direct control plays a crucial role in enforcing technical coercion. In this respect the study of Amazon's digital taylorism blurs the distinction between direct and technical control theorised by labour process theory (R. Edwards 1979).

The segmentation of the internal labour market is the second pillar of coercion. At Amazon France, internal labour market is divided between a permanent workforce, with a relatively secure job status and temporary seasonal workforce. If the theory of efficiency wage explained internal labour markets as a managerial strategy to exchanging effort for employment benefits, at Amazon the effect is reverses. It is the least protected segment to provide the greater effort, while the most protected share of the workforce is on average less productive. Such a configuration is not an optimum for Amazon. In the US, for instance, where employer's discretion in layoffs is greater, there is no such a gap between permanent and temporary workers. Both permanent and agency workers are in practices exposes to the same threat of dismissal. In France, where the labour market has become increasingly dualised – similarly to most European countries (Baccaro and Howell 2017; Doellgast, Lillie, and Pulignano 2018) – Amazon's search for flexibility and discipline produces such a “two-speed” internal labour market.

Is then coercion the only element supporting the mobilisation of efforts? What remains of the politics of active involvement that Amazon management deployed during the first phase? As we saw, the commitment of the workers was not anymore, a priority for management. Some forms of gamification, such as the fast start, as well as small prizes and goodies for the workers were still part of management's repertoires. Periodical company gatherings, such as the All hands, did not disappear.

However, they lost their function, and they survived as remnants of the previous labour regime. In the new regime, they turned into a routinised ritual with no substantial impact on worker motivation.

The other side of effort mobilisation is the de-mobilisation of workers' collective action. Under the new labour process, the intensification of pressure on workers leads to the deterioration of workers-management relations and to growing tensions. In the new labour regime, that I could observe directly, production politics becomes more contentious. Not only a first cycle of strikes takes place, but resistances appear in the everyday life of the workplace.

We will see in Part III, how Amazon deployed a repertoire of counter-mobilisation against the unions in the internal state. In this chapter, instead, we had a description of Amazon's demobilisation strategies in the labour process and the internal labour market. In the labour process, the level of monitoring is higher than in the past, and the atmosphere of permanent control aims at discouraging workers' open misbehaviour. In the labour market, the divide between permanent and agency workers contributes less to coordinate workers' and capital's interests, as in Burawoy's classic account (1979a), than to politically fragment the workforce. Thus the internal labour market on the one hand supports technical coercion in the labour process and, on the other hand, inhibits workers' collective mobilisation.

6. Algorithmic bureaucracy in Italy (2016-2021)

The study of the French case shed light on the two mechanisms that Amazon develops to secure worker effort and, on the other hand to politically demobilise workers: technical coercion in the labour process and economic coercion in the labour market. Although the digitalisation and proceduralisation of the work process has reached an unprecedented level, observation revealed the importance of shop-floor management for the enforcement of both kinds of coercion, especially economic coercion. In this respect, it is particularly relevant to talk about politics of coercion. The analysis of the French case also provides evidence of hidden forms of resistances that make labour politics in France particularly contentious.

We saw in Chapter 4 that the Italian and the French warehouse underwent a similar labour crisis. However, important differences emerged in term of temporalities of the transition and the stages of development of the labour process. The goal of this chapter is to analyse the new labour regime in Italy. The question I will try to answer is whether the same patterns of production politics emerge, despite the important differences in terms of temporality and trajectory of the Italian subsidiary, compared to the French one.

Methodological notice

The Italian case differs from the French case not only in objective terms, but also through methodological lens. In France, I benefit from written sources that have no comparison in Italy. These written sources are printed internal reports, produced under the French labour regulation that promotes information rights for workers and their representatives in the works councils. In Italy, unfortunately, information rights are not enforced with the same strength, nor unions seem to pay much attention to data access. Thus, I will rely mainly on my observation and all data collected during the fieldwork or through business databases (Orbis, Statista etc.).

For what concerns participant observation, the advantage was somehow reversed. In Italy, I was hired as an agency worker in site of MXP5, the oldest FC in Italy. My assignment lasted from the beginning of May to the end of August 2019, differently from France, where I worked during two distinct periods in 2018 and 2019. During the assignment I worked exclusively as a picker, and I did not receive any other training. A main difference with the French case was that, having spent several months in Piacenza while waiting a call from an agency, I had already interviewed several workers. Thus, when I started my assignment, a considerable number of workers knew my situation and my purposes, and this somehow facilitated my participant observation. Additionally, made clear that I

was not obsessed by the secrecy of my undercover research and that the information could circulate carefully. Far from increasing risks of going uncovered, this relaxed my relationship with these workers and reduced the burden of being undercover. Another key element was also my nationality and racial identity. Being a white Italian, even if not from the area, gave me more scope and respectability in the workplace than I had in France where, despite my white European race, I remained a foreigner. To be sure, this was a personal feeling that I had on the way people looked at me. Nonetheless, however subjective this feeling could be, it shaped my perspective on the social setting I was part of (Burawoy 1998; Chauvin and Jounin 2012). For what concerns the main advantage and limits of participant observation, especially when covert, the reader shall refer to the introduction to chapter 5.

Regarding the other sources, most of them were written documents collected in the fieldwork. Some of them have already been mobilised in chapter 4. Most of this body of sources consists of few internal documents concerning the firm, namely the two logistics subsidiaries of Amazon in Italy: Amazon Italia Logistics (AIL) which runs the FCs, and Amazon Italia Transport (AIT), which runs the Sortation Centres and the Delivery Stations. They have been provided by actors whose identity shall be not disclosed. Other written sources were accessible through platforms such as Orbis and Statista. A second thrust of written sources is made up of local and national press articles, collected either through databases such as Factiva, or in the digital archives of relevant newspapers.

6.1. Labour process. The politics of technical coercion in Italy

Under algorithmic bureaucracy, coercion becomes the prevalent element of mobilisation of worker effort. Like in the French case, we will analyse the mechanisms through which technical coercion mobilise worker effort. At the same time, we will find evidence and account for divergence between the Italian and the French case, concerning the politics of technical coercion.

6.1.1. The state of Amazon's logistics operation under the new labour regime

The transition from the first, consensual, labour regime to the new one took place in a much more rapid way in Italy than in France. The company opened its first FC in Piacenza (MXP1), but by the end of 2017 the number of warehouses had already multiplied from one to 5 FCs. The renewed warehouse in Piacenza, MXP5, opened in 2015. The “non-sort” warehouse in Vercelli (MXP3), the new generation Kiva-robotised FCs in Turin (TRN1) and Rieti (FCO1), all launched in 2017. This first wave of expansion was followed by another one between 2020 and 2022, Amazon opened five

more robotic FCs (three in Northern Italy: BLQ1, BGY1²²⁹, MXP6; two in Central Italy: FCO2 and PSR2) and a smaller crossdock FC (FCO5). In the space of 11 years, the total surface of Amazon Italia's FCs grew by almost 30 times, from 25.000 to over 800.000 m².

Table 25 – Amazon's FCs in Italy

Source: internal documents and press sources

NAME	LOCATION	DATE OPENING	TYPE OF FC	SURFACE AT GROUND (M²)
MXP1/MXP5	PIACENZA-CASTEL SAN GIOVANNI	2011/2015	LEGACY - SORT	100.000
MXP3	VERCELLI	2017	LEGACY – NON-SORT	100.000
TRN1	TURIN-TORRAZZA	2017	ROBOTIC	60.000
FCO1	ROME/PASSO CORESE	2017	ROBOTIC	60.000
BLQ1	ROVIGO	2020	ROBOTIC	70.000
FCO2	ROME- COLLEFERRO	2020	LEGACY – NON-SORT	100.000
BGY1	BERGAMO	2021	ROBOTIC	60.000
MXP6	NOVARA	2021	ROBOTIC	55.000
PSR2	CHIETI-SAN SALVO	2022	ROBOTIC	190.000
FCO5	ROME-ARDEA	2022	CROSSDOCK	50.000

To this core of FCs, Amazon added its last mile infrastructure thereby developing also in Italy its global plan of vertical integration (see Chapter 1). Between 2017 and 2020 Amazon opened a sortation centre (MXP8) next to MXP5, and 25 delivery stations diffused around the main urban centres of the peninsula. The number of employees grew consequently (Figure 53).

²²⁹ As I have already reminded in the methodological annex, as member of a collective research team, I had the opportunity to visit, observe work (for two years) and interview plant management in the sites of FCO1 (February 2022) and BGY1 (January 2023).

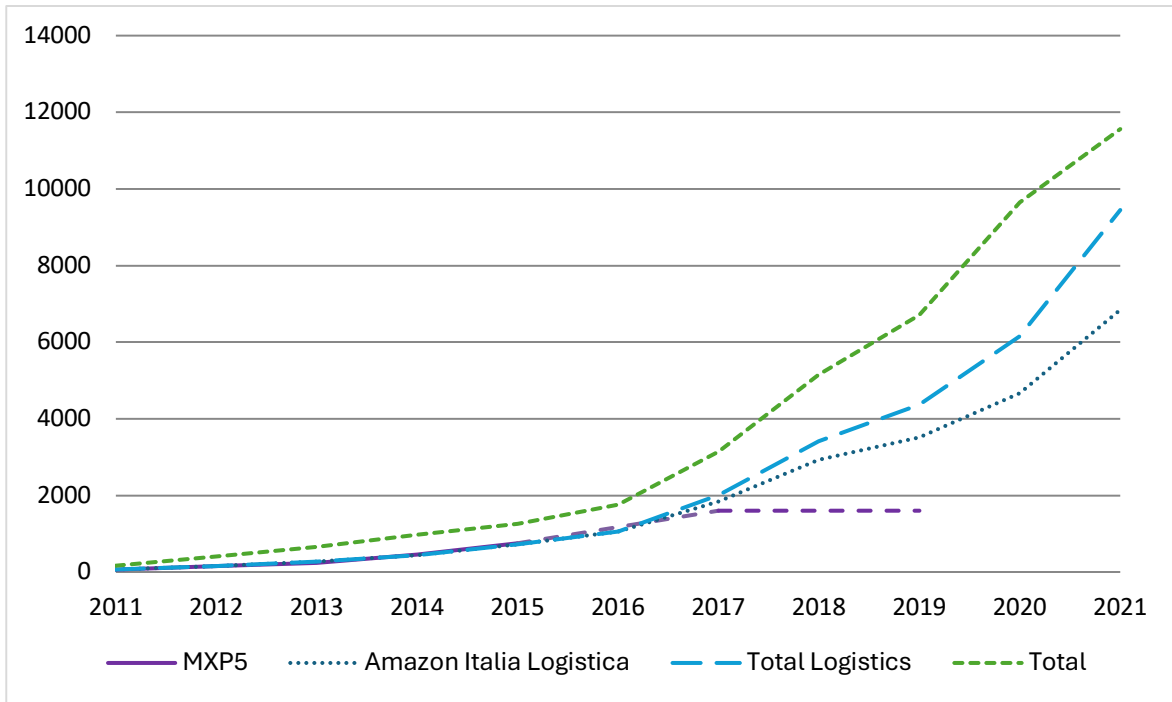


Figure 53 – Number of permanent employees at MXP5 and in the whole Italian logistics network (2016: missing; 2017-2019: estimated)

Source: Orbis database; internal documents

The operating revenue of Amazon’s Italian logistics subsidiaries, which gives an indirect representation of Amazon’s sales, grew from less than \$6 million in 2011 to more than \$1 billion in 2021 (Figure 54)²³⁰.

²³⁰ I remind that this is only the value of Amazon’s logistics/warehousing operation in Italy. There is no data available on Amazon’s e-commerce revenue and net income, which is likely to be far bigger.

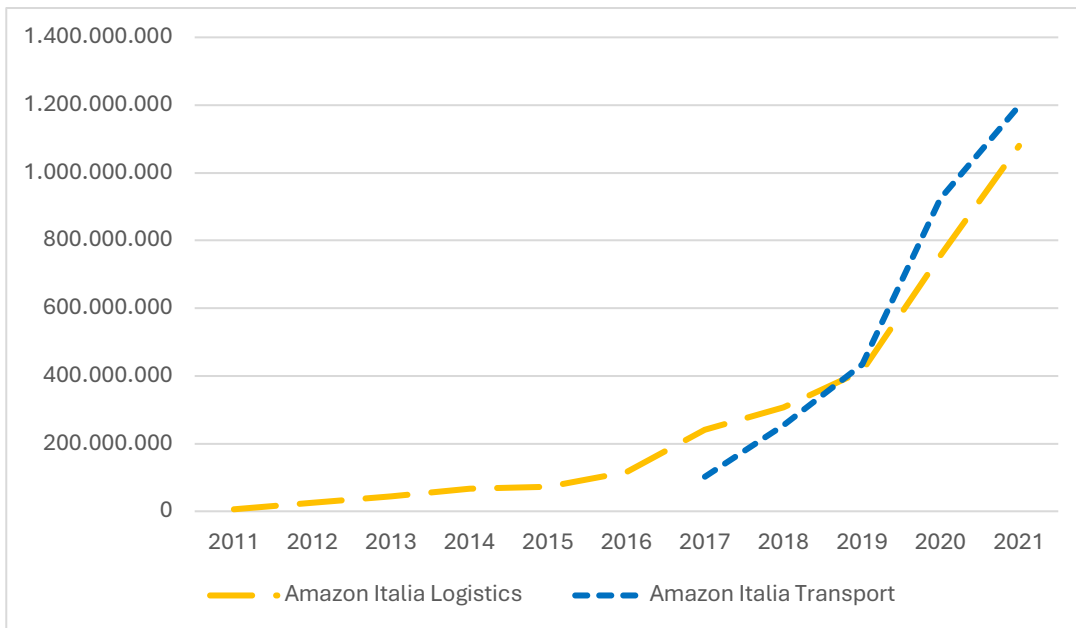


Figure 54 – Operating revenue of Amazon’s logistics subsidiaries in Italy (US\$)

Source: Orbis database

The progression of Amazon’s business in Italy was also particularly accelerated compared to France and other European countries. In a “late-comer” country such as Italy, where the development of e-commerce had started with a certain delay, Amazon easily managed to impose its market domination.

The first impact of this spectacular growth on the labour process was registered at MXP1/MXP5 (Piacenza). There, as we saw in Chapter 4, the labour process underwent a process of rapid taylorisation, standardisation and proceduralisation of the division of work. This was buttressed by a deterioration of the personal style of management and by the overt rebellion of the workforce who decided to unionise and go on strike, for the first time in Italy, in winter 2017.

In this context, shopfloor management faced the same problem that we found in France. The older regime, that mobilised workers by means of responsible autonomy, was structurally undermined by the transformation of the labour process and the growth of the company. Yet, worker effort had to be secured. The dominant factor of mobilisation became technical coercion in the work process and economic coercion. The company did not renounce to its apparatus of collective mobilisation of the workers; yet, given the constraints that forestalled workers motivation, its purpose was reshuffled: the new priority was to politically de-mobilising workers in cooperation with technical and economic coercion.

Given the global standardisation of the labour process unfolded in Amazon network, the organisation of work in Italian warehouse (MXP5) followed the same blueprint of the French one (ORY1). Both FCs are not only the first Amazon opened in each country, but they are of the same

type (legacy sort). Flows are organised in two main departments: inbound and outbound. Each can be broken in its own main processes: receive and stow for inbound; pick, rebin and pack in outbound. In addition, there is a series of auxiliary processes and jobs, from inventory (ICQA) to maintenance (RME) and IT. A part the warehouse is also dedicated to bulk handling, which is run by a team of forklift trucks (called “PIT”). Concerning management, I could not investigate systematically the professional trajectories of managers before joining Amazon, nor in Italy or in France. However, during my fieldwork I collected information about the way management is trained *after* joining Amazon and I figured out that it is a very homogeneous form of training. After the recruitment, managers are usually sent in another country for training. This can happen also with team leaders. Furthermore, European managers spent a training period of some days in the Luxembourg headquarter where they were not only initiated to Amazon’s corporate culture, but also trained about HR techniques and given instructions to deal with workers (after all, we saw, their role is mainly to manage the people rather than the fluxes), in other words they are trained to manage the infra-politics of technical coercion. This illustrates how Amazon, as the reader would expect at this point of this research, pays a great deal of importance to the homogeneity of standards, procedures, and managerial orientation in the labour process.

Despite these similarities, the two warehouses where I carried on my ethnography (ORY1 and MXP5) differ in terms of temporalities: the new ORY1 FC was set up in 2007, MXP5 in 2013. During six years, Amazon had further improved work processes, introduced new technologies and increased its investment capacity, thus making MXP5 an example of Amazon’s most advanced warehouses among the old generation. From 2014 on, most of new warehouses opened by Amazon in the US and abroad would be robotised (kiva-equipped warehouses). In this respect, MXP5 is equipped with a double-stream conveyor, able to serve outbound flows but also (differently from ORY1) inbound flows. This innovation accelerates inbound processes and, downstream, also outbound processes. The new conveyor replaces most of the jobs of cart handling that existed in the French FCs (5.1.4.1).

The FC is also equipped with an automatic packing machine, produced by an Italian company, introduced to operate in parallel with standard packing lines – although, as I showed elsewhere (Massimo 2019), workers reported many disfunctions in this kind of automatic packaging machine, which was finally withdrawn.

In sum, the Italian FCs presents itself as more mechanised than its corresponding French FCs. This higher level of mechanisation seems to further increase technical coercion over the workers. Also, at the nation-wide level, most Italian FCs are equipped with kiva robots. Here, the labour process is characterised by even further technical coercion, for, as we saw in Chapter 2, workers lose a great deal of control over working rhythms and task executions (see also our research in Cirillo et

al. 2022; 2023). At the time of the ethnography (2019), in other words, the Italian network had caught up the delay and had become even more advanced than the French one. The French network would, only in part, compensate the delay with the opening of two robotic FCs in 2019 and 2021 (Table 14).

Given the refusal of Amazon management to discuss this matter in the name of confidentiality, I can only make the hypothesis that this differential of investments and development is due, at least in part, to the lower level of labour unrest and the lower wages that characterises the Italian case. We will see, for instance, that during the pandemic crisis Amazon's FCs remained closed due to an intense labour conflict. The company was able to keep the last mile chain operating thanks to the supply coming from German and Italian FCs.

Finally, there is another element of context that we can remind. In front of the rapid expansion of Amazon robotic FCs, old legacy FCs such as MXP5 in Italy and ORY1, MRS1 or LYS1 are exposed to the problem of obsolescence and the threat of a closure. At the time of my ethnography, such a threat was quite remote, even if the FCs had already stopped increasing its workforce. Today, some warehouses have already undergone the road of specialisation: LYS1, for instance is now specialised in shoes; MXP5 has been recently reorganised for hosting customer return services (since 2022). This is aligned with a recent process of "regionalisation" of Amazon's inventory, which is mentioned in recent annual reports:

Until recently, Amazon operated one national US fulfillment network that distributed inventory from fulfillment centers spread across the entire country. If a local fulfillment center didn't have the product a customer ordered, we'd end up shipping it from other parts of the country, costing us more and increasing delivery times. This challenge became more pronounced as our fulfillment network expanded to hundreds of additional nodes over the last few years, distributing inventory across more locations and increasing the complexity of connecting the fulfillment center and delivery station nodes efficiently. Last year, we started rearchitecting our inventory placement strategy and leveraging our larger fulfillment center footprint to move from a national fulfillment network to a regionalized network model. We made significant internal changes (e.g. placement and logistics software, processes, physical operations) to create eight interconnected regions in smaller geographic areas. Each of these regions has broad, relevant selection to operate in a largely self-sufficient way, while still being able to ship nationally when necessary. Some of the most meaningful and hard work came from optimizing the connections between this large amount of infrastructure (Amazon.com, Inc. 2022).

The process has started in the US, which means the passage from a national to a sub-national compartmentalisation. In Europe, that could mean the passage not necessarily to a state-level division but to a greater transnational complementarity since macro-regions could cut across with national borders. This regionalisation brings about a process of specialisation of certain warehouses. This explains first, the fact that obsolescent facilities have been retrofitted for specific functions; second,

the complementarity between the European national networks during the pandemic. In a common European market of products, the size of national markets is not necessarily useful to understand the variations of logistics development: the capacity of the Italian network is currently larger than the French one, but the Italian network serves also the French one with probably lower “labour costs” and a more productive labour process.

Differences between the two countries concerned also working time. While in France there was a 35-hours regime, in Italy the working week is of 40 hours. In France, on the base of an agreement signed in 2014 by management and unions, there were special teams who worked on Saturday, Sunday and Holidays (*équipe SDJF*)²³¹. In France, I belonged to an ordinary team, so I worked from Monday to Friday, seven hours per day. Every week, teams rotate: Team A works one week in the morning and the following in the afternoon/evening, Team B vice versa. Night shifts were opened only during the winter peak, and they were formed by volunteers.

When I started my assignment in Italy, shifts were organised in the following way. There were three main shifts. The morning shift, from 7am to 3pm; the afternoon shift, from 3.30pm to 11.30pm; the night shift, from 8pm to 4am (January-August) or from 11.30pm and 7.30am (September-December). Some months before the start of my assignment, the company had added a “central” shift, from 11.30am to 7.30pm. Each shift lasted eight hours of work, with a break of 30 minutes. Permanent workers alternated the morning, and the afternoon shifts every week. Temp workers, instead, had fixed shifts: either morning or afternoon. I was assigned to the afternoon shift.

For what concerns night shifts, the situation had been at the centre of negotiations between unions and management between 2017 and 2018. Indeed, the strike of November 2017 was called mainly over this issue. Before the agreement – signed in May 2018 by the HR director of the warehouse and workers representative on behalf of the three main unions CGIL, CISL and UIL – all workers were expected to work the night shifts rotating every three weeks²³². The agreement abrogated the compulsory night shift and make it voluntary. In fact, temp workers were overrepresented in the night shift, since they were in a more vulnerable position in the labour market, and many of them felt they could not afford to refuse a job offer for night shifts. Other recruits, instead, were eager to access the night shift, since they would get a wage increase for night work²³³. All these differences in employment conditions will be discussed more deeply in Part III. They do

²³¹ The agreement concerned all the French FCs. See Part III.

²³² The night shifts had been progressively introduced around 2014, as Amazon increased its sales. For Amazon to deliver workers within the shortest delay, it is crucial that FCs operate the night. To optimise the distribution chain, most of the orders should be shipped around midnight so that they have the rest of the night to be distributed to the sortation centres and delivery stations and be ready for delivery by the morning. This pushes the company not only to concentrate FC activities between 8pm and 12am.

²³³ +15% according to the sectoral collective agreement; +25% (only between 10pm and 4am), according to the site-level collective agreement signed in 2018.

not imply major differences in the way how the labour process is organised, but they account for the different trajectories of Amazon's industrial relations in the two countries.

6.1.2. *Recruitment*

The recruiting process is crucial to understand the way how technical coercion is organised and enforced in the labour process. In Italy, as well as in France, Amazon resorts to temporary staff agencies to recruit its workers. Most temps will be dismissed at the end of the mission, while a tiny minority will be proposed a permanent contract. As, since 2016, the workforce in MXP5 had been stagnating at the level of 1.600 permanent employees, new workers are hired only to replace those who quit the company. Chances of getting a permanent contract have thus shrunk considerably.

As I have already stressed in Chapter 4, Amazon's monopoly/monopsony power allowed its Italian subsidiary to develop its own pattern of outsourcing based on temporary staff agencies, while in the rest of the logistics sector the dominant form of outsourcing was based on cooperatives. Amazon, however, has enough power to impose its own model. As we have already saw in the French case, also in Italy agencies provide workers almost on demand, take care of all the administrative tasks and function as a legal shield between Amazon and the workers. Agencies are also in charge of a first training of the workforce and preparing candidates to work in Amazon warehouses. Amazon, it is a refrain during recruitment sessions, "is not a conventional employer".

The recruitment process in Italy happens through the intermediation of temporary agencies (Adecco, Manpower, Proman in France; Adecco, Manpower, and Gi Group in Italy). When I started my fieldwork in Piacenza, in November 2018, I applied to all three agencies. I realised soon that I had sent my application too late, since by the first week of November, agencies have already formed their list of recruits. Some of them, between one quarter and one third, have been working in the site since the summer, while the rest has been recruited between September and October. My chances of getting a mission were low, but I was called for a recruiting session by one of the agencies. Eventually I was not selected by the agency during this first round. Finally, in April my new application was retained. In the next paragraphs I will provide an analysis of the recruitment process, showing how it is part of the whole process of enforcement of coercion in the workplace.

6.1.2.1. *Observation of a recruiting session in Piacenza*

The recruiting session takes place in the agency's office in Castel San Giovanni, the small town a few miles from Piacenza, where Amazon and other logistics companies have their warehouses. Here, the three main agencies have their offices where they select the workforce demanded by Amazon with its seasonal workforce. In the room there is less than a dozen candidates. Half of them

look like foreign African immigrant workers. The rest look like white European, but it is not clear if they are local, immigrants from other regions of Italy, or foreigners from other European countries²³⁴. After a short description of Amazon and a summary of the work processes, the recruiter, a young woman in her late twenties, with a local accent, starts explaining the rules. She mentions, not without detachment, the fact that at Amazon behaviour is rigidly, almost ridiculously, codified. Nevertheless, she adds, these rules are reasonable, and we would have to get used to them, as much as strange they could appear to us:

There are 150 security rules in Amazon. It's 150 really, it sounds like a lot but it actually includes the crap that you can't really think of like... for instance, when you go up the stairs always hold the handrail... like parking in the car park, don't use the pallet truck as a skateboard, in short things that seem trivial but as there are so many people... [...] if you don't respect them, it becomes a problem.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 22 – Recruitment session, temporary work agency, Piacenza (Italy), November 2018

Then, she explains the stages of the recruiting process. Candidates are required to follow a three-days training, the first, I would find out, takes place in a training centre run by the employer association of the temporary work industry. The second and the third will take place at Amazon, but only the third day, she says, will be a practical training, while the first will be also theoretical.

Today you will have an interview with my colleague who is coming, after that we have already set the training days: there are three days, two on safety (one general, one more specific) [...] which honestly are the most boring ones because you have to spend eight hours listening to someone saying things that maybe you have already heard for other jobs, in important because Amazon assumes that everything you have done before them you have done wrong for sure, not you, but they have explained it to you wrong, okay? So [...] and the third day, on the other hand, is the best day because you will go directly into the warehouse, they will explain the processes to you, they will explain some theory, some terms etc. and... what else? You will be evaluated by an Amazon manager who oversees training. Watch out, because that is the most important day: it is as if you go and interview directly with them. We've seen things happen ... hallucinating things: like people showing up in flip-flops, people falling asleep, people getting pissed off because they wanted to smoke a cigarette, but there are breaks for that ... there are people throwing things at the lecturer ... in short ... a few things that seem absurd but ... obviously ... So clearly someone who behaves like that gets caught and let out and.... never gets to set foot in Amazon again.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 23 – Recruitment session, temporary work agency, Piacenza (Italy), November 2018

²³⁴ At one moment one would explain that he is a prison mate with work permission and ask if he could work the night shift.

Then, after making sure we understand that Amazon is not an ordinary employer, she explains working conditions. The regulation of temporary employment in Italy is quite favourable to the employers compared to the French one, especially for what concerns work time flexibility. In France, temporary workers have the same work schedule of their permanent co-workers. In Italy the legislator and the National Collective Labour Agreement (*Contratto Collettivo Nazionale di Lavoro*, CCNL) for temporary work provided a derogation called MOG (*Monte Ore Garantito*). In practice, the MOG works like a zero-hour contract, although there is a minimum number of hours that the employer is expected to *grant* to the worker. The agency officer explains the functioning of the MOG, trying to present it as reasonable and good for the workers:

The contracts that Amazon makes are of two types. The full-time contract is the one that's easier to understand because it's the classic 40-hour-a-week, five-day-a-week contract [...]. It lasts a minimum of two weeks. The second type of contract, on the other hand, is the MOG: *Monte Ore Garantito*, it has an initial duration of 3 months, by law, and Amazon is obliged to guarantee you a monthly amount of work, which for convenience they spread out over the week [...]. Let me give you an example: you are hired on a MOG contract that starts on November 15 until February 14th. The first week, it's obvious, they make you go at least four days out of seven, if not five, because you have to learn the process you are assigned to. From the second week onwards you there are the two days in a week that Amazon has to guarantee you. What happens? We go to peak: now there is peak, it's starting, so they tell us, "Listen, tell your team of MOG workers that an 'expansion' is planned." What does that mean: expansion is a voluntary turnout. Amazon has an increase in work, they need people to go in and handle this volume of work. They call their MOG workers and say, "If you want you can come and work on ... let's say Monday and Friday". These extra hours – those who exceed the minimum amount of hours of the MOG – will be paid *not* at an overtime rate but as *supplemental* [*“supplementari”* in Italian] hours, a middle ground between ordinary and overtime, okay? When the opposite happens, there is no work, there is a drop: that week they have nothing to do. So, they tell you, "You stay home", because rather than stay here twiddling your thumbs, looking in the air, you stay at home resting. If, by the end of the month, you haven't reached the minimum amount of hours that Amazon has to guarantee you, that amount of hours is paid to you anyway, because those are the hours that they have to pay you necessarily okay? Then you will see that it is easier [to understand] when you are in it...

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 24 – Recruitment session, temporary work agency, Piacenza (Italy), November 2018

In fact, the recruiter illustrates the work time arrangement on a rather misleading way. It is not true that hours worked over the minimum hours are paid as "*supplementari*"; they are paid as ordinary hours. The manipulation reaches a ridiculous stage when the fact that a worker is left home when the company does not need him is presented by the recruiter almost as something good for the workers,

who, instead of going to work and being inactive because there is not much activity, can stay home, unpaid, “and rest”.

Box 11 – Comparing the legal regulation of agency work in France and Italy

France and Italy have two different regulations of temporary work. None is in absolute favourable to the employer, but each present constraints and loopholes compared to the other.

First, for what concerns the source of regulation, in France the main level of regulation is the labour law, while in Italy, sectoral collective bargaining is central. For what concerns the different matters of regulation, in both countries, agency workers must receive the same wage base wage of permanent workers in the same job. Differences concern the binding criteria for user company to resort to agency workers.

In France, companies may only use this form of employment in two very specific cases: to replace absent employees or to cope with a temporary or seasonal increase in activity (however, there is no *quantitative* limit for the use of temporary workers as ratio of the permanent workforce)²³⁵. They may not use temporary staff for their normal, permanent activities²³⁶. Under no circumstances may a temporary employment contract be concluded to replace an employee whose employment contract has been suspended as a result of a collective labour dispute, to carry out particularly dangerous work as defined by ministerial decree or to replace a labour medical doctor²³⁷. Furthermore, agency workers whose assignment is not renewed have right to a “precarity compensation” equal to 10% of the total gross wage paid during the assignment (the compensation is paid by the agency, which is in turn paid by the user firm for the whole service of intermediation). Agency contracts in the same firm and on the same jobs have a maximal duration of 18 months. The law provides also a “waiting period” (*délai de carence*) at the end of the assignment (half the duration of the assignment if the latter was shorter than a week; one third, if the assignment duration was longer than a week), whereby the workers can not work for the same user firm²³⁸. In fact, agencies can bypass the constraint, as it was showed in the logistic sector, by dispatching the worker on another workplace or, in case of five-days assignments, let the waiting period elapse during the weekend (Tranchant 2019).

In Italy, firms can resort to temporary work at any time, without the *qualitative* binding criteria enumerated by the French law. The only condition to respect is *quantitative*: that the number of agency workers (should not exceed 30% of the number of permanent workers. CCNLs can derogate from this threshold. Furthermore, the law itself provides a large space of derogation: it excludes from the account all former unemployed people (for at least six months) and the broad category of “disadvantaged workers” (*lavoratori svantaggiati*). The category include a wide array of figures, from young long-term unemployed to workers living alone with one child or more; from over-50-years-old workers to female workers living in a precise geographic area where, for the previous two years, the rate of unemployment has been higher than the European average and, for two of the previous three years, the rate of female unemployment has

²³⁵ *Code du travail*, art. L. 124-2-1.

²³⁶ *Code du travail*, art. L. 124-2.

²³⁷ *Code du travail*, art. L. 124-2-3.

²³⁸ *Code du travail*, art. L. 125-1-12.

been 1,5 times higher than the rate of male unemployment²³⁹. This gives employers huge latitude in the use of agency work, as we will see in the case of Amazon. Finally, at the time of the assignment the maximal duration of an assignment on the same job (including contract renewals), had been reduced to 24 months²⁴⁰.

Then, the recruiter raises another question: that of the employment relationship *strictu sensu*. The first issue she comes up with is an atypical character of temps' employment relation: they are not Amazon's employees even though they work in Amazon. This implies de facto, as she says, that they must respond to a double authority. Then she explains what sectoral collective contract is being applied and she informs workers about the hourly gross pay for temp workers: €8.

Let's talk about communication. You must *always* remember that your employer is the agency, you work for the agency... but you work in Amazon. So, communications must be, "double" i.e. if you are home sick you call us and give us the protocol number and we make the communication to Amazon, you also call Amazon to say: "I am sick, I am not coming to work today". All these things in more detail we explain to you when the contract is signed. The collective agreement that applies is, for [the larger warehouse] the "Tertiary-Distribution-Services" [Terziario, distribuzione, servizi] one, and for the smaller warehouse [MXP8] it is the Logistics and Transportation contracts. Nothing really changes, the gross pay is the same, it's 8 euros gross per hour.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 25 – Recruitment session, temporary work agency, Piacenza (Italy), November 2018

The recruiter concludes the presentation with two interesting remarks that tell a lot about the way the recruiting process is crucial to shape workers' behaviour *before* the entrance in the work process. First, the recruiter said that it was better for the candidates to be flexible and available in terms of shift. The reason is, and this is the second important point, that agency recruiter, according to her, have no say in the formation of the lists and in the assigning to the shifts:

Ah, my advice: if you don't have special needs, don't foreclose your possibilities. I understand that so many people tell me "I want to do the night shift because I get paid more". I don't know how possible it is, I don't know beforehand how many positions I will have on the night-shift so if a person says to me, "I don't know", "I have my baby at home, I'm comfortable doing the morning from 6am to 2pm or 7am to 3pm because then I have the whole day to manage the children", that's okay, that's an objective thing and you do what you can... But, apart from these special needs, family constraints etc... I suggest you don't give yourself too narrow bounds because when they send us instructions, I can't change them. They [Amazon] are the ones who decide what shift you will be on, okay?

²³⁹ *Decreto Legislativo 10 settembre 2003*, n. 276.

²⁴⁰ *Decreto-legge del 12 dicembre 2018*, n. 87.

In this way the recruiter killed two birds with one stone: on the one hand, she inhibits workers from making any claim on shift assignments; on the other hand, she also frees herself from any responsibility, preventing workers from complaining with her about the decisions. Once more, as already stressed by many observers of temporary workers, the *triangulation* of the temporary work employment relations turns out to be a way for the two employers (the formal and the *de facto* one) to escape accountability in front of the employee (Chauvin and Jounin 2011; Gaborieau 2016b; Benvegnù 2018; Tranchant 2019).

After this session, I did not receive any call. I tried to call the agencies back, but they always told me that they were not looking for new candidates in that moment and that they would have let me know. The weeks passed and I gave up. Thus, I spent the winter making in the area making interviews with workers and former workers, union representatives, local employer association representatives, school director, economists at the local university, local politicians. At the end of the season, I came back to Paris, giving up the idea of replicating my participant observation in Italian warehouse. It was then, in the month of May, that I received a call from another agency, Manpower. They were recruiting for the summer season and the Prime Day peak. They asked me if I was available. I accepted, repacked my stuff and went back to Piacenza to start the training, even if no one could promise that, at the end of the process, I would have been hired for real. The recruiter declined to tell me the date of beginning, on the grounds that Amazon had not informed them yet. A couple of days later, when I had already re-settled in Piacenza, and I was desperately looking for an accommodation in Castel San Giovanni, I received a call from the agency:

May 2nd, I receive a phone call by another agency to which I had send my application:

- Hello good morning, did you follow the recruiting process with us?
- Yes
- Ok are you available?
- Yes, I did my medical exam two days ago
- Are you available for the night shift?
- Yes
- Ok thank you
- Thank you? Wait, you do not tell me when we start?
- No... we do not know anything so far... Amazon has not told yet, but we will let you know... bye bye!

One more time, the recruiter freed herself from any responsibility, saying that Amazon takes the decisions. Uncertainty and opacity seemed to be the norms, and they were magnified across hierarchical lines: uncertainty on the duration of an assignment, opacity on wage policies, lack of information on whether one will work in the day or in the night shift, etc.

Opacity emerges one of the main instruments of domination: nobody knows anything. If a candidate needs to know with a certain advance the date of beginning of the assignment, the agency employee will tell, dismissively, “I do not know”. The worker is also implicitly reproached for daring to ask such a thing. In fact, when it comes to this kind of information, that imply an engagement of the employer to the workers, nobody seems capable to provide this information. The agency employment will say that “we do not have this information; we are waiting for Amazon to tell us”. Therefore, the chain of information is cut from the reach of vis-à-vis interactions: the worker does not know when he/she will start, because its direct interlocutor, the agency employee does not know it (which is probably true), and Amazon’s management prefer not revealing this information as long as its needs in personnel are not confirmed by sale forecasts, thereby adjusting its workforce to its needs with higher flexibility. Thus, the hierarchical chain of power is also a chain of information: the more the observer goes downstream, the more information (and power) is rarefied.

Uncertainty is a mechanism typical of the agency work form of employment, as showed by a rich scholarship on agency work in the logistics sector (H. Freeman and Gonos 2011; Gaborieau 2016b; Benvegnù 2018; Tranchant 2019). Not only makes the user firm less accountable toward the worker, but, as it emerges from these observations, by reducing workers’ visibility over working and employment conditions, make them more subject to the technical coercion in the workplace. By further examining the labour process and the labour market in the warehouse, we will see that this mechanism of opacity is a crucial element of managerial discretion: management is less accountable if it reduces the information on its future action.

6.1.3. Inequality before technical coercion across the workforce

After a week, I finally received the communication from the recruiters. Amazon had confirmed its demand of workforce, and the agency was ready to send me work in the warehouse. I packed my stuff and went back to Piacenza to start. My contract was of the MOG-type, although during the entire period of my assignment, between May and August 2019, the company required us to work almost every workday since volumes remained steady during that summer.

During this period, I spent most of the time working in the picktowers, so I could not directly observe the work of packers or people at the docks, except a few occasions during breaks, when I could get closer to them or discuss with co-workers assigned to other tasks. For what concerns my

social relations, I was already acquainted with some blue-badge workers, that I had met during the previous months when I was carrying out interviews with Amazon workers. However, as we have already seen in France, the segmentation of the labour market between blue-badge and green-badge is not simply a matter of contract but also of tasks and social relations. Employment segmentation also entails a certain degree of segregation by status. Thus, as it is “natural”, I also spent much time with my temp colleagues²⁴¹.

Training at Amazon is preceded by a sort of orienteering day organised by the “bilateral body” of the agency work industry, *Ebitemp*²⁴². The main purpose of the class was to instruct worker on the importance of safety at work but also to explain to them the rules of employment relations. Given the joint union-employer nature of the institutions, part of the classes was provided by union officials. The session I observed, as temporary worker, was held by a CISL union official. He only mentioned “rights” that the bilateral body offered to the workers, some small benefits on professional training and health protection.

After this orienteering day, workers are invited to show up at Amazon warehouse for the start of the assignment. The system of recruitment is based on a two-days training during which workers are assigned to a specific process (usually receive, stow, pick, pack, ICQA). The following journal excerpts comes from the first two days at Amazon. It gives an account of the atmosphere that new workers find at their arrival:

It is my first day of assignment at Amazon. I catch a regional train in Piacenza, and, in fifteen minutes, I arrive in Castel San Giovanni; I have my bike with me and start cycling to reach the logistics area, which is in the outskirts of the town. A few other workers got off the train to go in the same direction, some have a bike too. The route is very dangerous because the road is narrow and a lot of trucks pass by, coming from the north bank of the Po and traveling toward the highway. After ten minutes, I reach the warehouse. I am at the gates, with the other new temps waiting outside to come in. There are also people who have lost their badges. I catch up with some familiar faces. Time passes and people increase, besieging the gate. From the gatehouse inside, Amazon workers try to control the flow by letting in a few at a time [...]. We enter. We assemble. We consult the shift schedule, exchange information, pat each other on the back, sly or bewildered looks [...]. We go to the counter in disorder without a guide and the concierge gives us badges and assigns lockers. We go to the locker room then. It stinks. I find my locker. “What a drag,” I hear from

²⁴¹ We must bear in mind, anyway, that 90% of the work activities are designed to be carried out individually. Workers spend time together only before, after and during formal or informal breaks from work.

²⁴² In the years, social partners have deployed a dense network of joint regulation at the local level, with the institutions of *Enti Bilaterali* (“bilateral bodies”); bilateral bodies, originally spread in the building industry since 1919, then redefined and extended by the law 30/2003 (the so-called *Legge Biagi*, one of the most important reforms that deregulated the labour market in Italy); they are set up by trade unions and employer associations. In the spirit of the law, these bodies were designed to favour the “joint regulation” of the labour market, “making up for the deficiencies of the state” (Farrell and Holten 2004, 38; see also P. Perulli and Catino 1997; P. Perulli and Sabel 1997; Vatta 2022).

a blue-badge talking to himself very loudly. He seems almost annoyed by the arrival of new people, or perhaps he is tired from work, or maybe both. Our glances intercept, but we are strangers to each other. With the new temps I am herded back into the waiting area. Our instructors arrive and each in turn takes a roll call of their own. They form small groups of four. I am in the pick team. We are two groups of 4. The others go to pack, stow and sco-out (a sub process of inbound). The names of the novices are among the most varied; there are a lot of foreigners. The instructors do nothing to hide the effort of reading these names: “A-b-d-o-u-l-N-d-i-a-y-e”, he spells out one trying to make people laugh. We are gathered by Carla, an instructor in her thirties with a Neapolitan accent. I am with a small group of temps: Gesualdo, from Puglia, former driver for a truck transport company, with two years separating him from retirement. Walter, African from Genoa. He has found a home in Castello, with a Moroccan who, however, sends him away a few days, since his mother will arrive for Ramadan. Mamadou, very young. We get a first tour of the warehouse. We chat, the instructor tries to establish friendly and informal relations; my co-workers are in the same mood. Then we begin, with practice, orienting ourselves in the warehouse and then deciphering Bin addresses. The instructor uses some learning cards with images and examples to help us understand the process. Then he hands over the scanner to us and invites us to try, one by one we pick an item as if it were a game to compete in. Then the instructor leaves us and lets us work alone for real for about one hour. Short before the break, he gathers us again and we take a debriefing. During the break I look for someone to catch a car ride at the end of the day. I meet Jacopo. There is a colleague with him, his name is Diego, born and bred in the area; he is also a permanent worker, and he is also in his late twenties; he makes it clear he doesn't like that job. Then break ends. I go back to work and pick alone. Then Carla, the instructor, joins me. She knows, since I have already told it to another instructor, that I have already worked for Amazon in France. She friendly makes some questions about it: “how does it work there?”. I tell her that work is the same but there are some differences in pay, work time etc. She is impressed by both the salary [over 10 gross euros per hour as an entry level wage vs 8 in Italy] and the work time organisation [in France there is no fixed night shift and special shift for Saturday, Sunday and holiday]. She has the colleague approach her to let her know what I am saying. Then it is my turn to make question and I ask her about productivity, about Amazon's reputation of being a demanding employer, about working rhythms etc. She says “you have to do around 100 items and you're top, but for a while now it's been a bit taboo, we avoid talking about it, there's no pressure... Just don't be a slacker... I've never broken my back, but I've always made my effort...”. Then she adds that until a few months before, the picking software displayed a countdown: the picker had to retrieve the item indicated by the system within a given number of seconds, “It was very stressful”, she says “but a few months ago they withdrew it, I do not very well why...”. I understand she feels it is a sensitive topic and that she does not quite know how to talk about it. She confirms this, by saying that “management does not like talking overtly about productivity, especially after that the strike and all the mediatic attention... it has become a kind of taboo”. The situation gets awkward, and I try to get out of the impasse: “Then sometimes you work fast to pass the time,” I add, “yeah, yeah, maybe you say ‘I'll show myself how many items I can pick’” she replies.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 28 – MXP5, May 2019

The first hours of observation confirmed that the work process follows the same standard that I saw in France. Picking was the same in the two countries, and the same can be said on other processes

such as receive, stow, and pack. The form of training is also the same, with the same standardized practices and the same attitude of the instructors that try to give the impression that work can be funny.

What changed was first of all my subjective attitude: I had already known the job, so I was more self-confident. Furthermore, I was already in contact with permanent workers, in the warehouse and could meet them easily thanks to the fact that their shift rotated while mine was fixed in the afternoon. In France, instead not only I had known just a couple of permanent employees before my assignment, but they were not in my shifts. Finally, the fact that I was in my home country somehow increased my feeling of being “entitled” to make questions, discuss with colleagues etc.. While in France the combination of a foreigner (even if white) and agency worker statuses, reduced my scope of action. This latitude of action led me to make some “sensitive” question my instructor, who in fact did not consider it particularly unusual (differently from what I expected). The conversation resulted in interesting information such as the fact that talking about productivity has become “a kind of taboo”. Is productivity a taboo in Amazon’s Italian warehouses? Looking at the new recruits I would not say that productivity is a taboo, at least it is not for temps:

Second day. I see green-badge pickers working very fast. To save time, instead of placing the full tote on the conveyor, they put a third one on top of the one which is already on the cart. In theory it is forbidden, because the third tote is very unstable, there is danger of it falling and toppling to the ground, risking injuring someone, damaging the goods, slowing down the work. But it doesn't seem to be a behaviour that management is willing to sanction. “What the hell, why do you work like that?”, I say to myself, “You earn the same”. In fact, I realise that I am also caught by the pressure of the work process: I want to work fast and good, but I also want to comply with the quality and safety standards. At one point a new instructor joins me. She catches me just as I am overfilling a tote. She insists on that, “you must not fill the tote too much, it is not safe, and you risk that they capsize and block the conveyor”. She is very interventionist. I try to cope. Her stern attitude intimidates me, then she leaves. It is the pause time, followed by another brief. I notice that area managers and team leaders like making jokes during the brief: on religion (because management has conceded a specific “Ramadan pause” for Muslim workers that need to break the fast in the evenings), or on the fact that certain workers picked an entire set of condom boxes instead of a single box. Of course, they do not forget to lecture the worker on safety and quality rules, as well as on the productivity target of the day: “100k pieces need to be processed today”, the team leader says, “and now let’s go to work!”. I am again taken in between pressure on productivity and quality, and I make a mistake: I overfill the tote. I have an item in my hands that doesn't fit into the tote, but I have already registered as picked, so now according to the system it is virtually inside the tote, but it actually doesn't. I get nervous, worried about the consequences of the error. Could they kick me out and terminate my assignment for this reason? I can not just go on as if nothing happen because everybody knows that they would track the source of the error. So, I take the tote to the desk and do *mea culpa*. The manager takes note, but he doesn't yell at me, he seems quite unconcerned. He tells me just to be careful.

The excerpt confirms the strong pressure that temps feel in Amazon labour process, exactly like in France. Perhaps my anxiety can be explained by the previous experience in the French workplace, where I observed that management is particularly contentious in the respect of work discipline. In Italy, the situation appeared more relaxed, as the instructor suggested me privately. I saw anyway that temps worked very fast, and that management sent instructor to remind them about rules. Managerial pressure is quite looser for permanent workers, as I notice in the second day:

Before starting the shift, I have lunch something with, one of the blue-badge workers that I have known during my interviews with Amazon workers. We spend time with some of Jacopo's blue-badge colleagues most of them have been in the warehouse since the beginning. Suddenly I realise that it's late... I don't want to take the risk of showing up late at the brief, all my green-badge workers have already gone. "Take it easy, Francesco", says "you do not need to be there in advance, just sharp". "You know how it works for temps, come on" replies Jacopo... [...] During the shift I try to work carefully and rapidly, that's what instructors told to do. A blue-badge worker mocks me for how diligently I lift totes, respecting the recommended procedure. "Look at him", she said hilariously to a colleague, "see how much agile he is!". [...] A couple of hours later I meet Diego in the aisles, he is working at a "regular" speed, he says, which means slower than the typical temp worker. I say that I am puzzled by all the standard rules. "The work is not as standardized as they say", he replies. "There is a lot of adjusting, arrangements". In that precise moment, it is almost the end of the shift, I get a message on my scanner-gun: Overtime proposition. I run into a team lead and ask how it works, "There's half an hour of overtime today. You don't have to do anything, just stay an extra half hour to work and then when you leave you clock out. The system automatically records your time". What to do? Gesualdo, who has the machine, says, "I'm staying! But yes half an hour more half an hour less!". That night then I also stay and after work Gesualdo drives me home.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 30 – MXP5, May 2019.

An important element emerges since these first days: technical coercion does not seem to unfold equally across the workforce. Like in France, and perhaps even more than in France, temp workers are those exposed to managerial coercion. When it comes to the blue-badge workers, management seems to exert on them a looser pressure *or* that something prevent management from exerting the same pressure I noticed in France.

6.1.4. Algorithmic bureaucracy: contradictions and satisficing in the Italian Amazon workplace

During my participant observation of the labour process in the Italian FC of MXP5 I found the same key elements of the bureaucratic pattern that I found out in France, namely the contradiction between the productivity and safety, on the one hand, and productivity and quality on the other hand.

6.1.4.1. *Productivity vs safety and quality*

Amazon puts a great deal of effort in showing its primary interest in safety, as well as in the quality of the service. This message is sent not only externally to the public opinion, with Amazon's spokesperson continuously reminding how much the company cares about this matter. The company invests massively in state-of-the-art equipment and boasts about it. On the press, the company insists about the massive investments made in order to improve the efficiency and, at the same time, the safety of the work process. After all, many of the critiques addressed to Amazon by reporters, unions and other civil society organisations is the matter of workers' health and safety, which is considered to be jeopardised by Amazon's organisation of work. The message is also sent internally down to the bottom ranks of the company. Workers also recognise this effort. For example, a former employee in another warehouse (MXP3, a non-sort FC) reported to me:

In my warehouse management decided to invest €130.000 to improve the safety of handling heavy items. In another case, after that a worker got his hand stuck in the conveyor (luckily without a permanent damage), site management decided to install a barrier and established that none was allowed to work alone in the area where the accident took place. In these circumstances, where severe accidents can take place, management can be very reactive. They do their best to avoid high risk situations, especially those that turn into acute accidents. In this respect, says the interviewed worker, there is no comparison with the rest of the logistics industry around²⁴³.

Fieldwork Quote 99 – Former Amazon worker, MXP3, man, Italian, ca. 30 years-old, 2-years seniority, Interview, September 2020

Like in France, workers are permanently reminded about Amazon's safety policies. Many of the rules aiming at governing human behaviour in Amazon's facilities are related to the issue of safety. Workers are instructed on how to manoeuvre their cars in the parking lot, as well as on how to walk downstairs within the warehouse (with the hand always on the handrail of the stairs). At the beginning of the shifts, during the "briefs", area managers always ask workers to mention a "safety tip", a safety rule. It happens so regularly to become a ritual. Workers answer mechanically reading out a rule, almost as if it was a prayer. According to what workers and unionists reported to me the way of management insists on this issue is unusual, compared to the rest of the logistics industry²⁴⁴. In fact, it is quite typical of the corporate culture of American companies to show compliance with rules

²⁴³ The problem are the least visible risks, those linked to repetitive tasks executed hundreds of times every hour and under constant surveillance and managerial pressure. In this respect, workers are critical of the indifference of management and my observations also confirmed a certain lack of intervention on these weaknesses in the health and safety apparatus.

²⁴⁴ On this point, see also the statements of Italian unionists discussed in Chapter 8 (Fieldwork Quote 135; Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 41).

and conventions widely shared across society (Edelman 1992; Edelman, Uggen, and Erlanger 1999; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001). Management avoids talking explicitly about productivity with the workers, which is a specificity of Amazon's Italian workplace (see par. 6.1.3). During training, temp workers are constantly said not to get worried about productivity but just to focus on "doing the job well, because this allows you to do it fast as well", as reminded by instructors and managers.

Protecting the company's reputation against allegation of exploiting workers with no consideration for their health is one of the reasons that push Amazon to emphasises safety. Yet, there are also understandable doctrinal reasons for inducing management to insist on this point. Managerial pressures on temp workers aims at increasing productivity. However, productivity increases risk to be offset by quality and safety problems. Put under the pressure of delivering high productivity performances, these workers are likely to work so fast to increase the risk of inventory errors and work-related accidents.

Because of their vulnerability in the internal and external labour market, these workers, who can easily amount to more than half of the workforce during peaks, are particularly exposed to this pressure. During my participant observation, I saw many temp workers run with their picking cart, sometimes with a third "tote" stocked on top of it in a precarious balance; many times I saw them moved their heavy stow carts by pulling them instead of pushing them as prescribed by the rules; it is extremely frequent, indeed systematic, that workers do not make the correct movement with their back or their knees to lift up totes or boxes, to stow or pick items. I found myself breaking safety recommendations because I was absorbed by the frenetic rhythm of the activity. In other moment, instead, I tried to pay more attention, but I knew that I could not make my productivity go under a certain threshold.

Some of the gestures are very visible such as putting a third tote on the picking cart. They could be considered as sign of worker dexterity and an expression of the worker's will to increase his performance. Both in Italy and France, I observed that workers adopt also small variations from prescribed work. These are invisible to the eyes of management, for instance if an item is damaged, but in the next bin there is another copy in good condition, the worker can replace the damaged with the good one. In this way, the picker does not have to follow the procedure for damaged items. However, what is common to these transgressions, whether macro or microscopic, is that they are not only the signs of workers' dexterity or autonomy (which anyway is already quite restricted and more remarkably than in the rest of the logistics industry) but also the symptoms of managerial pressures. One of the features of Amazon labour process that I observed both in Italy and France, is that workers' self-latitude is so limited by digital standardisation (the fact that the software allows a very limited

choice to the workers) that a very small niche remains for transgressions and in most of the cases transgressions occur because the worker wants to increase is productivity, especially if they are temps.

In some cases, the invitation to privilege productivity instead of a literal interpretation of safety rules comes from local management itself. It is the case of an area manager:

During the brief, as usual, the area manager asks the workers to mention a safety rules. “Do not overfill the tote, otherwise it is too heavy”, says a temp worker. “Correct”, he replies, “but above all”, he continues, “keep in mind that overfilling the tote increases the risk of blocking the conveyor... and anyway let’s try not to have half empty totes, which is not good either”.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 31 – MXP5, July 2019

It is interesting to remark the contradictions contained in this statement, and the different perspective by which workers and managers look at the organisation of work. When the workers signal the problem of too heavy totes, the manager agrees. Yet, he suggests that the problem is not so much the weight but the *volume* of the tote. From the point of view of management, if an over-charged tote is put on the conveyor, some items contained in the “tot” can exceed the limit of the container, and they can be tracked by a photocell (part of the safety system of the conveyor) that is programmed to stop the conveyor in order to avoid the fall of objects from the tote and from the conveyor. From the workers point of view, instead, the matter is a matter of *weight*, since a too heavy tote represent a higher risk of accident for the back of workers who must lift it up. Nonetheless, the recommendation of the manager emphasises the first aspect over the second one. On top of this, the manager also suggests “not to under-charge the tote”, thus implicitly stating that the actual priority of work organisation.

A similar observation can be done for what concerns quality. As I have already illustrated for the French case (see par. 5.1.4.1), when it comes to shipping commodities on time, then the hierarchy of norms, between productivity and quality is also reversed. When workers are put under pressure for making their rate and make them understand that their rate will decide whether they will confirm on the job, it is inevitable that they will privilege productivity at cost of jeopardising their safety and their quality performance.

The problem for management is that a deterioration of quality and (more indirectly) of safety, risks to badly affects productivity. Too many errors of inventory can significantly slow down the workflow. This requires to allocate more people to problem solving and inventory tasks, which are considered “non-productive” since they are unrelated to the fulfilment of customer orders. This entails in turn an increase in the cost of operations. Therefore, productivity is de facto the top priority. Quality

problems can be tolerated for a certain span of time, because the company treats so many volumes that errors are spread over the massive volume of operations across the whole network.

However, on the long run, this form of satisficing can be harmful and must be contained. An increase in working rhythms, especially during peaks, when the warehouse is particularly crowded of temps working at full speed to make their rate, can result in a peak of accidents which in turns slows down production too and increases labour costs for the company. In this case, management has to balance the imperative of productivity with the need to maintain a minimum level of quality and safety. The result is that, periodically, management tries to establish order in the floor. Workers receives blames and sanctions for micro-violations of safety rules, or they are “audited”, i.e. asked to give explanations, for inventory errors²⁴⁵. At the same time, management does not renounce to pressure workers on productivity, focusing especially on temp workers.

In fact, sanctions can be completely arbitrary, since workers are caught in between on the one hand, the injunction to productivity, and, on the other hand, safety and quality rule. This is a contradiction that originates from the distinct pressures of Amazon labour process: the impulse to productivity in order to ship as many items as possible vs the need to keep inventory in order as much as possible. Yet, pressures are inevitably transferred on the workers. Workers have to face the dilemma: either they respect literally the procedures, or they increase their productivity. They can choose one between the two, but they have no guarantee that they will not be sanctioned.

6.1.4.2. Coping with managerial discretion: workers in front of satisficing

Like their French colleagues, Italian workers are aware of the contradiction between these injunctions, and explicitly remark it. The most controversial problem that they emphasise is the question of opacity of the system of rules, even if this could appear paradoxical given that all the rules are written and public. The question is that the rules are *de facto* not always compatible, and it is a decision of management, according to the conjuncture of the moment, whether one should prevail on the other or the other way around. In any case, the rationale of the decision n45 remains obscure to the workers, who all they can do is to conjecture about it. This is what Diego alluded to in excerpt N., when he said: “the work is not as standardized as they say. There is a lot of adjusting, arrangements”. I realise that workers constantly speculate on the reason why and how things happen in the warehouse. In this excerpt, for instance, temp workers debate about the criteria of assessment that could determine the duration of their assignment:

²⁴⁵ Thanks to digital devices used by workers, management is able to identify the source of most of the inventory errors, for example the stower who stowed an “extra” article in a case, or a picker who did not pick all the items required by the algorithms.

Before work, I take the time for a coffee. It is Sunday afternoon, and the canteen is closed, so I queue up at the coffee dispenser with a bunch of temp colleagues. The discussion turns toward the issue of individual productivity. Is it the key to get a contract renewal? How is it assessed? “Nobody tells you if you are doing good or bad, in fact...”, says a young female temp from Romania, “you have to understand on your own”. Then she adds that there are managers who are not clear about the productivity target: “One day you get a manager who tells you are doing fine, then another comes and tells you can do better...”. “Who knows”, adds another worker.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 32 – MXP5, July 2019

Opacity gives rise to a whole corpus of “metropolitan legends” on the functioning of algorithmic processes and their impact on the workers. During work I often had the occasion to discuss with other workers, permanent and temps, about the organisation of work or the system of recruiting. Everyone has their own theory to explain “how it works actually”, but it is difficult to discern rumour from reality:

At the end of the shift, I meet some colleagues and among them Mario [a temp worker born and raised in the area. He is about thirty years old and before getting an assignment at Amazon worked as a freelance solar panels broker. He is short and he wears Woody-Allen-like glasses and grey hair. He shows a sly smile on his face]. At one moment, when we are alone, he questions me:

“What about you? You never ask about contract renewals... you look so calm”.

“I am just shy”, I say, but I seize the opportunity to make some questions about how management decides who is going to remain and who is going to be terminated.

“But I've heard stories of any kind on this issue... When I finish work, I sit outside and stop for a cigarette: there the fun begins ... you listen to all the conspiracy of Amazon employees ... you hear all kinds of shit! Now for example my girlfriend has gone blue (permanent)...and here comes this guy, Floriano, the manager, telling her that he insisted on having her on his team etc... while last week he said he had no say in the matter.... !!”

“So how does it work?”, I say.

“It works like that: everything depends on the agreements between the company and the agencies to decide how many people to hire... it's crazy... And managers have no say in the matter. They profile the workers with all the information they need and then they send it to HR, which is four people sitting locked in offices, playing darts with the names... ‘you: yea; you: nay; you: nay; you: yea’... I've seen colleagues busting their asses working, making 130 pieces an hour, doing all the processes... oh! They all have been left at home... But then, you know that agencies get compensation for each person hired, yes! They get compensation and a fee.... It is a waste and at this point was better the old public job placement...”

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 33 – MXP5, August 2015

This, as well as other episodes observed at work, reveals the discretionary power of algorithmic bureaucracy. This specific excerpt illustrates very well the opacity of the system of worker evaluation

and also of the system of recruitment. This opacity is not the result of fate but of the organisational structure of the workplace, where, despite the hypertrophy of rules and organigrams, routines regularly deviate from formal prescriptions. The logics underlying the decisions of management appears as fuzzy and confused to the eye of workers, and this participate to the reproduction of the relation of domination between management and the workers. If the rules on job prolongation of the assignment are not clear, then this increases the latitude of management, because management will be unaccountable; if there is no clear rule on the actual enforcement of productivity, quality, and safety standards, then management will have large discretion in enforcing these rules.

Indeed, satisficing has a broader effect not only on the vertical relationship between management and the workers. Opacity also governs the horizontal relations between workers, in the labour process and, more broadly in the daily life of the warehouse. Two examples can be mentioned in this respect.

First, there is the diffusion of rumours among workers. In the warehouse, or during free time meeting with colleagues, it is very easy to hear about “secret stories”. They concern sex, corruption, theft, any type of plot. The warehouse is a place of transit of commodities, where apparently everything is tracked. Yet, from these stories emerges another reality, made of countless little daily plots, committed in the backdrop of a workplace too big for following them all. The dimension of warehouse changes when we change the scale. A pallet of bottles of perfume that disappears without a trace can be negligible for a worldwide multinational that ships millions of items every day, but it means a lot for a worker that sees it vanishing with the secret cooperation of a few persons. Rumours are also the effects (and the source at the same time) of the formal and informal division of work inside the warehouse. During an aperitivo with some blue-badge colleagues, one referred to a former manager in the warehouse, who moved to the close MXP8 sortation centre: “When he moved, he brought with him all his fellows and he said: “I will promote them all and give them good jobs to all the members of my’. Another worker agreed and then criticised another “group” in the warehouse, the forklift drivers: “I call them ‘the Barons’... they are always there, sitting on their engines... they are paid like us but they think they are better than us, because they do not run with a picking cart... but their job is not so good as they think, it is dangerous, you have always to check your list...”. These forms of distinction across the workforce – distinctions that in most of the cases do not even imply differential in salary or classification; rather, they are coupled with various forms of symbolic remuneration (the fact of driving an engine for instance, or of having a radio) – contribute to the political fragmentation of the workforce.

Second, the minority of jobs whose tasks have not been subject to algorithmic control constitute niches where informal exchanges between workers can take place. I saw this in France, where the

workers that distribute the stow carts to the stowers are not monitored by digital devices in executing this task. This affords them a certain self-latitude in distributing carts according to their personal preferences – for instance save for friend stowers the best carts, such as those with many small items of the same type that are very easy to stow compared to large and single items – instead of assigning them according to the FIFO rule (first-in-first-out). These practices contributed to the establishment of exclusive horizontal solidarity and to the creation of *cliques*. Management oscillated. On the one hand, managers tolerated these deviant practices, because it was a way to give some latitude to the workers; on the other hand, stowers excluded from these practices complained about the situation, so periodically, managers intervened to establish formal rules, scolding the concerned workers and threatening suspensions or terminations. In Italy, such informal practice was even more circumscribed because, as we saw, the introduction of the double conveyor replaced most of the work of distribution of stow carts. However, even in the remaining niches, certain workers developed forms of informal deviation from the standard:

After work, I drive home with Maurizio, my temporary colleague at the pick, an Italian in his 50s who lost his job as a surveyor before joining Amazon, and with three stowers I didn't know: an Egyptian, an Indian and an Afghan. Sitting next to the Indian, I have a conversation with him. He explains to me that the unloaders (those who unload part of the incoming goods from the conveyor and prepare the stow carts and then pass them to the stowers) sometimes give preferences. “Alright, OK, I say, but you must not push it too far otherwise you create conflicts”. So, according to him, it is legitimate to respect informal affinity criteria instead of treating all colleagues the same way – “you have to help each other among friends”, he says – but there must be limits. “For example, if there is the Albanian woman who is a bit old, it’s OK, you can help her... but it’s not fair that the loader, just because he’s Albanian, passes the best carts to the Albanians. If you are young you must work like everyone else”.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 34 – MXP5, July 2019

The excerpt presents, first, a workplace where the workforce is divided not only between blue-badge and green-badge, but also across ethnicity, and sometimes kinship, lines. Second, it shows how these groups can compete between them for the allocation of the (indeed very meagre) organisational resources available to the workers. This contributes further to the recomposition of the individuals in groups but also reproduce the political fragmentation of the work collective.

The examples mentioned above illustrate, on the one hand, how the contradictions of the labour process produce uncertainty for the workers, which are taken in between contradictory injunctions exposing them to managerial repression. Opacity, in Amazon’s workplace, do not seem to generate worker autonomy. Where, on the other hand, worker autonomy appears, as in the last example, it is

fragmented and divided between informal groups in competition between themselves. In both cases, the result is the political fragmentation of the workforce in the labour process.

Most of the literature on digital taylorism, algorithmic management, and Amazon, including my research, emphasises correctly the power of standardisation and constant monitoring (Delfanti 2021a; Massimo 2019; Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2021; Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova 2022; T. L. Lee et al. 2022; Kassem 2023). Opacity concerns not only the enforcement of work procedures but also the algorithmic processes in itself, the informatic code that runs the fluxes in the warehouse, connect it to rest of the logistics network, and finally hook it up to the website. Algorithms are a black box for the workers, even if they work with them every day. The relation is unilateral: the algorithms monitor the workers, but the workers do not know almost anything about them. Workers do not know precisely how they work, and they are just trained to execute and input very simple information during the execution of the task; only a minority of them (problem solvers and process guides) have a certain space of interaction with the software, for instance the possibility of manipulating inventory; management on the other hand does not take care of explaining the functioning to workers; indeed, it is likely that algorithmic codes and the elements of their equations remain something obscure even for local management. The result is opacity in the relations between managers and workers which is not an accident but a support of managerial domination²⁴⁶. Direct and prolonged observations of the workplace, in Italy but also in France, reveals a complementary reality. In the highly bureaucratised context of Amazon labour process, with its hypertrophy of unilateral and contradictory rules and procedures, managerial discretion finds itself reduced by centralisation but also enhanced *vis-à-vis* the workers, for managers are conferred niches of discretionary power to apply one rule instead of another. Workers, have in turn their niches of autonomy – even though only on some tasks and very narrow indeed. We are far from the extended mechanisms of competition described by “classic” authors such as Donald Roy’s “goldbricking” (1952a) or Michael Burawoy’s “making out” (1979a)²⁴⁷.

The analysis carried out in Chapters 5 and 6 reveals that the hold of technical coercion in Amazon’s workplace has become much more solid and extended, thanks to digital devices and to managerial enforcement. Some niches exist, but they do not generate the same forms of extended cooperation. Managers use them to exert discretionary power over workers. Workers, in turn, have

²⁴⁶ As we have already said, it is important to remind that this discretion on the enforcement of rules allows proximity management to recover part of the power that it lost with the centralisation of control in Amazon logistics operation (see Chapter 1).

²⁴⁷ The common characteristics of these forms of quota restriction is that they are based on piecework. In Amazon, piecework does not exist because the labour process is based on the centralised coordination of workers effort. Effort must be elicited but always contained into the procedures of digital devices. Fostering individual effort through piecework risks to create disorder (in this regard, see the work of Burawoy, Crozier etc. mentioned in the introduction to Part II).

very narrow niches and, eventually it emerges how they use them to improve their individual productivity (or those of their informal groups).

6.1.5. The limits of Amazon's corporate ideology and workers' critique

We have observed so far how in the Italian workplace, once abandoned the start-up labour regime (Chapter 4), the mobilisation of workers effort is secured through technical coercion which is enforced by managerial direct supervision. In addition, workers, especially temps, are subject to the contradictory pressures of Amazon's labour process. These contradictions increase managerial discretion in parallel with workers' exposure to sanctions.

Workers are aware of these contradictions and the tensions they produce. Those whom I met in the workplace develop their own critique. The diffusion of rumours about how things go on in the workplace are also part of this critique since they express distance from the processes of decision-making in the workplace. Workers emphasise precisely the opacity of the labour process, the functioning of algorithms and the way management enforces the rules.

These tensions, due to the transition from the start-up to the bureaucratised labour regime, prompted workers overt protest (a protest that would be progressively domesticated as we will see in Chapter 8). The taylorisation of the labour process, with the narrowing of workers space of autonomy and the erosion of the relations between management and the employees, questioned Amazon's capacity to secure workers effort without creating labour unrest.

Until the strike, the company had been able to successfully deploy its corporate ideology and human resource practices, to mobilise worker effort. In the new labour process, on the one hand worker effort could be secured through technical coercion, thus making Amazon "humanising" discourse and practices redundant. On the other hand, it undermined their very viability.

In fact, the company continues to support humanising practices. Like in France, there was a variety of devices for involving the workforce in the labour process. There is the Kaizen, which in Amazon is the possibility for a worker to suggest improvement of the work process. Tables are placed at the entrance of the floor, where individual workers can write their suggestion and then management is expected to give feedback. There is the Gemba walk, a periodical visit of the site's general manager in the workplace to listen to workers, possible complaints and announce that any possible improvement will be done. Finally, there is, the so-called Amazon connection/Voice of Associates, that we have already mentioned in France: a centralised survey that Amazon administers every day to its employees all over the world: at every shift, workers login and before starting their job are asked a couple of questions on how they feel at work, if they are happy, if there are some reasons for discontent etc. Answers are anonymous, the software promises, and they are treated centrally by

corporate offices to monitor the state of workers morale in each site. All this is carefully showed to the public and to the visitors. The company carefully shows the devices of workers involvement that, it pretends, allow Amazon to be such an amazing workplace: during visits, Amazon’s spokespersons show proudly the boards where workers can write their suggestion, the *gemba* board. For instance, in the toilet, the company place small posters every month where management give an account of the improvement made in the workplace thanks to workers suggestions. Another example, when I visited another warehouse, a new robotic one in northern Italy, I saw that the company had replaced the old table with a flamboyant computer station where workers could insert their comments and suggestions:



Figure 55 – The “voice of associate” station in a robotic FC in northern Italy, where workers can provide their “ideas”

Source: fieldwork

As in France, the direct observation of workplace practices casts doubts on the effects of these measures on worker motivation. First, these forms of involvement are not unique. Toyotism and lean management have traditionally reckoned on “humanising” practices, with the goal of fostering employment involvement but with uncertain results (see Box 12).

Box 12 – Lean workplace practices between myths and reality

The introduction of lean paradigms was studied as early as the turn of the 85s and 90s and they produce mixed results (Vallas 1999). On the one hand, early surveys stressed the introduction of Employee Involvement (EI) programs in US workplaces; on the other hand, many case studies provided ambivalent interpretations.

Some scholars found appreciable increases in the level of discretion or control that workers exercised on their jobs (Zuboff 1988; Adler 1993; V. Smith 1996). However, Zuboff also reported middle managers reasserting their bureaucratic authority and Thomas found a mixed evidence (R. J. Thomas 1994).

Other surveys and case studies refused the expectation of post-Fordist flexibility paradigms: a review of the literature and evidence reported that “With respect to interorganizational relations, neither surveys nor case studies give any significant support to the idea that pyramidal hierarchies are replaced by looser networks” (Alvesson and Thompson 2006, 495; see also François and Lemercier 2021, 147–77).

Trends toward greater job discretion were not actually detected, hierarchical patterns were more tenacious than expected (Shaiken, Herzenberg, and Kuhn 1986; Kelley 1990; I. M. Taplin 1995; I. M. Taplin and Winterton 1995); even where teamwork was introduced, some studies showed how they implicitly enabled firms to maintain hierarchical patterns of authority (Grenier 1988; Graham 1995). Not only empirical evidence suggested the resilience of hierarchical patterns, but also their possible strengthening. Although in a more fragmentary way, scholars found increased centralisation (V. Smith 1990; Prechel 1994), in some cases by means of introduction of “post-Fordist” innovations such as Total Quality Management (Klein 1994; E. Appelbaum and Batt 1994). In a study of Bell operating company following the break-up of AT&T, Vallas (1993) talks about “algorithmic” forms of control (Vallas 1993). As suggested by Appelbaum and Batt, an American version of “lean management” was spreading that maintained a deeply hierarchical framework, quantification of indicators and production standards that constraint discretionary power of work methods. Besides the issue of control, a marked increase in work intensification occurred over the last thirty-plus years across sectors and occupations (V. Smith 1997; Green 2007; Crowley et al. 2010), also beyond the scope of diffusion of lean production.

Second, it was precisely the increase of technical coercion that made these programs quite ineffective. As we have illustrated in Chapter 2, Amazon adopted lean organisational principles already in the global restructuring of the early 2000s. Together with the organisational principles, lean management emphasised the importance of favouring workers mobilisation in the production process. To achieve these goals, “employment involvement” (EI) initiatives were recommended, such as quality control circles, safety committees, open communication, structures suggestion systems, employee problem-solving task forces, continuous improvement teams, suggestion box, and the like. Amazon adopted many of these devices, as we saw, blending them with a strong anti-union ideology that the company imported from the Wall Street-background of Bezos, the Californian ideology of internet economy and the Walmart background of many Amazon’s logistics executives. What was typical of Amazon was precisely the combination of these different stream, that all aimed at the same goal: mobilising worker effort through new mechanisms. As explained by a manager during a visit in an Italian robotic FCs, the “Voice of the Associate survey tells us how much employees are committed, it gives an overview of the extent to which an employee is engaged”²⁴⁸.

²⁴⁸ Visit to an Italian FCs, January 2023.

In fact, in the new context of algorithmic bureaucracy, evidence suggests that this commitment is not a priority. As the organisation of the labour process becomes more and more standardised and centralised, the scope of adaptation becomes increasingly narrow. During my four-month ethnography of work in the Italian site, for example, I have never observed a *gemba walk*. The voice of associate survey was dismissed as useless by most workers, and at one point I started considering just a routine task that I had to comply with before the beginning of the shift. It is interesting to notice instead, that the survey was more a way to centralise the monitoring of workers attitude from the local level to the corporate level; in other words, the survey produced metrics through which central management evaluated local managements. For many of my co-workers, the voice of associate or the suggestion box were just a question of appearances, with no substantial impact on their work experience. It is “just a scam”, as Diego puts it bluntly. Like in France, only a minority of workers takes the time to make suggestions. Workers reckon that only marginal proposal, those that do not really touch at the essential mechanism of the work process are going to be accepted.

If the margins of departure from the standard model are narrow, why does Amazon not cease to require workers’ propositions? In fact, while many of my co-workers, especially senior permanent workers, were disenchanted about it, this was not necessarily the case of other workers. A former team leader that I interviewed – someone who had left the company in very bad terms, unhappy because he did not obtain the promotion they had promised to him – recognised that these practices had some valences. According to him, EI practices can have effects on the morale of certain workers:

Certainly you will already imagine, but what I can tell you is that from a psychological point of view this stuff is perceived as incredibly cool, because being the associate and having all the top management of your warehouse listening to you for 10 minutes, a quarter of an hour or more... listening to your complaints [he is talking about the *Gemba Walk*]: “Yes, it’s always cold here in the warehouse”, or “Yes, but why, instead of doing like this, we don’t do it this other way?”. In my opinion it means a lot, it makes you feel better... it’s a great implementation of that corporate culture of which we were talking about earlier... it makes you feel part of a team.

Fieldwork Quote 100 – Former Amazon worker, MXP3, man, Italian, ca. 30 years-old, 2-years seniority, Interview, September 2020

On the other, hand when it comes to dealing with substantive modifications, management becomes less open to adopt workers’ suggestions. The criterion, explains the team leader is always that the modification must be approved centrally and that it must not imply major costs:

If it is not possible to match the cost to some benefit, then unless it is a legal requirement (as it was also partially in this case), it's hard to believe that anybody will do anything.

Fieldwork Quote 101 – Former Amazon worker, MXP3, man, Italian, ca. 30 years-old, 2-years seniority, Interview, September 2020

In France, workers (and union delegates) proposed modification in the organisation of shelves that protected workers' health, reducing the time they had to spend in dangerous positions (Chapter 8). Unions had to engage a juridical battle against management to obtain, only in part, the modification proposed. Even more interestingly, the improvement passed through union action and not through the one-to-one approach supported by Amazon.

In Italy, we did not find any evidence of similar dynamics – something that deserves to be discussed and that I analysed in Part III – except during the pandemic, when union delegates made proposition to re-organise the work process in order to reduce the risk of contagion. The requests implied a temporary reduction of volumes and working rhythms, something that management deemed out of question. The excerpt above (Fieldwork Quote 101) suggests that Amazon insists on deploying EI practices not so much to improve the work process per se – because improvements are subject to increasing centralisation and economic imperatives – but to persuade at least part of the workforce of how much the company cares about them. In fact, most of the practices are just rhetorical and ritual. The ritualistic dimension of Amazon HR practices emerges also in rituals such as the “All Hands” or the warming up at the beginning of a shift. I took part to an All Hands during my ethnography in Italy. Like in France, workers stopped working for half an hour, were gathered in the hall of the FCs and listened to the discourse of the General Manager. As I wrote on my journal:

All hands. The General Manager gives a speech in front of hundreds of workers. We stand in front of them, but most of my co-workers do not seem particularly interested. I mention the importance safety rules in the workplace and then he reminds that cars must be parked correctly, with the front ahead. Then he explains that Amazon invested some thousands of euros to renew the floor – “He could give us a wage increase, instead”, comments Adriano, a co-worker. The list continues: the managers explains that also this year it is possible to apply for the Offer and Career Choice programs. Then he makes a very short report on Kaizen: “I want to thank the workers who proposed to place some padding at the bottom of the chutes of the conveyor, so as to reduce the risk of damaging the items to ship”. The he asks if there are some questions. A worker ask to come back to the previous work time, i.e. starting and finishing 30 minutes earlier [see Chapter 6 for a discussion of this crucial topic]. It is an embarrassing question, because the crowds murmurs and many agree with the colleague. “Unfortunately, I am afraid it is not possible”, explains the GM, “Should we bring back work time by 30 minutes, we would run short of people between 8pm and 12am... in that case we should force you all to work night shift, and it seems clear to me that you do not want this”. “Sur enough” comments Jacopo deceived, “now back to work and make history!”.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 35 – MXP5, July 2019

We are far from the image of the company that uses its gatherings to motivate the workforce. Here what emerges is rather a form of conflict domestication, with a worker expressing a claim and the general manager dismissing it. These considerations are all the more relevant in the case of other “cheaper” practices such as the distribution of candies and banana during the peak. They are despised by most workers, which usually talk about them outrageously.

As stressed in Vallas’ discussion on EI practices in the 1990s, “employee involvement programs have spread rapidly, but only rarely seem to lead to structural change in jobs or organizations. Indeed, the use of EI or team systems seems either largely confined to rhetorical significance, or else subordinated to the thrust for greater production quality” (Vallas 1999, 87). In light of our findings, I could add to this consideration that another important aspect of EI, at least in Amazon, do at the same time less and more than what EI are expected to do. They do not seem able to mobilise worker effort, but they do something more: they offer workers good reasons to accept their conditions. This will emerge even more clearly through the analysis of Amazon internal labour market. Before diving into it, however, I shall conclude the analyses of the labour process in Italy showing the major specificity of it compared to France: a non-contentious politics around the enforcement of technical control.

6.1.6. The non-contentious enforcement of technical control in Italy

I wrote earlier in this chapter that, once in the warehouse, it is quite obvious to find similarities in the work process between the French and the Italian case. We have already seen in chapters 1 and 2 how the organization of work is dependent on the decisions taken centrally in Amazon’s headquarters. The labour process is very similar. The contradictions are very similar too. The divergence between productivity, on the one hand, and health and safety (and, to a certain extent, quality), on the other hand; the higher vulnerability of temp workers to managerial pressure (something that I will delve into in the next session of the chapter); the role of management in enforcing technical coercion. Workers (mis)behaviour also follows similar patterns. In the workplace I found forms of misbehaviour that I also detected in France. The most evident case is the low-intensity war on working time. It happened quite frequently during my assignment that, at the end of their shift, workers stopped working some minutes before, went to the ground floor of the picktower, there queued up and waited their turn to clock out. More experimented workers knew the shortest way to reach the clock card machine. I remember one day my co-worker Diego, a veteran permanent worker, leading me through the aisles in order to get to the clock card machine earlier than our colleagues so as we could be the first to leave. Sometimes, a few minutes before the end of the shift, there could be a couple of dozens of workers (the vast majority blue-badge) gathered around the machine, waiting idly that the clock marked the end of the shift. As in France (see Box 18),

(mis)behaviour in the labour process could take overt, but usually individual, forms. A similar episode was reported by Adriano, a worker who was also a union member. During the first phase he had been a loyalist, very involved and motivated; in the second phase it turned into dissenter and active union member. He liked telling me how he deliberately slowed down his work pace in front of his manager. Another worker, Massimiliano, also boasted about his ability to intimidate young managers when he got nervous. I did not observe these behaviours directly, so there is also the possibility that these stories were made up to impress me. However, some of these senior workers were well-known among their co-workers for being particularly hostile to management. All these accounts of insubordination reflect the deception of many veteran workers toward the company but suggests also that permanent workers had a certain agency, on some occasions, to overtly resist management. This agency was largely outside the reach of temp workers, who were more vulnerable and also more hopeful to improve their condition.

What puzzled me the most, however, was not the existence of overt resistance but the fact that management seemed to ignore or tolerate such behaviours. What changes, in Italy in comparison with France, is the way how management enforces this coercion. For instance, when the workers assembled at the punching machines, managers did not sanction such a behaviour. In France, instead, managers tried to repress it by literally patrolling the shop-floor and threatening the workers.

There are other examples of this different attitude. If readers recall the discussion I had with Carla, the instructor, they should remember the discussion we had on work (Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 28). The instructor said that for a short time management had been avoiding talking about productivity. This was only partially true, since temp workers received individual feedback about their productivity and continued being exhorted to increase their effort. Temps, on their part, accomplished with these requests. Carla's discourse was true for permanents, who adopted a much slower working rhythm. However, it was true that management did not insist on productivity during the brief. In France, we saw it, the team leaders displayed the team-level productivity rate and pushed all the team to increase their effort. In Italy, most of the times, managers just reminded safety rules, announced the total number of items to ship but did not show any graph. Similarly, management did not insist on ToT (time-off-task), while in France management did it constantly.

In sum, management's enforcement of technical coercion was less aggressive and managers less eager to exert their own authority on the workers. This passed through tolerance of evident misbehaviours but also through micro statements and sentences that I heard during my observations. Another day, for instance, during a brief, a team leader, who was well-known for his sarcasm, made a curious statement. As usual, he asked workers to mention a safety rule. "Do not run!", replied one worker. "Well... nobody runs here, there is not such a risk in this place...", he replied with contempt

and irony at the same time. The team leader was suggesting that most workers used to slack off very often. In fact, as I have already recollected, I found myself very often working fast in order to get my rate (sometimes also to avoid boringness, see Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 28). During my shifts, I regularly received the visit of instructors, who informed me about my productivity rates. Most temp workers, including me, speeded up under the pressure. The statement of the team lead above reflected more a state of mind, and it hinted at the fact that probably there was a category that was more relaxed, and they were permanent workers. This could be noticed easily if one spent some time in the aisles. In any case, the excerpt shows that management in Italy seemed much less obsessed and eager to impose its authority on the workers.

When I told some senior co-workers about the discussion with the instructor (Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 28), they commented that it was because of the strike. Since the strike some things had changed, or at least, they had this impression. The countdown had been withdrawn, and there was less pressure, perhaps also because of media attention. Evidence I collected, however, did not match with this account: first, the abolition of the countdown had been decided at the global level, not because a strike had taken place in Italy; second, for temps, pressures remained high; third, the strike, as we will see in Chapter 8, was certainly a ground-breaking event in workplace politics, but the mobilisation was domesticated quite easily and, more importantly, more easily than in France, where union conflict is endemic.

Contrary to the appearance, management's attitude is more relaxed not because management felt the pressure of unions or of worker mobilisation. Quite the opposite, I would argue that the reason why management enforces technical coercion less aggressively is double. First, economic coercion in the labour market was stronger in Italy. Italian workers were less protected in the local and internal labour market. In other words, if we compare working conditions within the local labour market, the situation becomes comprehensible. Second, as what seems to change is not so much the form of workers resistance in the labour process – which are quite the same – but the attitude of Amazon's management. My hypothesis is that management's attitude to worker resistance in the workplace is shaped by the level of threat represented by union action and by the confidence that management has in the possibility of politically demobilise the workforce. Therefore, in order to understand the capacity of management to demobilise, we are going to observe (in the following section) the role of economic coercion, which is influenced by the local specificities of the labour market in Italy; then, in the following chapter, we will investigate the role of unions and the institutions of industrial relations in shaping labour politics in the Italian and French workplaces.

6.2. *Internal and external labour market. The politics of economic coercion in Italy*

From the account of the labour process and of the politics of technical coercion presented above some particularities emerge. First, like in France, temp workers are the most exposed to managerial pressure because of their precarious status of employment. Second, the enforcement of control seems looser than in France, at least as the instructor describes it to temporary workers like me. How is that possible than that this difference in the enforcement of technical coercion does not result in an evident reduction of worker effort?

The answer rests on the specific dynamics of the internal labour market in the Italian case. The first is that technical coercion is compounded by economic coercion: the dualisation of the internal labour market operates as a device of economic coercion, resulting in the mobilisation of workers effort. Permanent workers instead, who benefit from a certain employment security, are less exposed to this mechanism (management copes with this problem by favouring turnover, even if without salient results, see par. 5.2.4). The specificity of the Italian case, in comparison to France, is the economic vulnerability of temps which is stronger in Italy: working opportunities in the rest of the logistics labour market offer lower wages and no employment security, as showed by several studies on the logistics sector (Mento and Violante 2015; Benvegnù 2018; Fana and Massimo 2019). Consequently, the reverse efficiency wage of working for Amazon is higher in Italy.

This makes the temporary workforce in the Italian warehouse more exposed to managerial pressure than its French counterpart. This economic constraint on workers, however, like technical coercion, does not operate mechanically but needs to be enforced in workplace politics.

6.2.1. *A dualised internal labour market*

In Amazon's Italian warehouses, the interaction between the company's policies and the local regulation of labour gives to the internal labour market a shape which is like the French one.

Amazon internal labour market is organised on two tiers²⁴⁹. First, there is a "core" of permanent workers, usually full-time but also a significant number of part-time, employees; second, there is a "periphery" of temporary workers recruited when sales forecasts require an injection of workforce in surplus for a certain period.

²⁴⁹ Unfortunately, it was not possible to access firm- and warehouse-level data on the use of temporary workers in the same abundance of the French case. Differently from France, the regulation of employment relations provides right of information for the workers but does not provide concrete instruments for the enforcement of these rights. At Amazon, in particular, there are two factors that contribute to this situation. On the one hand, the employer is, quite unsurprisingly, reluctant to provide worker representative with data. On the other hand, unions and worker representative do not seem to have much interest, or the institutional resources, in the matter. Both union officials and most worker representatives do not consider access to these data a priority. Therefore, for this chapter I can rely on the few data I was able to collect in the fieldwork, as well as those accessed indirectly through various public and private database, the press, or personal counting.

In the FC of Piacenza, Amazon permanent workforce grew steadily between 2011 and 2017. However, since 2017, the number of employees with an open-ended contract remained stable on about 1.600 units, while Amazon started expanding its Italian network (Figure 53).

What is the proportion of temporary workers? It is hard to make estimations, let alone to give an exact figure. First, because the discontinuous nature of temporary work makes the measurement more difficult. Second, as I have already explained, there are no exhaustive figures on the quantity of temp workers over the years, for the company avoids revealing such data to the unions and unions seem not particularly able to enforce their information rights. As the head of the UGL union, told me during an interview, “We have problems with this issue... they [Amazon] do not give us numbers about temp workers... in the past, employers used to be obliged to notify the unions of temporary contracts, but after the Jobs Act the only constraint is to give the total number once a year”²⁵⁰. During my fieldwork in Piacenza between 2018 and 2019 I was able to collect data on the number of temporary work contracts activated in the MXP5 FC only for the year 2018.

As in the French case, data shows two peaks: a moderate one in summer, during the Prime Day, and a sharp one in winter, when the Black Friday and the Holiday boost Amazon’s sales.

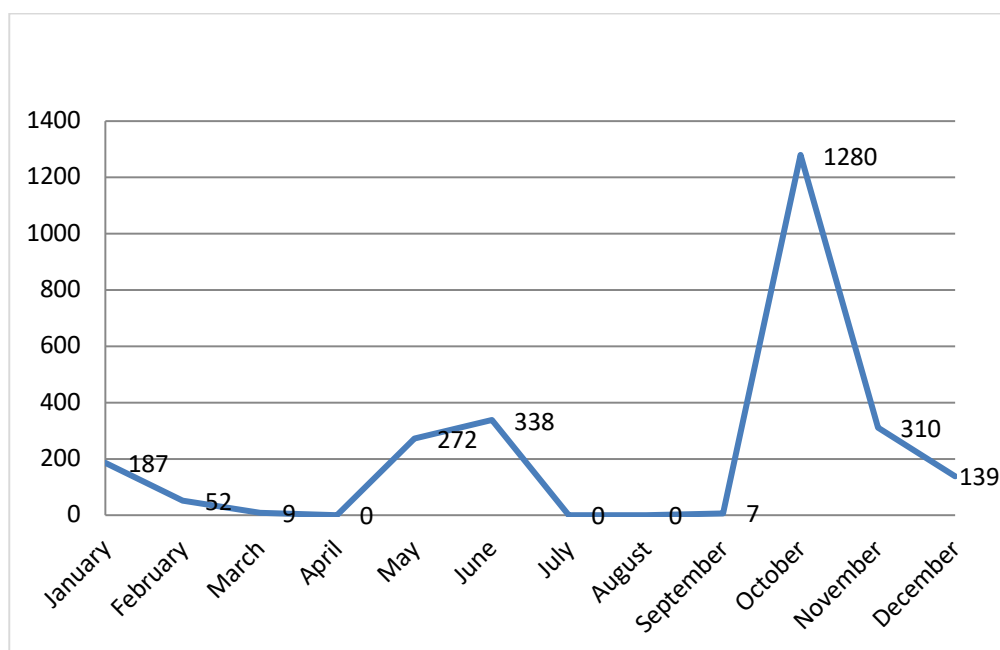


Figure 56 – Number of agency work positions opened monthly at Amazon’s MXP5 plant (2018)

Source: Author’s calculation on internal documents

From this figure (Figure 56), we can estimate the proportion of temporary workers on the whole of the workforce during the winter peak quarter (October-December). Between May and December,

²⁵⁰ Interview, with Head of the local branch of UGL commerce branch, Piacenza, January 2019.

2.339 temporary work contracts were recruited at the warehouse, but we can assume that half of the contracts activated in May and June (610) were interrupted later in the year either for termination or for resignation (-505). If we consider that in 2018 the warehouse had about 1.600 permanent employees, then we could estimate that, by the end of the year, temporary workers (n. 1.834) represented over 50% of the workforce²⁵¹. For what concerns the rest of the network I rely on data on the recruitment of temporary workers during 2019: it emerges that in the majority of Amazon Italia Transport's facilities (Amazon's subsidiary for sortation centres and delivery stations), almost 100% of the temporary workforce is composed by "disadvantaged workers".

6.2.1.1. *The (non)compliance with the regulation of temporary work*

What is interesting about these numbers, however, is that they raise the question of Amazon's compliance with the rules that frame the use of temporary work in Italy, in particular for what concerns the allowed proportion of temporary work contracts over the whole workforce of a company. The prevision of the Italian labour law is that, unless otherwise provided in the sectoral collective agreement (that applied by the client-company), the total number of temporary and fixed-term workers employed by the client-company cannot exceed 30% of permanent workers (hired by January 1st of the year considered). However, there is a clause that excludes from the count all agency workers who were unemployed (for at least six months) and/or belonging to the broad category of "disadvantaged" workers (see Box 11). Thanks to this clause, the company is able to inflate the ranks of its temporary workers well beyond the standard threshold of 30% of the permanent workers²⁵².

Indeed, it seems from these figures that, during the peaks, the number of temporary workers exceed the legal threshold. This hypothesis was confirmed by an inquiry of the National Labour Inspectorate carried out in 2018 (*Ispettorato del lavoro*, INL). On December 7th, 2017, at the peak of Amazon's winter season and just two weeks after the first strike in an Italian warehouse, officers of the INL inspected the warehouse of Piacenza and collected information on the recruitment of temporary workers (*La Repubblica* 2017; *Il Sole 24 Ore* 2017). Six months later, in June 2018, the INL announced on the press, and on its Twitter page, the conclusions of the investigation (*Il Fatto Quotidiano* 2018; *Il Sole 24 Ore* 2018; *Wired Italia* 2019)²⁵³. Between July and December 2017, Amazon was allowed to recruit 444 temporary workers. Instead, it had abusively contracted 1.308 workers under such assignments (later revised upwards at 1.951) (*Libertà* 2018). The INL also announced that, in court, those workers could be considered eligible for a mandatory open-ended

²⁵¹ There is no data available for the previous or following years. However, drawing on the state of the knowledge that scholarship has built about Amazon, this figure does not seem to be an outlier.

²⁵² We will see in Chapter 8 that Italian unions do not question this practice.

²⁵³ https://twitter.com/INL_gov/status/1005045791218692096.

contract. The company disagreed with the conclusions of the INL and criticised its estimates (stating that all the workers had been contracted within the legal threshold, including the so-called “disadvantaged”), but 245 former temporary workers, most of them helped by the unions, almost immediately filed individual suits against Amazon claiming their right to be hired with permanent contracts (*Wired Italia* 2019a). Eventually, in July 2019, the judges (in Piacenza and Milan) dismissed the demands on the grounds that they had been filed beyond the legal delay (60 days after the contract expires)²⁵⁴. Nevertheless, the judges did not refute the substantial argument of the plaintiffs i.e. that the company was not fully compliant with the regulation of temporary work (*La Stampa* 2019; *Il Manifesto* 2019; *Wired Italia* 2019c). At the same time, the story showed the obstacles to the enforcement of temporary workers’ rights: first only a part of the temporary workers concerned by the investigation decided to file a lawsuit demanding an open-ended contract; second, those who filed a lawsuit were finally deceived by the decision of the judges, a judgement that proved one more time the difficulties for such a precarious and often misinformed workforce in enforcing their labour rights.

6.2.2. *The social characteristics of temp workers and their scarce mobility power*

But what do we know about the mass of temporary workers that Amazon seasonally recruits for its peaks? We do not have data necessary for an exhaustive sociography of temporary workers. Differently from France, where works councils have quite effective information rights, Italian worker representative fumble in the dark. As consequence I relied direct observation for gathering data. Therefore, when I had the opportunity during my participant observation, I counted and took notes (Peneff 1995). For instance, during the first day of training, I counted the members of my group. There 24 new recruits: 15 men, 9 women. Approximately a dozen of the recruits were non-white people: they looked like people from Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa and from Latin America. Of course, appearance does not necessarily correspond to nationality, but there are good chances that none of them held an Italian passport, even those who were born in Italy. Conversely, it is more likely that among white workers there were people from Eastern Europe or the Balkan region. Making all these kinds of assumption, I estimated the proportion of foreign migrant workers in about two thirds of the group. Finally, even among the Italians, only a part of them were “local” northerner people. Many were Italian migrant workers, coming from the regions of southern Italy, such as Sicily and Campania, to escape endemic unemployment. For example, during work at Amazon I met a couple of young Sicilian, a girl and a boy in their early twenties, that after a transition in central Italy had decided to move to Piacenza/Castel San Giovanni because they had been informed by friends that

²⁵⁴ Despite the fact, pointed out by unions’ lawyers, that workers realised the irregularity only after the INL’s investigation.

Amazon used to hire seasonal workers during peaks (I was not able to carry on an interview with them, however).

Temporary agencies have offices within the warehouse, in the village (Castel San Giovanni), and also in Piacenza and other towns in the closest provinces. This allows them to drain the workforce in an ever-growing geographical perimeter. “A friend of mine used to come to work every night from Bologna [2 hours by train and one hour walking on the main street from the rail station of Castel San Giovanni to the warehouse]”, told me Dylan, one of my gatekeepers, during a conversation.

In the workplace the situation was not different. Confidential data which I could look at shows that (permanent) workers from Castel San Giovanni and the nearby area were now [at 12.10.2018] a minority among the whole workforce (12%). By the fall of 2018, the main residence area was the rest of Piacenza’s province (17%) and, mostly, beyond the Po River, in the provinces of Pavia (33%) and other Lombard provinces (19%). Data for temps was not available, but we could estimate that the proportion of temps coming from farther territories is much higher. In my entourage of new temporary workers, there were three Italian and four foreigners. Among the Italian, two were from the city of Piacenza: Maurizio and Paolo. Maurizio was a former surveyor in his fifties. The firm where he used to work in Piacenza had just gone bankrupt and Maurizio had found himself unemployed. He found a temporary job at Amazon as a “disadvantaged” worker (see Box 11). He felt quite lost at work, as he was used to work in an office and did not expect to end up working in a warehouse at the twilight of his career. His goal was to get an open-ended contract and resist a couple of years, the time of getting enough contribution to retire. Paolo was a young man in his late twenties. I ignore what kind of education or training he had received. At time of his assignment at Amazon, he used to live with his parents. The third Italian of the group was Gesualdo, but he was not born in the area. He was over 50 years old, and he was born in the Apulia region (South-Eastern Italy) from a middle-class family, although he had been living in Lombardy (the bordering region, just across the Po River) for a decade. Before applying at Amazon, he had gone through a series of working-class jobs: baker in Milan, blue-collar worker in a rubber-plastic factory, security guard and truck driver. Like Maurizio, he applied for a job at Amazon because he needed two more years of social contributions in order to retire with a full pension. On the other hand, Amazon had an interest in hiring him because he was considered a “disadvantaged” worker. No one had ever been involved in union activities. All three were assigned to pick, with me. The remaining temporary workers of my training were all foreign immigrants. There was Emily, a 19 years-old girl, born in Ecuador but raised in Piacenza since her late infancy. Educated in a technical high school for tourism professions, she was looking for a seasonal job at Amazon. She was assigned to pack, a job which was more likely to be assigned to a woman. Then there was Marco, a Nigerian worker in his thirties. He had just arrived in Piacenza. He lived with a Sicilian girl in

Palermo (he spoke Sicilian with a perfect accent), and they had just had a baby together, but he had decided to move alone to Piacenza in order to find a job. Walter was another Nigerian worker in his late twenties. Before coming to Amazon, he was living and working in Genoa, in a small mechanic shop for cars. He left because his employer did not pay him a decent wage. Now he got a job and found a precarious accommodation in Castel San Giovanni, subletting a couch from a Moroccan worker. The day we met I was still looking for an accommodation and this is why I asked tips to him. He answered that the situation was difficult even for him: his “housemate” had told him to leave the apartment for a few days because his mother was coming to see him. Mamadou was from Mali. He was 19 years old. He would become one of the fastest pickers of my team. Finally, there was Abdoul, a migrant worker from Egypt, about 35 years old. None of these workers had a previous experience in a union.

To these temp workers we should add the group of veteran permanent workers, a sample of them I described in Chapter 4 (par. 4.2.3), who were mostly men (except two woman), mostly between their twenties and thirties (except one who was in his forties), all born and raised in the area between Piacenza (north-western Emilia-Romagna) and Pavia-Lodi (southern Lombardy). The only exceptions were Mike from Western Africa and Maria from Eastern Europe. Most of them were union members and sometimes shop-stewards (with CGIL or CISL) and they worked in pick, ICQA, vendor and stow departments.

These reversed proportions suggest that an evolution had taken place in the social composition of Amazon workers since the opening of the FC. In the first phase, Amazon’s workforce supply was mainly local. Since approximately 2014, with the progressive exhaustion of the local workforce pool, agencies enlarged the social and geographical limits of their pool. It is also significant that, among the few Italians in my group of temps, two out of three were classified as “disadvantaged” workers (see Box 11), which explains why agencies recruit them despite their old age. It is important to stress that this ethnicisation of the workforce took place while the working conditions in the warehouse underwent a process of taylorist degradation of work (see chapter 4). It is also worthwhile to remind that, since 2016-2017, the MXP5 warehouse had filled all its vacancies. Without a rapid increase of turnover, the chances for temporary workers of getting an open-ended contract have decreased significantly.

What are the strategies of temps in front of this narrowing of the possibilities for promotion? Recent comparative analysis on the labour market in the French and Italian logistics sector focused on labour mobility as a form of resistance (Benvegnù and Tranchant 2020; for a discussion on mobility power see, C. Smith 2006). From this viewpoint, labour mobility and turnover are intended

as non-confrontational resistance in the informal every-day bargaining between employees and management or, using Hirschman's categories, labour mobility is a form of exit (Hirschman 1970).

As we have already seen (par. 5.2.4), employers have an interest in retaining a part of the workforce, and, according to efficiency wage theorists, the constitution of internal labour markets serves precisely this purpose. On the other side, workers whose skills are scarce in the labour market can leverage on mobility to bargain better conditions. In the case of the French labour pool studied by Benvegnù and Tranchant, "the use of temporary work offers workers the opportunity to escape from the most degrading employment conditions on an individual basis" (2020, 54).

This interpretation of labour mobility is insightful but does not suit the findings of my fieldwork. Labour mobility exists in and out Amazon's pool of temporary workforce. Trajectories could be of very different kinds. For instance, in Piacenza, I met a couple of former temporary workers, foreign immigrants from Western francophone Africa. At the time of the interview, they worked in warehouse for a subcontracting cooperative of GLS in Piacenza. They were also members of the alternative left-wing union USB. Previously, they had spent three months as temps in Amazon's FC (in 2014) but finally their contract was not renewed. They claimed that they were doing better in their new jobs, where they felt less pressure and more latitude for their union activity:

At Amazon you don't talk, you listen to the music and that's it... you're fixed like a robot, here at GLS it's relaxed, you can joke around, go for a coffee, you know? But at Amazon, you get a 30-minute break and that's it... so it's a very hard job... and the people who work at Amazon, the temps... they're afraid to join the union... to fight. They don't have any ambition, they work for 3-4 months, then they go on unemployment, and when unemployment's over?

Fieldwork Quote 102 – Former Amazon (agency) worker, currently warehouse worker in a subcontracted cooperative, man, West African, 22 years-old, Piacenza, interview, February 2019.

Another former worker, that I met through personal links, a woman in her 30s, born and raised in the Piacenza area, had worked three months during summer 2015. She had just lost her job in a surveying office, as the daughter of the owner had been hired at her place. She applied for a seasonal job at Amazon and spent some months there as a receiver. Her account was also particularly critical. At the time of the interview, she no longer worked for Amazon, but she had found a temporary assignment as a teacher in a high school in Piacenza. I also met and interviewed other former Amazon workers who, by the time of the interview, had managed to find another job, either in the logistics (sometimes, but only in the case of team leaders and other qualified workers, leaving Amazon could result in a professional ascent) or in their field of election: from architecture to the local metal industry.

Two of my housemates in Castel San Giovanni, were in the local logistics workforce pool. One, Emilio, in his early thirties, was born in the area. After school, he started working in a local manufacturing company specialised in oil drilling equipment that its skilled workers installed in Nigeria as well as in Texas. Work was hard, specialised, and well-remunerated, especially missions abroad, but Emilio wanted to take a pause, spend some time doing electronic music and studying engineering at the university. So, he quitted, and worked for six months in the nearby Zalando warehouse, hired by a subcontracted cooperative. Then, he quitted, because for him it was only a temporary job to make an earning. At the time we met, he had been on unemployment checks for a few months, but he was considering applying for a seasonal job at Amazon for the next winter. The other one was Vassilis, in his mid-twenties, born and raised in the area by a Ukrainian immigrant mother. He had been working for Amazon for a few years and he had managed to get an open-ended contract. In the warehouse, he was not a workhorse. He was also a union member, at CISL, but was not particularly involved in union activism neither. He was a member “just for the bureaucracy services”, as he told me. In fact, his low involvement, whether at work or in the union, was echoed by his continuous research of an exit strategy from Amazon. He aimed for a job as bus driver in the local company of public transport. Finally, he left the warehouse, but he would find a job as forklift driver in a local manufacturing company.

There were many other stories which I heard about: in some rare cases, Amazon workers managed to make their way in more lucrative sectors (informatic programming, for instance); in the majority, however, they were not able to escape the lower ranks of the labour market, especially when they were immigrants (foreign or national). Labour mobility, mostly horizontal, is a reality difficult to overlook. Furthermore, in a company such as Amazon, workers are constantly in search for an alternative.

The question is that these strategies can be hardly considered as a form of resistance (they are indeed an *alternative* to resistance). On the contrary, they are part of the factors that lead to the political demobilisation of the workers while not affecting the actual effort of the workers. Why?

First, because the local logistics labour market is far from being favourable to workers. Not only for structural reasons, such as the high number of fixed-term contract and the generally bad employment and working conditions; but also for the specific employment policy of Amazon. On the company’s side, except a few blue-collar jobs with technical skills and experience, there is no need for retaining the workforce. Quite the contrary Amazon has in interest in fostering turnover – provided that exits do not exceed a physiologic rate, i.e. the employer’s capacity to replace those who quit with a new workforce – for its workforce tend to quickly wear itself, and the company needs to replace worn workers with new and motivated ones.

On the side of labour supply, the population of Amazon's temps is large enough to avoid any labour shortage. During peaks, the company hires hundreds of temps, but only a small part of them gets a permanent job, because since 2016 the warehouse has reached its full employment capacity. Thus, the current rates of quitting are not sufficient to generate enough vacancies for temps. So, as the peaks approach, the company can rely on a quite secure buffer of workforce, but most of it remains stuck in the secondary labour market.

From the point of view of management, and it would be great to replace more blue-badge workers at a higher pace. To boost workforce rotation, the company deploys its set of pro-turnover policies such as "Career choice" and "The Offer" (Box 10). What is interesting, however, about these policies is not only their ideological background, but also the concrete application of the programme and its effect on the political demobilisation of the workforce. Not only "the Offer" is supposed to prevent workers from opting for "voice", but it is the procedure in itself that puts the applicant in a position of dependence toward managers' discretion.

This is particularly true for the "Career choice" programme. Procedures can slightly vary across countries and through time, but the basics of the programme is that only blue-badge workers with a certain seniority (usually at least one year) are eligible; when they apply, they have to submit a project of professional training, but they have a limited choice among professions that are particularly demanded in the labour market (and that do not require a too long education)²⁵⁵. In Italy, where the programme was introduced in 2014, the main sectors of conversion were the logistics-transport and the administrative services sector. To those workers who opt for these professions, Amazon offers to pay up to 95% of the training fees to the workers (within a maximum amount). However, it is possible to apply for professions in other sectors. It is the case of Giulia, an Amazon worker and union member. By the time of our interview (January 2019) she had a badly injured knee, used by work at Amazon. She was planning to enrol a renowned school for bartender in Milan, become a professional bartender, quickly find a job thanks to the good reputation of the school, and finally leave Amazon. For a youngster coming from a single-salary working-class family, finding the money to pay the school (over € 4.000) was not obvious and she had to carefully plan her investments, even if many variables were out of her control. Furthermore, the training was not included in the list of professions eligible for career choice funding. In sum, she knew that she had to negotiate any form of support, including the possibility to reschedule her workdays in order to have the time to attend classes.

²⁵⁵ In this way, the company has a reputational dividend: Amazon can claim that it contributes to make the Italian labour market more flexible and competitive. At the same time, the company can eschew allegations of exhausting the workforce and then let them go without

Even workers who chose among eligible careers had to submit their plan to management. Management had the last word on the applications and were not held accountable for their decision in front of the worker.

Similarly, in the case of “the Offer”, there were usually two windows per year, during which a senior worker could apply for the exit bonus. Sometimes, extra windows were allowed to single workers through individual bargaining. This also increases the dependence of the individual workers on the specific relationship that they are able to establish with managers. Like in France, many of the workers interviewed usually complained about old-boy networking and relations of patronage between single manager and workers. This network of dependences made the single workers dependent on the discretion of managers in taking decisions that are crucial for their professional life in the everyday life (for instance, asking for a day off or making any arrangements on working time) as well at particular turning points (for example, when a worker plans to leave).

In this context, programmes such as “Career choice” and “The Offer”, that were conceived as instrument to facilitate turnover, turn out to be also leverages of managerial authority over workers, who very often feel that they have something to lose when it comes to confront their supervisors. As summarised by Stefania, whom I questioned about the claim of a union official (who said the overall Amazon workers were better off than other workers in the area):

Well, he [the union official] must understand that if elsewhere they go on strike there are entirely sacred reasons for doing so. Then it is true that we are better off in many respects. We are in a historical phase where if you go on strike you are told, “But how? You get your salary every month, and you go on strike too?” I know it is like that... But it’s also true that the level of consciousness and commitment of our colleagues here ... there are very few people who think consciously and collectively. I mean there are people here who are 30-40 years-old and they know that they’re going to have to stay in here for life ... they’re afraid. Because, if you mess up, then they start to complicate your life with vacations, with leaves, you get disciplinary letters... and they talk to themselves and say “What on earth am I doing this for?”... and they don’t understand that, instead, the more we are [to struggle], the less they can hurt us, but I mean that’s the way it is.

Fieldwork Quote 103 – Stefania, Amazon worker and union delegate for CGIL, MXPI/MXP5, woman, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, Interview, January 2019

However, there is a paradox inside the functioning of Amazon’s internal labour market that I have also discussed in France. Something that jams the smooth functioning of this turnover machine. On the one hand, the company has an interest in constituting a central segment of “privileged” workers, the blue-badges, for it is the mirage of achieving such a protected position that push many temporary workers to increase their effort. On the other hand, in fact, precisely because conditions

are better than the rest of the industry, workers very often try to resist and prolongate their tenure because their chances to find something better are not very high.

In the rest of the logistics industry working conditions are usually considered worse. Union officials insist quite a lot on this (see Chapter 8). Also workers, despite the complaints, recognise that there is a gap between Amazon and other employers in the local logistics area. It is true (as we saw in Fieldwork Quote 102), that warehouse workers in cooperatives claim that managerial control at Amazon is way stricter²⁵⁶. However, there are some objective elements that need to be reminded. First, Amazon offers to blue-badges secure employment, potentially for life (if one manages to avoid severe injuries due to work). In the rest of the industry, instead, workers are usually employed by subcontracted small firms (cooperatives in most of the cases), thus having to deal with higher precarity. Quite usually this segmentation of employment conditions is reproduced by the colour line: cooperatives' workers are predominantly non-white foreign migrants, while Amazon permanent workers are predominantly white and Italians. To my knowledge, there is no significant mobility of workers from Amazon to cooperatives²⁵⁷, and workers explain so as a matter of employment conditions, even if people also implicitly agree that it is also a matter of racial division of labour.

For what concerns wages, for a long time Amazon's spokespersons have claimed to offer wages *above* the average of the logistics sector (see, *Il Sole 24 Ore* 2017d; *La Stampa* 2017), even if they have never provided a clear measure of this claim, at least to my knowledge. In the warehouse of Piacenza, Amazon applied the same wage rate established by retail CCNL ("Terziario, Distribuzione, Servizi"), to which Amazon added an extra-pay that progressively grew up and now is about *gross* €150. Today Amazon workers in Piacenza get a monthly gross wage of about €1.700 at the entry level, and €1.800-2.000 for senior workers, plus two extra-month salary of a slightly lower amount²⁵⁸. A very similar wage has been reported by workers in FCO1 warehouse (under the CCNL "Trasporto merci e logistica"), who get also an extra-month pay. This makes Amazon's wages about 6-8% higher than the minimum pay established by collective agreements. As stated by worker representatives, "they [Amazon] have always been within the standard, never below"²⁵⁹. This is confirmed if we look at the wages of workers employed by cooperatives running warehouses for large logistics companies

²⁵⁶ The claim of these workers needs to be contextualized. The GLS warehouse where they are employed has been affected by a remarkable wave of labour conflicts led by SI COBAS and USB unions. Their hold on the workplace is so strong to jeopardise managerial control and significantly reduce coercion in the labour process. This explains their opinion on Amazon's workplace.

²⁵⁷ The only approximating case regards Amazon team leaders or simple workers that joined other warehouses in the area, often climbing up the job ladder thanks to their "amazonian" CV but were employed in the ranks of the client company (Zalando, Fiege-Zara etc.).

²⁵⁸ According to several Amazon worker, at the beginning of the operations in Piacenza, the monthly wage was about €1.050-1.100 and that only progressively wages have grown, thanks to Amazon's extra-pay and the renewal of the collective agreements.

²⁵⁹ Conversation with Jacopo, Amazon worker and union delegate for CGIL man, Italian, 30 years-old, 7-years seniority, September 2021.

such as GLS or FedEx-TNT: researchers report that, with seniority and bonus of various type, those workers reach gross monthly wages of €2.000 (Benvegnù and Tranchant 2020). Therefore, there is not a significant gap in terms of wage grids.

Indeed, to the eyes of a service/logistics worker in Italy, what matters is not only the hourly rate, but the effective amount of worked hours. At Amazon, the standard number of hours is 40 per weeks, plus extra-time. This is true also for part-time (MOG) temporary workers: during peaks these workers are regularly asked to work full-time so they are able to make their living with Amazon. In the rest of the sector, the situation can be far worse: not only workers, especially those hired by cooperative, face more frequent oscillations in their schedules, but it is the very reward of all worked hours that is often underpaid. At Amazon, at least, the company is big and cannot afford wage theft, although worker representatives have reported frequent mistakes in the establishment of pay checks, something that they consider inappropriate for a big company with a large HR staff²⁶⁰. On top of this, Amazon adds its own programme of company welfare, especially a small health insurance.

Finally, for what concerns working conditions, a comparative assessment is difficult to establish. Nonetheless, workers' mobilisation in the outsourced logistics sector brought to light the harsh and poor working conditions endured by migrant workers in the warehouses: wage theft, arbitrarily dismissal, violence, racism. In this respect, Amazon is considered an oasis of peace. First, there is no subcontracting chain, which makes the company more accountable toward workers. Second, thanks to its high investment capacity (and its monopoly power), the company not only equips its facilities with state-of-the-art machinery; it also makes considerable efforts to maintain the workspaces clean and orderly; maintenance is also regular, and workers are provided all the safety tools prescribed by law (gloves, cutters, safety shoes, safety vests etc.). This is part of the company's health and safety policy. For Amazon, as we already discussed, safety is essentially a matter of procedures: processes must be executed in the right order, tools and equipment must be put away in their won place etc. The company also installs air conditioning in the warehouses, something that is perceived not only by workers but also by unions as an important improvement. What Amazon's management seems to neglect, however, is the impact of rhythms on workers' health. Concerning France, I have already discussed this question in Chapter 5. In Italy, the same contradiction can be noticed through direct observations. In Amazon warehouses, workers, especially temps, must accept high working rhythms (imposed precisely by the same state-of-the-art equipment that is expected to make work orderly and safe) and high personal and technical scrutiny on their job. This level of technical coercion is incomparable to other logistics warehouses.

²⁶⁰ Fieldwork conversations with Amazon workers' representatives.

The rest of the logistics industry, especially in mass retail and courier sectors, has traditionally relied on cheap labour force rather than on technology (Bologna 2000; Benvegnù 2018; Bologna and Curi 2019; Fana and Massimo 2019). This makes labour regimes particularly despotic but reduces the importance of technical coercion on work. At Amazon, instead the technical control exerted via digital devices and the pressure of the lean flux makes work unbearable for many workers. This contributes to explain the statement of the two GLS workers and former Amazon temps presented above: at Amazon “you do not chat”, since workers operate under a rigid monitoring system, while in other logistics companies, work pace seems more relaxed²⁶¹.

In sum, employment conditions at Amazon compensate the particularly tight control over work and also makes a permanent job at Amazon more attractive than a permanent job in any subcontracted warehousing cooperative in the rest of the logistics industry (or than a part-time low-rank job in a retail/service sector company). This slight comparative advantage of Amazon in the labour market (which constitute a sort of indirect efficiency wage) attracted always new recruits but it has the side effect of inducing permanent workers to stick to their jobs, especially when they get older and sicker, since their chances to get a better employment shrink dramatically. This contradiction slows down the rate of rotation of the workforce, that Amazon would like to increase though its pro-turnover policies. At the same time, as Stefania has insightfully stated in the quoted excerpt, these veteran (almost “survivors”) workers have also not a great interest in confronting management, since their goal is to keep floating until the moment of retirement.

The existence of these policies means that, beside the ideological side, they need to push more people outside. These policies show Amazon’s will to orchestrate and impose its own control on labour mobility. This control allows the company to foster individualisation. The fact that management itself deploys a set of incentives to quitting, reveals – apart from the mere compliance with global HR directives – its strategic importance for fostering control in the workplace. Furthermore, according to my informants among managers and unionists, turnover is not higher than the rest of the industry. This was also confirmed publicly by Amazon’s Italian spokesperson, stating that “the rate of quits is low: 3,05% in 2015 and 2,55% in 2016” (*La Stampa* 2017).

²⁶¹ Of course, one has also to consider the possible bias of these workers, who have good reasons to “promote” their current employer over the former, in order to depict an ascendent trajectory. However, my direct observation of the work process in both kinds of labour regimes, the Amazonian and the lower-added-value logistics, confirms this separation between Amazon and other warehouses where rank-and-file unions have been able to exert power in the labour process.

6.2.3. *The political fragmentation of the workforce in the labour market*

Temporary workers, it is quite useless to remind it, experience a level of employment protection which is relatively low in comparison with permanent workers. Temps can *de facto* be fired at any moment during their assignment with little chances to be reinstated in case of unlawful dismissal²⁶².

Temp workers, as we know, are recruited at the periphery of the labour market. They stay at the intersection of the main factors of marginality: young unemployed, old unemployed, single mothers etc. A condition of marginality which is even formalised by the label “disadvantaged worker”. Then, there are those workers who are not formally disadvantaged, but that in substance are among the most discriminated fraction of the workforce: foreign non-Schengen immigrants, sometimes assimilated as white (Albanians, for instance), more often non-white immigrants from Northern Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian sub-continent and, less numerous, Latin America.

These two groups share economic precarity and the need to find a job for their subsistence. If they come from the area of Piacenza, they are more likely to rely on a solid network of kinship. If, as it has happened more and more often, they come from other regions or other nations, these chances diminish. However, the main distinction is between national workers (to which we could add workers coming from Schengen-countries) and foreign immigrant workers. On top of economic precarity, these workers have a precarious residency status which increases their dependence on a stable job. This makes them more docile vis-à-vis managerial authority, because employment is key for getting a permit.

The substantial difference between the conditions of temps and the conditions of permanents are well-entrenched in workers’ and management’s minds. In this respect, the situation is very similar to the French case: a dualisation of the labour market which is clear to everyone²⁶³. It is in the conventional wisdom of the workplace that the divide between perms and temps is consolidated and continuously reproduced in discourses²⁶⁴.

²⁶² Indeed, a reform supported in 2015 by the centre-left government of Matteo Renzi, inspired to the principles of flexicurity and known as “Jobs Act”, amended the Articolo 18, reducing the protection from unfair dismissal (Picot and Tassinari 2015). For what concerns the levels of employment protection for permanent workers in France and Italy, it is difficult to make sharp distinctions. There are some differences in the formal regulation of employees’ dismissal: while the French regulation (1973) preferred economic compensation for unlawful dismissals, the Italian regulation (1970) included reinstatement as a means of employee’s reparation. However, with the recent reform of the Renzi’s government of 2015 (the so-called “Jobs Act”), the cases in which the judge can establish reinstatement were significantly reduced, thus bring the two systems closer. Furthermore, both the Italian reform of 2015 and the French one of 2017 (the so-called “Macron’s ordonnances”) established a ceiling for unlawful dismissal, thereby reducing the judge’s latitude in determining compensation and increasing predictability for the employer. Both systems found themselves subverted in their original aim of discouraging unlawful dismissal (Allamprese and Dalmaso 2019; Bubbico 2019).

²⁶³ There is however a major difference between the working conditions of temp between France and Italy, especially for what concern work time: French temps have full-time contracts, while Italian temps are subject to the MOG part-time contract.

²⁶⁴ We will see in chapters 7 and 8 that also unions and union members contribute to reproduce this divide.

At work, it is obvious, temporary workers are recognised as the most docile and productive, in other words “the most exploited”. They are the most exposed to managerial pressure, precisely because of their vulnerability in the external and internal labour market. I felt that pressure too when I was a temp. I was well aware that my assignment could be terminated at managers’ will. After all, especially during the first weeks, I saw some temp colleagues being dismissed with no delay, in Italy as well as in France.

Writing down my impressions in my fieldwork journal, I sometimes stated my amazement in front of the discrimination of temporary workers in the labour process and the labour market:

I see many blue-badges slacking off and green-badges working hard, as usual. Crazy how anyone can accept this discrimination. If you are green, they [blues] look down on you, you are a *pariah*, or an outsider not doing enough. The job opportunities are all for the blue-badge workers. The greens are uniquely competing for the chance of stabilization. It is a goal longed for by all. If you want to reach it, you cannot afford mistakes, you cannot allow yourself absences you dare not go to the bathroom if you can hold it. Looking for the bathroom and peeing means that you are losing precious minutes; minutes that determine the ranking and your average. Those, on the other hand, who do not hope for a prolongation, or a permanent contract are more cynical, but perhaps also more realistic. They refuse to play the game.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 36 – MXP5, July 2019

Permanent workers themselves have no problem in recognising their “privilege” in terms of employment security and, consequently, the lower pressure they feel to live up to managerial expectations.

I meet Jacopo, a co-worker and unionist, for dinner in a restaurant downtown. He has just returned from the political meeting in another town.

We discuss. Then two “Amazonians” also arrive to dine at the next table.

One (a 51-year-old Italian man) says to the other, “I took a week of sick leave because I collapsed with fatigue....” The other: “The greens work their butts off to make up for what the blues don’t do.... Then once you’re blue, you can relax.... (He has been green for 4 months).

Then the other worker raises a question which shows the overlap between employment and racial lines:

The other replies, “Speaking of greens... Is this thing true that they made some foreigners blue because they were political refugees?”

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 37 – Castel San Giovanni, dinner in a restaurant, August 2019

From the excerpts emerges how the gaze of permanent workers on their temporary colleague appears here in all its ambiguity. Like in France, temporary workers are despised and commiserated at the same time. In the warehouse, they are perceived by permanent workers as pariahs, but also as a threat.

On the one hand, all permanent worker was a green badge at the beginning of their career. Therefore, they workers can develop a certain sympathy for temps, although this benevolence has often a patronising flavour. According to senior workers, agency workers are those expected to work hard:

I meet a senior worker in the aisles of the picktower, a woman in her forties. We do not know each other, but we start chatting a little, just to break the routine of work. She has already noticed my green badge and she knows that I am new. "You won't get used to it", she says, "It will be worse and worse. Now you have adrenaline, you seek the contract renewal. Then it will be worse and worse: your back will hurt, you'll hate everyone in here, and maybe you'll even get tendonitis", then she disappears. [I keep on working.] [...]. I meet her again. She yells at the Team Lead who is on duty, pointing at me, "Hey he's cool!" Embarrassed, I tell her that I prefer to remain unnoticed. "But here you have to get noticed," she replies surprised and with the air of someone who is explaining to me how to get by in this world. "It's the only way," she says. "Yes", I reply and then I make a question to change topic: "Look I have to ask for a day off, how can I get it?". She looks at me with a feeling of disappointment and derisiveness. Then she exclaims, "Pickers are not anymore like they used to".

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 38 – MXP5 July 2019

On the other hand, temp workers tend to be considered as "opportunist"; "they are not loyal" according to blue-badge workers. In fact, they are under the double hold of the fear for termination and the hope of getting an open-ended contract. In order to increase their chances, they tend to acquiesce yes to managers' requests. Thus, permanent workers despise them for the zeal of some temporary workers, blaming them for being naïf and, in a typical strategy of distinction, claim that they have never behaved in such a pitiful way when they were temps. During a conversation in the workplace, a blue-badge told me:

- I preferred when I was a green-badge, at least there were optional days [he refers to the days of "expansion", see paragraph (6.1.2.1)]. I didn't use to go! What bullshit huh? Don't tell me to come to work if "it's optional" because if it's optional I won't go, I'll stay home and spare myself 40 km driving. I don't care about the money....
- But how long were you a green-badge?
- For a long time
- And they used to leave you at home at the end of the assignment?
- Sometimes even six months- But I had the unemployment check! I was getting the same amount anyway. [He has been blue for a year]. Remember. You do not need to work overtime or to come, just

because you hope to get hired.... I see all these green-badges doing that but it doesn't depend on that... it's good for money but not for getting hired... and anyway by now Amazon will hire very little in this warehouse...

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 39 – MXP5, June 2019

This blue-badge worker misses the good old times when he was a temporary worker, since he had more schedule flexibility. In sum, temp workers can be perceived as privileged by permanent workers. Like in France – where it happened to me to hear a permanent worker (and union delegate) disapproving the fact that temp workers could access the canteen which was partly financed by the works council – I heard permanent workers complaining about the fact that “temp workers earn more” or that they were “pampered” by managers. Such statements are not totally absurd. The French permanent workers is correct in stressing the fact that temps benefit from a service for which their employer (the agency) does not pay; and it is understandable that a permanent worker feel somehow treated worse than temps by management: after all, it precisely Amazon strategy to favour the turnover of the workforce, and such feeling can push a permanent worker to quit, if he/she has the opportunity. Temp workers, on the other hand, sometimes believe that they get good economic conditions, or at least it is what they want to make their interlocutor believe in order to protect their image. One day, while I was working in the aisles of the pick-tower, I started chatting with a temporary worker, a young man from Pakistan. He told me: “temp contract is not so bad, if you work many hours, if you do all the overtime they [managers] ask you, you will earn a good salary, even higher than the manager!”²⁶⁵.

Temp workers can be seen not only as pariahs by permanent workers, but also as a threat for their welfare, and this for a variety of reasons to the eyes of permanent workers: because they are mostly foreigners, because they do not know the rules, because they do not work enough or because they work too much. Remember the discussion I made above on the conspiracy-like interpretation of opacity that permanent workers sometimes can develop (Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 33). During my presence in the workplace, I dealt with permanent workers suspecting that management plays the temporary workers against them. This intuition can get a conspirative tone, but it has structural causes. Temp workers are among the best performers in terms of productivity rate. Since productivity rates are calculated on the individual performance of most productive workers, which most of the time are temps, permanent workers look at them as an instrument of management to constantly increase the target. Furthermore, racism does not play a minor role here, for the figure of the temp worker is more and more associated with that of the foreign migrant worker.

²⁶⁵ Fieldwork Journal, MXP5, July 2019.

The division between temps and permanent workers is crucial to understand the demobilisation of the worker as a collective actor opposed to managerial domination. By segmenting its workforce in these two macro-groups, Amazon's management also fragments their immediate political interests. Permanent workers aim to preserve their health and their job. After all, they consider they do not have many better chances in the world outside. Very often they have a mortgage, and if they do not have children, they have some relative who depends on them. Thus, they and their families depend on Amazon's pay-check. Working conditions, once one has got the holy grail of the open-ended contract, become more acceptable. Here is an exchange with a permanent worker, a southerner Italian woman on her late forties, who chatted with me during a shift:

She tells me she has a son. I ask her what she did before. She worked as a sales agent. She used to sell leather to the factories in Tolentino for brands based in Veneto and Tuscany. I ask her why she left and she says because she got fed up: "Now here it sucks as a job, but when I come home it's not my problem. Before I used to work a lot, now I am more relaxed"

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 40 – MXP5, August 2019

For temps, their dependence is even higher, since they do not have any security of employment. Many temp workers, even if not all²⁶⁶, bet on Amazon to get out of under-employment. Therefore, for an unemployed person a three-months assignment (even if part-time) means the possibility to financially breathe, a guarantee of income for at least part of the year. For permanent workers, Amazon is a solid employer, offering a proper pay-check and all the other accessory wage elements, such as extra company welfare provisions (even if quite small compared to other big multinational companies in other sectors)²⁶⁷.

Working conditions are not satisfying for workers in absolute. Diego complains about working eight hours shifts on Sunday: "they do not understand that you cannot give 8 hours of your daily life to such a work... it is too much!", he says, and he adds: "it is good to work, it makes you live, but you cannot live to work". Adriano is very direct: one day, I saw him moving boxes from the conveyor to a cart, at dozens: "what are you doing?", I asked, "I am doing like a slave", he answered bitterly, "but they tell me that I am making history!". This sentence sums up the specificities of Amazon labour politics. On the one hand, a technologically advanced (although neo-taylorist) organisation of work, which allows management to impose a high level of effort to the workers. On the other hand, a system

²⁶⁶ There is a minority of temps that are not particularly interested in a stable job, at least this is what they say. They just want a seasonal assignment. However, I have heard many permanent workers telling me that they started "just to spend some months" and then "remained stuck". So, such statements can be very ephemeral.

²⁶⁷ Amazon offers a private health insurance which should complete the universal public health service. The amount of this provisions is not particularly high, especially if compared to other multinational companies (especially in the high ranks of automotive sector) that runs factories in northern Italy.

of management of the workforce that operates to prevent workers from challenging this organisation, first by reproducing political fragmentation in the internal labour market; second, by persuading them that they are in the best of the worlds, because the world out there, the external labour market, does not offer to them anything better.

With respect to France, however, Amazon's Italian subsidiary presents a peculiarity. While in France, temp work has been normalised since the late 1970s (Lapoire 2007; Belkacem and Kornig 2020), in Italy it was legalised only in the late 1990s, and in the logistics sector had a very limited diffusion until the arrival of Amazon. The adoption of temporary work instead of outsourced cooperative contract marked a break with the dominant mode of employment relations in the Italian logistics sector, characterised by more uncertainty and very often by illegal employment situations. For a workforce used to these forms of employment, a contract, even if temporary (but with the possibility of acceding the "paradise" of an open-ended one), with a renowned and solid company represent an improvement. And this contributes to make workers accept the high intensity of effort required by Amazon labour process.

Thanks to the residual protection provided by labour law, open-ended contracts protect from managerial pressure, at least in part. Most permanent workers are demotivated or unsatisfied because of the demanding working rhythms and because their hopes for professional improvement have been broken. For permanent workers, the combination between technical constraint and a relatively higher employment protection results in their partial economic demobilisation. For what concerns agency workers, the employment conditions which are worse than those of blue-badge but significantly better than other workers in the logistics industry also contribute to their demobilisation.

6.3. Conclusion of Part II

In chapters 5 and 6, I tried to present the evolution of the French and Italian workplace and to compare them. Both workplaces had undergone a similar pattern of the transition from a start-up labour regime – in which the labour process gave the workers (and also management) a certain autonomy in the organisation of work and, in turn, required the active mobilisation of the workforce – to a bureaucratised (and industrialised) labour regime characterised by the erosion of the direct relations between management and individual employees, and an increase in the technical coercion by means of digital taylorism and algorithmic management. In such a context, marked by a labour crisis (workers disengagement and overt insubordination) and the erosion of the old systems of managerial control of the labour politics (direct and personal relationship, opportunity of occupational promotion etc.), managerial priorities change.

Worker effort was no longer secured by workers’ active involvement but through technical coercion. The new political priority of management was to disarm and demobilise worker protest, which was triggered by increasing technical coercion and lack of individual recognition. Technical coercion was increased by digitalisation and the further standardisation of work. Work became, in Marxian terms, more and more “abstracts” and workers autonomy more and more narrowed, a process typical of scientific management (Braverman 1974; Cirillo et al. 2023). Workers were also subject to strict productivity, quality, and safety standard. In fact, it was structurally impossible for workers to comply with all these goals simultaneously. It is precisely in this typical bureaucratic ambivalence, that local managers, through satisficing, restore part of the power lost *vis-à-vis* algorithms. Managers are in charge of enforcing these contradictory priorities, inflicting workers uncertainty, and exposing them to managerial discretion. The fact is that the system of rules intertwined with the structural coercion of the algorithms are unilaterally defined by Amazon (at a central level), while their enforcement is devolved to local management: the result is unilateral managerial discretion and minimal accountability. This mix of technical coercion and organisational uncertainty (“the disorganisation of work”, as put by a French worker) puts workers under pressure, especially temps, but it also generates tensions and labour conflict (more in France than in Italy, we will see in Part III). Bureaucratic ambivalences and some very small niches that escape from digital control also provide scope for informal practices, but these practices in most of the cases create competition between groups and they reproduce the race to individual productivity rather than questioning it. In this respect, these practices can echo classic forms of “making out” (Roy 1952a; Burawoy 1979a). However, in the Amazon plat-fordist workplace, with such a high level of technical coercion, informal practices are not a source of “consent”.

Table 26 – Amazon labour regimes in France and Italy

LABOUR REGIME	LABOUR PROCESS	INTERNAL LABOUR MARKET	MANAGERIAL POLITICS	FRANCE	ITALY
PHASE I (START-UP)	LOW TECHNICAL COERCION	MONIST AND EXPANSIVE	MOBILISE WORKERS’ PARTICIPATION	2000-2009	2011-2015
PHASE II (ALGORITHMIC BUREAUCRACY)	HIGH TECHNICAL COERCION	DUALISED AND STAGNATING	DEMOBILISE WORKERS COLLECTIVE ACTION	2010-2020	2015-2020

Under a highly coercive labour process, which is likely to fuel labour conflict, the matter is not to demobilise workers regardless of their supposed consent. How is demobilisation obtained? In both France and Italy essentially through another form of coercion, i.e. economic coercion in the internal and external labour market.

In the new phase, the workplace labour market become dualised: this ensures not only that the most vulnerable part of the workforce, emergency workers, contribute to most of labour effort, but also the political fragmentation in two blocks. Other parallel dynamics of demobilisation operate in the workplace. On the one hand, employment involvement practices – that Amazon inherited from its earlier phase or, more broadly, from a variety of managerial traditions (from lean and toyotism to “walmartism” and the internet economy) – remain in place. In managerial intentions, typical of the “new spirit of capitalism”, workforce commitment is sought through suggestion boxes, kaizen/gemba meeting and collective gathering to celebrate Prime Day. On the other hand, the capacity of mobilisation of the company is thwarted by the reduced scope of manoeuvre that technical coercion concedes to employee involvement practices.

However, although these practices fail to mobilise, they nonetheless contribute to demobilise the workforce by amplifying the effects of the internal labour market and, as we are going to see also in Part III, in disarming union critique. The dualisation of the labour market decouples the interests of temps and permanent; furthermore, the stagnation of employment levels (which stopped decrease at the beginning of the first phase) and the pyramidal structure of job hierarchies (with most of the workforce concentrated in low-skilled and low-paid jobs) reduce the opportunity of occupational promotion and increase competition between workers to access the few jobs that are better paid and less standardised.

The political fragmentation of the workforce through the labour market segmentation is not a specificity of Amazon. While institutionalist economists tend to treat internal labour markets strictly as a matter of internal efficiency, typically linked to information costs, training, and turnover, others – especially Marxists but not only – emphasise the class character of these efficiency considerations (Fligstein and Fernandez 1988; Wright 2000), and stress the ways in which ILMs are instigated by employers to divide the working class and weaken unions (Burawoy 1979a; Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982). Amazon’s ILM is a case in point. Not only the internal labour market increases pressure on the workforce and contributes to mobilise worker effort, but it fosters competitive individualism among the workforce. The race for mobility that it engenders at the point of production dissolves some of the vertical tensions between workers and management and generates lateral tensions among workers. As explained by Burawoy, “in both these ways the interests of the worker are constituted as

those of one individual agent against other individuals, rather than those of one class opposed to another class” (Burawoy 1979a, 107).

Yet, differently from the context described by Burawoy, the substantial absence of rewards for seniority – that, in Burawoy’s framework, fosters a commitment to the enterprise and coordinate the interests of capitalists and labourer in the generation of surplus value – implies that the coordination of the interests must be achieved by means of economic coercion. At Amazon, a company that emerged and flourished in a context of underemployment and post-fordist regulation, the means boil down to the promise of security of employment, as it has happened in most industrialised workplaces since the end of full employment (for some examples, see Burawoy 1985, 148–52; J.-P. Durand and Hatzfeld 2002; 2003, 2011–15; Sallaz 2004). Considering more specifically segmentation through agency work, a vast literature on agency work in the logistics (Jaffee and Bensman 2016; Gaborieau 2016b; Allison et al. 2018; Benvegnù 2018; Tranchant 2018) as well as in other sectors (Gorgeu and Mathieu 2008; Chauvin and Jounin 2011; Ardeni, Gorgeu, and Mathieu 2019) shows the centrality of this form of employment to increase organisational flexibility, deskilling work (*déqualification*), externalise compliance with law, break workers collective.

The fact that these patterns not only are new, but also echo those typical of conventional industrial context, reveals how the initial “new spirit” of capitalism has withered away, confirming the process of normalisation and industrialisation of Amazon’s plat-fordist paradigm. If there is a specificity of Amazon, it is the complementarity of these mechanisms in securing workers’ effort and simultaneously demobilising their collective resistance.

* * *

This pattern of mobilisation and demobilisation operates quite similarly in both the Italian and the French case study. However, there are also some important differences that emerges and that force us to explore other facets of the problem.

The first difference concerns the relation between Amazon’s internal labour market, the external labour market and the possibilities of labour mobility. Analysing the French and the Italian cases, and comparing working conditions in Amazon with the rest of the logistics sector, we observed that the “reverse” efficiency wage is higher in Italy than in France: in other words, in Italy, working at Amazon implies a considerable improvement of working and employment conditions, especially for what concerns the possibility to access employment security. Economic coercions seems to have a stronger hold on workers in Italy rather than in France.

The second difference concerns the relation between labour resistance and managerial reaction. We saw how the French workplace is characterised by a contentious enforcement of technical coercion. It is a low intensity but daily and endemic conflict that concerns most of the time arrangements on work time. Worker resistance is always individual but at the same time quite spread in the workforce and, to a certain extent, it includes temporary workers. Resistance is not limited to the French workplace. However, there is a relevant difference in the way how Amazon reacts to labour conflict. In France the reaction is contentious, with management exerting strong pressure against worker resistance; in Italy, management reacts with a certain tolerance and indifference toward micro-conflicts. In the fieldwork, Italian workers attribute this calm to the strike that took place few months before. However, strikes are much more frequent in France, and union pressure more intense. So, one should expect even more calm in the French workplace.

It is this puzzle that leads us to the last chapter on unions: what happens when unions finally manage to mobilise the workforce? How does Amazon cope with organised labour? What counterstrategies does management resort to?

Table 27 – Variety of coercion in France and Italy

FRANCE	HIGH TECHNICAL COERCION	MEDIUM ECONOMIC COERCION	MICRO- RESISTANCES	CONTENTIOUS MANAGEMENT
ITALY	HIGH TECHNICAL COERCION	HIGH ECONOMIC COERCION	MICRO- RESISTANCES	NON- CONTENTIOUS MANAGEMENT

If management is quite homogeneous in the political lines, (which is also quite “natural” given the research designed adopted, i.e. studying the same company in different contexts), it is at the context that we must look. As suggested by evidence on French management dealing with the institutional constraint of union representation (see Chapter 3), the difference in the style of management comes from the different solicitations coming from the local context, namely the political attitude of the unions toward Amazon and employment relations in general.

In Part III, we will deal with unions. In a context where Amazon tries to mobilise the worker as economic actor and demobilise them as political actor, unions are expected to play an opposite role: politically mobilising the workers. They do it in a variety of forms, both across countries but also across union organisation and across workplaces. This has consequences on the organisation of work,

on employment conditions and on the relations with management, on the one hand, and between management and workers, on the other hand. Especially during peak crisis such as the Covid-19 crisis.

Part III

III. The politics of (de)mobilisation. Industrial relations in Amazon's subsidiaries

In the previous part, I showed how the transition from a start-up labour regime to an industrialised labour regime reversed the priority of management. From mobilising the workforce – in a context in which the labour process required the responsible autonomy of the workers – to demobilising it – in a context where effort is secured by technical and economic coercion.

Part III will deal with the final brick of production politics, i.e. unions-management relations. The two start-up and algorithmic bureaucracy labour regimes will be analysed “against the grain”. In Chapter 7, we will compare industrial relations in the start-up labour regime in France and Italy. In Chapter 8, we will compare the algorithmic bureaucracy regime in the two countries.

The goal is to illustrate the patterns of mobilisation and demobilisation in both countries by looking (1) at the impact of the forms of the institutions of labour regulation at the company level; (2) at the way how unions defined their goal and deployed their strategy accordingly; (3) at the way how management counteracted unions with the purpose of inhibiting the successful mobilisation of the workforce and the reducing the constraint of the institutional regulations on the labour process.

Industrial relations are little considered in the analysis of labour process under algorithmic management, which is focused mainly on technologies of control and forms of resistances (see Introduction to Part II) but not on the relations between algorithmic management and the institutions of labour regulation (Doellgast and Wagner 2022). However, there are some important exceptions precisely in the case of Amazon (Apicella 2020; Massimo 2020a; Vgontzas 2020; Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2021; Kassem 2022a; Goldmann 2023). In Burawoy's framework, the analysis of the labour process unfolds in parallel with that of industrial relations or, in Marxist terms, the “internal state” (see par. II.1.b). However, Burawoy's theorisation of the internal state is rather functionalist and over-determinist (see Clawson and Fantasia 1983; Gartman 1983). The institutions of labour relations appear as a mere mechanism for the reproduction of consent and unions are completely absorbed into them.

Differently, following a power resource approach (Wright 2000; Silver 2003; AK Strategic Unionism 2013; Refslund and Arnholtz 2022; 2024), we can consider the institution of labour regulation, not as a mere vector of incorporation of the workforce in the labour process, nor as an intrinsic antagonist of employers' power, but rather an arena of class conflict open to a variety of

outcomes, according to actor's resources and their political strategies. As reminded by Milkman (2024), power resource approach is explicitly anti-determinist. Scholars conventionally identify two forms of power resources: *structural power*, which refers to the position of wage-earning workers in the capitalist mode of production, and *associational power*, which concerns the power that workers derive from the formation of collective organisations such as trade unions, political parties and works councils.

Structural power is distinguishable in two sub-types: *workplace bargaining (or positional) power* and marketplace bargaining power (Wright 2000). The first relates to the costs that workers' mobilisation can inflict to the employer by virtue of their particular position (Perrone 1984; Wallace, Griffin, and Rubin 1989). Port and logistics workers are a case in point. Scholars have widely debated the role of "choke points" in supporting workers action (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018). Some authors identify "logistical power" as a specific subset of power resources (Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster 2018), and qualify logistics workers as the successor of the once powerful industrial working-class (Moody 2017). In fact, other scholars have stressed how this power remains rather virtual and difficult to translate into capacity to achieve the demands of workers (Nowak 2022). Even in the case of Amazon, researchers have emphasised that its decentralised and sparse network means that there are no clear choke points and that, even in case of strikes and blockades, Amazon is able to reroute its flows thereby circumventing workers' obstruction (Barthel 2019; Vgontzas 2020). We will see that this is precisely what happened during the Covid-19 crisis in France (par. 8.1.4.). At the same time, from my point of view, it is arguable that Amazon's decentralised network is immune to localised disruptive action. As I showed in Chapter 2, orders fulfilled in FCs had to pass through SCs, where they are sorted and sent to delivery stations for the last mile. SCs, are just a few. In countries such as France and Italy there are just one or two SC, but almost all commodities have to pass through them. In fact, mapping vulnerable spots in Amazon's US network, Potiker and co-authors (2024) point out that also SCs have become too decentralised and dispersed to represent a choke point. However, in France and Italy this is not yet the case. Rather, the question is whether French and Italian unions are ready to leverage on this positional power to maximise the cost of their mobilisation for the employer.

Marketplace bargaining power refers to workers' substitutability and it is therefore related to the distribution of skills and to the structure of the labour market, especially its segmentation. Silver elaborates that this power "results directly from tight labour markets" and can take several forms such as "(1) the possession of scarce skills that are in demand by employers, (2) low levels of general unemployment, and (3) the ability of workers to pull out of the labour market entirely and survive on non-wage sources of income" (2003, 13). These conditions indicate that the strength of workers'

bargaining position, the extent of viable alternatives for workers, and their capacity to choose between voice and exit will be influenced economic cycles (Reflund and Arnholtz 2022). It is also related to levels of state welfare provision, i.e. to the way how social wage increases the reservation wage of workers (Burawoy 1983; Wright 2000). We could consider market bargaining power the reverse of economic coercion, and we have already treated in Part II, concluding that power relations in this domain are clearly in favour of Amazon, except during the short conjuncture of the pandemic outbreak (for this late aspect, see Chapter 8).

Associational power arises from collective forms of organisation. Given the inherently asymmetrical distribution of power between capital and labour, associational power has been regarded as particularly important for the latter, while capitalists are supposedly able to pursue most of their interests individually via market relationships (Offe and Wiesenthal 1980; Streeck 1989). Associational power can be shaped by a range of interacting factors. Building on Goldmann's (2023) and Kassem's (2023), we can distinguish two main sub-types: i) unions' capacity to *intermediate* contending interests (Kelly 1998; Hyman 2001), for instance between permanent and agency workers, and to *frame*, i.e. to define and legitimate repertoires of action (Lévesque and Murray 2010; 2013); ii) *institutional arrangements*, the resources based on legislation, collective bargaining and worker representation bodies such as works council and union delegates.

Intermediation of contending interests is a traditional issue of unionism. For example, as central intermediary organisations, unions have to reconcile opposing logics, such as the defence of the "ends" of the organisation, the short-term interests of its members, the survival and the consolidation of the organisation itself, the reproduction of collective identities etc. Unions' capacity to deal with these competing logics is key to understand the outcome of industrial relations at Amazon. Framing refers to the unions' capacity to set a narrative capable to align different interests and grievances so as to legitimate collective action. Unions are not the only actor to deal with the problem of intermediating and framing. As we saw in Part II, Amazon management is also involved in this process, and we will see how both actors' strategies interact.

III.1) Institutional convergence, unions and transnational corporations

Institutional resources are of particular interest to understand industrial relations in Amazon's European subsidiaries, especially in France and Italy, the only countries where Amazon signed collective agreements.

Institutional arrangements result from the solidification of class relations (Poulantzas 1978a; 1978b) and for this reason they have a dual nature. On the one hand institutional power grants unions significant rights and constrain employers' discretion. On the other hand, they constraint unions'

action and grant significant prerogative to employers. Unions are embedded in national – and, to a lesser extent, transnational – institutional arrangements. Transnational companies are also embedded in specific national institutional contexts, those of their home countries, and they have to deal with different institutions when opening cross-border subsidiaries.

One of the most heated debates in comparative sociology and political economy between the 1990s and the 2010s has concerned the resilience of national institutional systems. Scholars debate whether economic globalisation has been leading to convergence between national systems or whether different national institutional frameworks have been retaining their distinctiveness and absorbing common challenges in different ways (Crouch and Streeck 1997; Hollingsworth and Boyer 1997; Guillén 2001; Hall and Soskice 2001; Djelic and Quack 2003; Howell 2003; 2015; Crouch 2005; Streeck and Thelen 2005a; Thelen 2014).

The debate has become particularly lively in comparative industrial relations. Students of the long-term formation of industrial relations systems in Europe have stressed the path-dependence of their development (Crouch 1993). Globalisation and Europeanisation, however, exerted strong pressures for liberalisation and homogenisation of institutional arrangements, with the erosion of their stability and their capacity to coordinate the economy and protect solidarity (Doellgast, Lillie, and Pulignano 2018). Scholars disagree on whether these trends result in a general “neoliberal” convergence (Streeck 2009; 2014; Baccaro and Howell 2017) or in the persisting capacity of national and sectoral institutions to refract common neoliberal pressures (H. C. Katz and Darbishire 2000; Bechter, Brandl, and Meardi 2012; Thelen 2014; Kim et al. 2015; Meardi 2018; 2019).

In France and Italy, in particular, the crisis of the Fordist mode of regulation paved the way for reforms aiming at giving a micro-corporatist spin to industrial relations.

Box 13 – The notion of micro-corporatism

The term “micro-corporatism” refers to corporatist-style bargaining between labour and capital at the firm rather than the confederal or industry level. The concept of corporatism describes institutional arrangements whereby strong, encompassing and hierarchical trade unions and employer organisation were integrated in economic governance and policymaking through the institutionalised sharing of power and responsibility, in exchange for moderation in the pursuit of their particularistic interests, especially in wage setting. According to Schmitter’s definition, neo-corporatism denotes “an ideal-typical institutional arrangement for linking the associationally organised interests of civil society with the decisional structures of the state” characterised by a number of structural features, i.e. the presence of a limited number of encompassing and monopolistic representative institutions, hierarchically ordered and thus able to internalise the competing demands of their associates and to exercise authority over them (Schmitter 1974, 93). As summarised by Howell, “the terms of microcorporatist bargaining centers around employment. Existing workers receive employment security, and perhaps other forms of protection, from the firm in return for flexibility and an

acceptance of the legitimacy of the economic goals of the firm. Thus wages, bonuses, the organization and control of work, new technologies, and so on are all centred around the needs of the firm” (Howell 1992, 24). In this part, micro-corporatism is distinguished in two sub-types. In France, it is the aim of state-led neo-liberal labour reforms (Howell 1992; 2009; Baccaro and Howell 2017). In Italy, it is rather the result of the result of firm and sector-level social regulation, with a marginal role of the state (Regini and Sabel 1989; Locke 1990; Regini 1995). Both forms pursued economic restructuring via consensual and legitimate bargaining, even if their outcome remained disputed. In France, this micro-concertation was not able to consolidate due to reciprocal distrust of social partners, a partial failure that led government to enlarge margins of unilateralism for employers (Baccaro and Howell 2017; Rehfeldt 2018). In Italy, the extension of micro-corporatism at the tripartite level led to important social pacts during the 1990s (Baccaro 2002a; 2002b), was followed by a much more oscillating partnership from the 2000s decade onward (Tassinari 2019).

In France, the micro-corporatist turn was mainly state-led and took place in the 1980s. From the point of view of French government, France lacked industrial relations institutions appropriate to post-fordist economic restructuring and the necessity of deregulating labour market. The core of the state’s strategy, under both Socialist and Gaullist governments, was to shift regulation from the sector- to the firm-level and to create legal obligation inside the firm to support and legitimate concessionary bargaining in order to restore firm’s competitiveness (Howell 1992; Baccaro and Howell 2017). In Italy, a similar process of micro-corporatisation took place but it was rather promoted “from below” by social partners, especially in the sectors more exposed to restructuring and international competition (Regini and Sabel 1989; Regini 1995). In both cases, the spirit of micro-corporatism was the provision of consensual and legitimate reciprocal concessions between employers and unions, the former granting employment security, at least for the core workforce, and the latter accepting labour flexibility. Eventually, in Italy, the firm-level experimentation would lead to the spread of social concertation at the tripartite level, with the approval of important welfare and labour reforms during the 1990s (Locke and Baccaro 1996; Baccaro 2002a; 2002b). Since the 2000s, however, concertation has undergone a deep crisis and governments as well as employers have been resorting to unilateralism with higher frequency (Tassinari 2019). In France, instead, macro-level social concertation never achieved stability and consensual reforms (Amable 2016; Baccaro and Howell 2017). These recent developments seem to reaffirm the thesis of the neoliberal convergence, but comparative analysis suggests the persistence of national and sectoral variations.

The comparative study of industrial relations in transnational companies (TNCs) such as Amazon provide a test for these contending interpretations.

For what concern the employer side, since the 1990s, a branch of IR scholarship has focused on TNCs as drivers of homogenization/diversification (Almond and Ferner 2006; Ferner, Quintanilla,

and Sánchez-Runde 2006). Scholars in the field of international industrial relations and organisational behaviour argued that systematic differences in the behaviour of TNCs were significantly shaped by their embeddedness in distinctive national-institutional complexes. For example, country-of-origin practices may be reshaped in the host-country context into hybrid forms (Boyer et al. 1998; Doeringer, Lorenz, and Terkla 2003; Royle and Ortiz 2009). Authors leaning towards the convergence thesis see TNCs play an important role in national-institutional evolution (Bélanger and Edwards 2006), acting as “rule makers” and “rule takers” (Streeck and Thelen 2005b). In this perspective, TNCs also shape institutions by transferring practices that subsequently diffuse to other firms within their organisational field, through what the new institutionalists would call “mimetic isomorphism” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). As we saw in chapter 4 (parr. 4.2.1 & 4.2.2), for example, Amazon was able to impose its own model of employment flexibility through agency work in an environment, the Italian logistics sector, where the dominant model had been outsourcing to cooperative firms. In sum, institutions leave enough space to actors, thus allowing them to establish a micropolitics of institutional change and adaptation within market fields and organisational fields. A company such as Amazon, with characteristics typical of the US national business system can be analysed as a major actor of the so-called “neoliberal convergence” of industrial relations systems in advanced capitalist countries (Baccaro and Howell 2017; for a critique of this approach, see Meardi 2018; Yon 2019). This highlights one theoretical shortcoming in this approach, i.e. the implicit conception of neo-liberalisation as an ineluctable force or, alternatively, the pure result of elite-driven reforms. In fact, pressures for neo-liberalisation are not coming necessarily and exclusively from an underlying structural pressure or from external factors such as TNCs, but they can also be exerted by locally embedded business actors as well as from local policymakers. Furthermore, TNCs, even those like Amazon, do not necessarily drive a levelling down of working conditions (Meardi and Tóth 2006). For example, we saw in chapters 5 and 6 (see, especially par. 6.2) that working conditions at Amazon are considered by workers significantly better than the rest of the logistics sector, thus contributing to inhibit workers collective action.

For what concern unions, institutions can simultaneously constrain and facilitate collective action, depending on the social context and actor’s strategies, namely how they choose to exploit the opportunities available to them (Hassel 2007; L. Turner 2009). Differently from the US, where the industrial relations environment has become particularly hostile to unions, in France and Italy, the institutionalisation of industrial relations and the resilience of unions, although with significantly different degrees, provide workplace unionism greater power vis-à-vis the employer.

In the French context, the restructuring of industrial relations institutions has produced a paradoxical scenario (Lallement 2006; Wolff 2008; Bérout and Yon 2012): on the one hand, the

“contractualization” of society as collective bargaining has become an increasingly important form of social regulation; on the other hand, the crisis and delegitimization of trade unions, which lost associational and structural power. On the other hand, some provisions of micro-corporatist reforms, for instance mandatory collective bargaining at the firm level, gave unions new institutional resources. Furthermore, the revitalisation of union landscape paved the way for new experimentations, for instance the increasing use of the juridical tool to counterweight unions’ structural weakness (Pélisse 2009). In Italy, the participation of unions to concertation both at the firm- and the tripartite-level represented a departure from the adversarial tradition of unions. Nevertheless, unions have also recorded losses in terms of structural power, without experiencing the same increasing institutional power of their French counterpart. In this regard, unions have tried to leverage on framing and intermediating, for instance by enlarging their membership base and diversifying their repertoires of action (Frege, Heery, and Turner 2004; Frege and Kelly 2004; Hae-Lin Choi and Mattoni 2010; Pulignano, Ortíz Gervasi, and de Franceschi 2016).

In all, in front of the same employer, trade unions develop their strategies in a variety of forms. This is suggested by evidence found in Part II, where contentious and non-continuous enforcement of managerial coercion varies significantly between France and Italy. The goal of Part III is now to verify this hypothesis, by focusing specifically on industrial relations.

III.2) Methodological note

Part III draws on a comparative analysis of industrial relations in Amazon’s French and Italian subsidiaries, with a specific focus on the workplace where I run my participant observation. The period of time under study is relatively vast, from 2000 in the case of France and from 2011 in the case of Italy.

Also, there is a plurality of actors and levels that are involved. For what concerns actors, the obvious ones are unions and management. However, these two groups are far from monolithic organisations. Unions or, more precisely union officials, face the problem of coordinating with their membership (workers with a union card) and with their constituency (the whole workforce). In the middle, there are union delegates (or shop stewards) who are both workers and union representatives. Furthermore, the Italian and French case are typical example of union pluralism. In both countries, organised labour has been cut across ideological and strategical lines; the legacy of these divisions is today the presence of distinct organisations which are in a contradictory relationship of coordination and competition with each other. Management is not a unitary organisation either. The main line of division is between corporate management and subsidiary management and, within the latter, between the different layer of plant management, from the general manager to area managers and team leaders.

To be sure, corporate management is also likely to be fractured across different liens, for instance between divisions and business line, but these cleavages are less relevant from our standpoint in the workplace.

Furthermore, the industrial relations arena is inhabited by other actors, such as the state which produces legal norms and intervenes through its administrative bodies. In addition, we could mention social movements and the press which can exert influence and pressures on the actors of industrial relations.

Another question that this research faced was the overlapping of different levels of analysis of industrial relations. The local level of the workplace, the national level of the subsidiary, the transnational level of the firm and, also, of trade union international coalitions. In this research I chose the workplace level as the pivot of my analysis. However, I have already showed the necessity and the results of “extending”, following Burawoy’s method, from the workplace to the national dimension of the French and Italian subsidiaries (considering where possible other sites where I had not run my ethnography); and to the transnational dimension of the firm, showing the relations between the transformation of the labour process and Amazon’s profit strategies. Here I will “extend” to the transnational level of trade union coalitions by illustrating the connection (or their absence) with labour politics at the workplace level.

In order to analyse the actors and the levels of industrial relations, while accounting for their multiplicity, I drew on a variety of sources. The main bodies of sources consist of the observation of union activities and interviews with union members, union delegates and union officials at the workplace level (see Appendix 1). Interviews took place in a variety of settings, from the workplace to union local or national headquarters, including transnational meeting venues. The duration of interviews varied from one to over two hours. In addition, phone conversations and email exchange with unionists allowed me to complete interviews. Another important source of material were the meetings of transnational union coalitions. These meetings lasted several days, from two to three, and took place in different European cities (see Appendix 1). I could observe discussions and, during breaks have conversations with unionists (for further details, see Appendix 1). Participation to these meetings also helped me to expand my contacts with key informants from inside the transnational coalitions as well as with other scholars and researchers.

Where possible, I triangulated these sources with interviews with workplace managers in the French and the Italian subsidiaries. The analysis of documents, especially internal reports and collective agreements, represent another important thrust of evidence. Finally, press sources, collected via Factiva database, completed my set of sources.

7. Industrial relations under start-up regimes in France and Italy

In both countries, even if through different patterns and temporalities, the initial labour regime, in which worker effort's mobilisation was secured through responsible autonomy, gave way to another one in which worker effort was secured by technical and economic coercion. In this regime, and the priority for management is to prevent workers from mobilising collectively as a group with interests opposed to those of management.

This transition coincided with the consolidation of unions as independent actors (France) or the appearance of unions *tout court* (Italy). In both cases, Amazon did not hide its hostility toward unions, although as we saw in France, the company had showed a certain pragmatism in dealing with them thanks to the skills of its local management. We will try to understand what forms of power unions relied on to navigate the workplace and to develop their strategy.

7.1. *The state of the unions in France at the arrival of Amazon: contested neoliberalisation and union renewal*

When it arrived in Orleans, Amazon had many chances to remain immune to union action. On the one hand, as we saw, the French labour movement was in a process of crisis and transition. On the other hand, Amazon was still an unidentified object within an unidentified sector: it was difficult to understand whether it was logistics, retail, or tech industry *tout court*. The trade unions confederations differed in assigning the “new economy” workplace to a specific industry-level federation: telecoms with SUD-PTT, the CFTC and FO; consultancy firms with the CGT and the CFDT²⁶⁸. Today, instead, all Amazon's FCs are under either transport or commerce federations, a sign of the progressive normalisation and industrialisation of Amazon.

Also, unions were having a hard time in dealing with the ideological and organisational schemes that infused the workplaces of the “New Economy” (a term employed by themselves), and that we saw operate in a company such as Amazon. As explained by a member of the Trade Union Research Institute “IRES” and of CGT, interviewed by the French economic newspaper *Les Echos* (2000b):

We are a union [the CGT] for large companies and not very comfortable in new sectors. The problem of establishing ourselves is also due to the fact that, in companies in the new economy, everything is changing all the time. The context is not stable: recruitment is exploding, staff turnover is high, contracts are signed

²⁶⁸ The CFDT tried to take a step forward, at least on paper, by renaming its advertising and consultancy branch BETOR-PUB (with its 3.000 members) the “CFDT New Economy Union”.

individually... Virtually nothing that happens in the new economy corresponds to a traditional workplace. It is a bit like the Wild West, where employment rights are not a central concern.

Union officials felt that their organisations still did not manage the codes of the new economy and that the magmatic state of this sector, with high turnover and low attention to unions from workers, did not encourage them to consider investing this sector. Relatedly, scholarship on the French labour movement emphasised that in the early 2000s unions were consolidating their presence in its traditional strongholds rather than expand in the private and service sectors, small enterprises, and the peripheral segments of the labour market (Pernot and Pignoni 2008, 146–47; Bérout et al. 2008, 54–58).

On the other hand, the appeal of a company such as Amazon was strong and immediately raised the attention of the unions. In France, after a few months of activity, the company had already reached and exceeded the threshold of 50 employees (the legal bar that required the constitution of a company-level works council). In the US, two important unions, the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), were trying to penetrate, respectively, Amazon's call centres and warehouses. The campaigns, which were isolated from each other, were run in partnership, with new organising associations such as, respectively, WashTech²⁶⁹ and the Prewitt Organizing Fund (POF)²⁷⁰. The echo of this battle arrived in France. Furthermore, POF sent one of its members, Patrick Moran, to tour Europe in order to establish contacts and possible alliances with trade unions and other worker organisations.

It is not by chance that the first union to get involved with this embryonic Amazon alliance was SUD-PTT.

²⁶⁹The Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (WashTech) was a labour association founded in 1998 by high-tech agency temp workers at Microsoft. The state of Washington was at that time one of the areas with the highest density of high-tech in the US. Shortly after, WashTech affiliated with the CWA and run various campaigns to organize high-tech workers both in the Seattle area and on a national level. For an interesting discussion on the strategies of WashTech and a broader discussion on unions' organizational dilemmas in the "new economy" at the turn of the XXI century, see (Van Jaarsveld 2004).

²⁷⁰Sources on the origins and nature of the POF are meagre (in the US: *The New York Times* 2000b; *Bloomberg* 2000; *In These Times* 2001; in France: *Les Echos* 2000a; *Le Monde* 2000c). According to a working paper published by the US Chamber of Commerce (2013), the POF was established by in 1999 as a sort of contract clearinghouse for organisers. Prewitt was a non-profit organisation supported by grants from foundations and contracts from labour unions. In fact, though careful to describe itself as not being a union, Prewitt's model was to act in concert with, or on behalf of, one or another union in efforts to organize non-union employers. It was variously described as a self-funded nonprofit, a fee-for-service operation, "venture labour", and "an independent union recruiting group". By 2002, the fund had worked with such unions as SEIU (Service Employees International Union), UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees), AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees), the LIUNA (Laborers' International Union of North America), the UFCW through its affiliate RWDSU (Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union), the Mine Workers, and the California Nurses Association, as well as the AFL-CIO. For example, in 2006, the same year it received contracts valued at \$935,000 from SEIU and \$70,000 from Change to Win. The paper also reports that in 2006 POF came under fire within the labour movement for resisting unionization efforts by its own employees, some of whom were fired. The organisation appears to have ceased operations shortly after.

Box 14 – SUD and the transformations of the trade union movement in France

SUD is one of the youngest unions in France (1998) but its origins can be traced back to restructuring of union landscape started in the early 1980s (Connolly 2010). The process was sparked by the recoil of the labour movement, which was ongoing from the late 1970s with the sharp decline of labour conflicts and union memberships in a context of global capitalist restructuring (Ubbiali 1993)²⁷¹. The first union to react to the crisis was the CFDT, which launched a process of organisational rationalisation and political conversion from radical “self-management” (*autogestion*) to moderate “social dialogue” (Defaud 2009; Guillaume 2014). Inspired by the reflection of intellectuals close to the organisation, especially Pierre Rosanvallon, CFDT top leadership gave a “voluntaristic” turn to its approach to membership (Guillaume and Pochic 2014): rationalisation of union structure, with the merging of several branch federations ; centralisation of the confederal strike fund (Denis 2022; Tixier 1992); redefinition of the figure of the union member, considered now more as a recipient of services than a militant (Bourguignon and Floquet 2016); creation of professional “developers” in charge of recruiting new members (Guillaume and Pochic 2014); “managerialisation” of discourse and practices (A. Thomas 2013). Since the early 1990s, this organisational restructuring resulted in a progressive growth of the CFDT: at the beginning of the 2000s, the union would regain the level of membership it had in 1976, and it managed to increase its presence in the private sector and in small and medium size enterprises (B. Giraud, Yon, and Bérout 2018, 140)

This “reformist” shift (known as *recentrage*) sparked important change within and outside the CFDT. Outside, the relocation of the CFDT contributed to push CGT-FO, “for a long time a preferential partner of employer associations and governments”, to pursue “a more autonomous trade union policy since the 1990s” (Rehfeldt 2018, 620). Also the CGT, which had denied the crisis for a long time, in 1992 recognised its member losses and developed a series of attempts to adapt to the new context (Pernot 2006; Piotet 2009a; 2009b). Inside the CFDT, many union officials and members, especially those involved in the rank-and-file “*coordinations*” (Denis 1996), opposed to the *recentrage*. Eventually, they were pushed out of their union and form the “SUD” unions (*Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques*; renamed “*Union Syndicale Solidaires*”, USS, in 1998). The first one was SUD-PTT, formed in 1988 by unionists involved in a labour conflict against the privatisation of the French national postal service (PTT) (Coupé and Marchand 1998). Excluded from the CFDT, SUD-PTT joined the Group des Dix (G10), a coalition of independent unions created in 1981. The arrival of SUD-PTT – with its original but also contradictory militant style based on radical claiming, strong professional embeddedness, distance from political parties, refusal of limiting union action to work or company issues, use of legal rules to weaponise collective action (Sainsaulieu 1998; Denis 2003b; Bérout et al. 2011) – and of other SUD unions, that had emerged in other

²⁷¹ The debate on the decline and revitalisation of the labour movement has been particularly lively in France. In part inspired general theorisations (Touraine, Wieviorka, and Dubet 1984; 1987; Rosanvallon 1988), scholarship insisted on the irreversible crisis of the “French model” of unionism (Baumard and Blanchot 1991; Bevort and Labbé 1992; Groux and Mouriaux 1992; Labbé and Croizat 1992; Mouriaux 1998). Some of these scholars, especially the group led by Labbé and Andolfatto, adopted an organisational gaze and insisted on the problem of “bureaucratisation” and “institutionalisation” of union action and the decoupling of union structures from the workforce (see in particular Andolfatto and Labbé 2000); others, namely Groux and Moriaux, pointed at “external” explanations of the unions recoil, namely capitalist restructuring, mass unemployment and the fragmentation of standard work contracts. During the 2000s, however, a new generation of scholars challenged the thesis of an inevitable decline, critically examined the production and use of official statistics on (declining) labour conflict (Brochard 2003; Bérout et al. 2008; Penissat 2009), emphasised the recovering of union presence in the workplaces (Amossé 2004), and proposed to move the focus on new forms of mobilisation (B. Giraud 2006; Bérout et al. 2008).

sectors, accelerated a process of unification which led to the foundation of the *Union Syndicale Solidaires* (USS) in January 1998 (Ubbiali 2004). At the same time this acceleration produced a further recomposition: some “moderate” unions of the G10 did not agree with the social movement approach of the various SUDs²⁷², decided not to join USS and to merge in the *Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes* (UNSA). Thus, two poles eventually emerged from the G10: a “reformist” project, UNSA, and a “radical” one, *Solidaires*. Both these unions – together with the CFDT, the CGT and FO – would have a role in the institutionalisation of labour politics in Amazon French subsidiary.

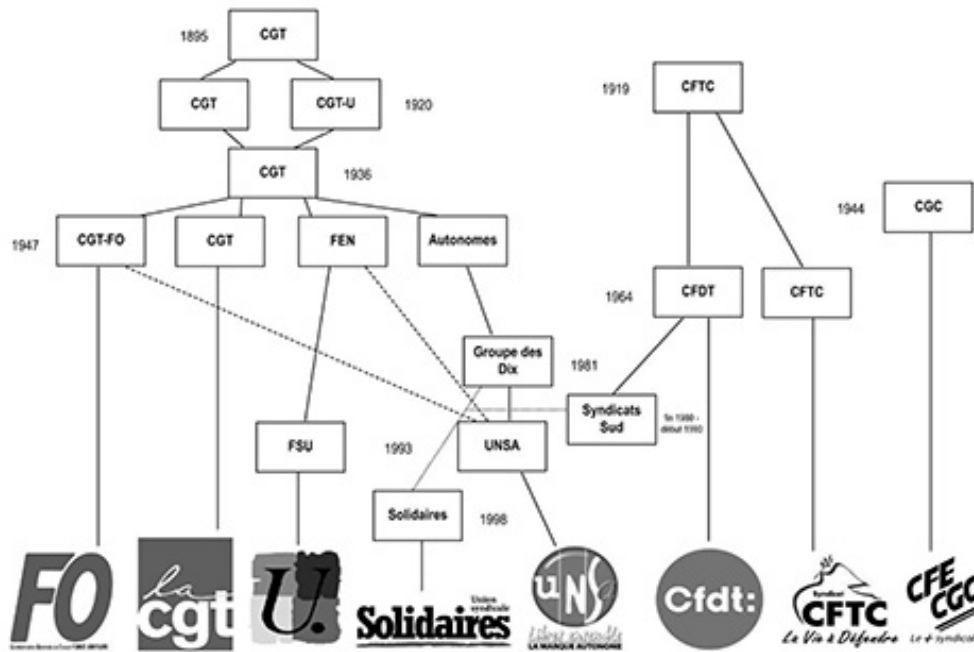


Figure 57 – The trade union landscape in France

(B. Giraud, Yon, and Bérout 2018)

SUD-PTT was the offspring of the self-management tradition within the CFDT and the radical style of the 1980s rank-and-file worker *coordinations* (Box 14), a tradition that the CFDT had rejected. SUD-PTT had its roots in two sectors, the postal services and the telecommunications, that overlapped with the magmatic e-commerce sector. The POF got in touch with SUD-PTT. In 2000 the online magazine *Transfer.net*, a sort of French version of *Wired*, published an interview to Patrick Moran and SUD-PTT two union officials: Luc Lecornu, from SUD-PTT, and Marie-Thérèse

²⁷² In 1993 SUD launched the AC! movement (*Agir contre le chômage*) which aimed at unifying the galaxies of militant unemployed organisations. Other examples were the cooperation of SUD first, and Solidaires later, with the alter-globalisation movement (with ATTAC), housing social movements (with *Droit au Logement*, DAL), and other organisations such as the Alert Network Against Inequalities (*Réseau d’Alerte contre les Inégalités*), the Human Rights League (*Ligue des Droits de l’Homme*), and *Droits Devant!!* (Rights Ahead) (Denis 2003a).

Deleplace, from SUD-PTT at France Telecom. In the interview, Lecornu and Deleplace emphasised the interest of their organisation for the development of the internet economy:

Although we are often accused of being archaic, we naturally turn to this sector [...]. In view of the Internet turn taken by France Telecom and the deregulation underway in the parcel post sector, we voted to broaden our field of intervention. As a result, SUD now covers all parcel and letter delivery activities and the communications sector, which includes the Internet and a large part of the new technologies. The Amazon case is therefore a happy surprise, exactly at the crossroads between these two areas.

(*Transfert.Net* 2000, my translation)

In other words, while the French government had decided to split the PTT in two separated companies, one for postal service and a telecommunication, SUD unionist worked to keep the two bodies united, aware of the imbrication between them, especially with the development of the internet²⁷³.

There was another key element in the conception of international organizing brought about by Moran and the POF, i.e. the articulation between the classic repertoire of action of trade unionism (deployed at the global scale) and supposedly “new” forms of action such as campaigns that targeted the reputation of firms and tried to mobilise wider sectors of the public opinion²⁷⁴:

Amazon is our first project. The aim is first and foremost to bring the issues to the public’s attention. We also want to show that the issue is international, worldwide (*Transfert.Net* 2000, my translation).

For Moran, the e-commerce industry was in its infancy, but that was precisely the decisive moment in which workers and citizens should raise the pressures on Amazon, in order to shape the pattern of its further development:

We chose to specialise in e-commerce because it is a form of new industrial revolution that is changing a lot of working processes. We need to set standards for working conditions now, while the sector is still in its infancy. Otherwise, companies will do it for us and it will be too late (*Transfert.Net* 2000, my translation).

Finally, SUD’s international and alter-globalist orientation was also decisive for the partnership with the POF. For both Moran and the two SUD-PTT union officials, the transnational cooperation

²⁷³ In this regard, the choice of the French government to divide the PTT within a broader process of privatisation and deregulation results, retrospectively, particularly anachronistic.

²⁷⁴ Actually, the “newness” of these practices is quite debatable. Scholarship on the history of the labour movements has widely analysed societal forms of mobilisations such as boycotts/buycotts and consumer activism (Frank 2003; Hawkins 2010).

between unions was of paramount importance, given the international deployment of Amazon, and its capacity to build its comparative advantage also on the lower labour cost of other geographical areas. Moran illustrated his vision of union activism in the new economy:

[...] the new economy has no limits or borders. It therefore needs to be approached on a global rather than a local scale. It also moves very quickly and will seek to take advantage of regions that are easier to dominate or exploit. Amazon has just opened a call centre in India, serving American customers. If these companies go to these countries, it is obviously to take advantage of the virtual absence of labour law [...]. It underlines the need for international standards of protection. If capital has the freedom to move wherever it pleases, employees should be able to do the same by banding together to defend themselves (*Transfert.Net* 2000, my translation).

Deleplace developed on the problem of Amazon's multinational structure to raise the question of the construction of international institution of worker representations. Drawing on the case of France Télécom, who had undergone a process of international restructuring after the opening to private capital, she claimed that such institutions were "fundamental" for strengthening unions' international cooperation:

[...] we called for the right of employees of the same company to join together, regardless of the country in which they are employed. The example of France Télécom, which we know very well at SUD Télécom, is interesting. The company is now present all over Europe and practically all over the world. Yet it has no group-level representation bodies. [...] We are currently asking for a group body to be set up at France Télécom. It is vital that these institutions become widespread, and will help to create a union fabric with strong international links. (*Transfert.Net* 2000, my translation)

This claim reflected the importance that SUD, but also most French and international trade unions, assigned not only to transnational union alliances, but also to their institutionalisation in representation bodies such as the works councils. The strategy of accumulating a countervailing power to that of multinational firms had been elaborated since the 1960s by the international trade secretariats of the metalworking, chemical and food sectors, which had been particularly affected by the process of internationalisation (C. Levinson 1972; Rehfeldt 1993; da Costa and Rehfeldt 2006; Erne 2008). In this phase, the trade union movement was at the peak of its strength. Their influence combined with fear for the increasing power of multinational firms, pushed the European Commission to promote workers' representation and collective bargaining in European multinational firms since the 1960s, even though many of these projects either failed or had to be discussed at length and deeply amended under the scrutiny of governments, unions, and employer associations. In the 1990s, this process of institutionalisation of European industrial relations got its form, even though

the balance of power had shifted in favour of employers and firms: the European Works Council (EWC) Directive came into force on September 1996²⁷⁵, the first World Works Councils were created in 1999, and the first European agreement negotiated by a EWC (in the automobile sector) was signed in January 2000 at Ford Europe, followed by another agreement at General Motors Europe in May 2000. It was in this context that that *Solidaires* developed its claim of an international institution of representation at Amazon. However, as we will see in the next pages, SUD-POF partnership would eventually fail to organise a union presence in the French workplace. It would take more 20 years to European union to obtain the constitution of an EWC, but the roots of this goal plunge in this epoch.

7.2. *The failure of the first organising attempt and the cooptation of unions in France (2000-2007)*

One of the side-effects of the failure of the partnership between SUD and the POF, is the fact that no memory of it has remained today in the rank of SUD's officials and members at Amazon. During my fieldwork, none evoked this campaign. Turnover among membership and the parallel transformation of the company had eroded any memory. The only source I could rely on were online archives of *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Les Echos*, and other minor online blogs/newspapers (such as *transfert.net* or *ZDNet.fr*).

During Amazon's first holiday season, on November 21st, 2000, a group of activists gathered out of the facility in Boigny-sur-Bionne. They were members of SUD and of the POF, including Moran. There was no Amazon France's employee among them. The warehouse had been operating for just three months and employed a few dozens of workers. At that time, workers used to work 10 hours per day on Monday and Tuesday and 5 hours each day from Wednesday to Friday. November 21st was a Tuesday, and workers were going to the warehouse ready to spend 10 hours inside. We can imagine that activist arrived at the facility by the start of the shift around 7am. Activists probably took place right out of the fence of the facility and, according to the press, they started distributing leaflets to the workers. According to *Libération*, the text contained an exhortation (*Libération* 2000):

Les salariés d'Amazon. com doivent s'unir face à leur patron ("Amazon workers must unite in front of their boss")

²⁷⁵ The EWC Directive seemed modest from a legal perspective since it only granted information and consultation rights. It did not contain mandatory collective bargaining, though it did not exclude it on a voluntary basis. Mandatory bargaining was included only for the constitution of a body of employee representatives for the purposes of information and consultation in all multinational companies employing at least 1.000 employees within the European Economic Area (EU plus Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein) and at least 150 in more than one Member State (da Costa and Rehfeldt 2008).

The leaflets denounced the precarity of temporary work contracts and overtime work. Union activists also criticised the distribution of shares to employees, stating that it was an unstable form of remuneration, and because it was in their eyes a way by which management tried to “buy” workers’ loyalty. Furthermore, the value off share had plummeted during the previous months because of dot-com burst²⁷⁶.

The initiative raised the attention of the national press. Several stories were published about this and other organising attempts of unions (and non-union worker associations) in the Internet economy. Vincent Marty, Amazon.fr head of operations, responded to the press. He stressed that all Amazon France employees worked full time and with a permanent contract, and that wages were “way higher than the minimum wage” (*Libération* 2000).

As I said, very few traces remain today of that attempt. Even the site’s general manager at the time, that I interviewed more twenty years later, said that he had no memory of that. The disappearance of this story from the union’s collective memory suggests that that impact of this initiative was ephemeral. Indeed, it was certainly so in the short-term. Despite Luc Lecornu immediately declared that “workers were particularly attentive to our leaflets” (*ZDNet* 2000), not a single workers decided to join the union, as reported by *Le Monde* (*Le Monde* 2001). It became clear to SUD members that within the warehouse the terrain was not ready for union organising:

A move as simple as this is not enough,’ says Marie-Thérèse Deleplace, federal secretary of SUD-PTT télécoms. A union presence can’t just be the result of the will of an organisation. You also need a will from within (*Le Monde* 2001, my translation).

To be sure, the leaflet distribution was quite an isolated episode. It does not seem that SUD and POF had been planning a real campaign of unionisation – in fact, the very idea of an organising campaign was rather foreign to the tradition of French trade unions (A. Thomas 2016). Anyway, the weak response of Amazon’s workers truncated any ambition.

As I showed in Chapter 3, in this very early phase Amazon’s workers were not particularly oriented to seek union’s presence in their workplace. The work process was still magmatic, and it left margins of autonomy and initiative to the workers. The internal labour market promised opportunities of professional ascension. Management adopted responsible autonomy to mobilise worker effort.

As stressed by interviewed veteran workers (who would later join the CFDT union), at that time unions were not present in the workplace. Quite the opposite, a *modus vivendi* between managers and workers governed the everyday social relations in the warehouse. In this context, margins for union

²⁷⁶ This was one of the reasons that fuelled the discontent of Amazon’s workers in the US (*Bloomberg* 2000; *The New York Times* 2000b; *In These Times* 2001).

action were very narrow and a leaflet distribution organised together with an unknown American NGO was doomed to produce little results. It is also possible that the failure of such a premature initiative would inhibit the further mobilisation of potential union members among the workers. In sum, despite its supposedly innovative repertoire of action (Connolly 2010; Le Queux and Sainsaulieu 2010), SUD failed in building up a solid membership in the workplace, confirming the problems of French unionism to organise workers out of their strongholds (Bérout et al. 2008; Pernot and Pignoni 2008).

Despite the “fiasco”, however, things were not doomed to remain quiet in the workplace. The management of the plant, however, did not rest on its laurels. Management understood quickly that, given the pressure of the local socio-institutional context, unions could not be kept outside the warehouse for a long time. First, workplaces with 50 or more employees had the obligation to have 4-year elections for the *Comité d’entreprise* (CE), the *Comité d’hygiène, de sécurité et des conditions de travail* (CHSCT), and the *délégués du personnel* (DP) (see, Rehfeldt 2018). Unions had the right to present their candidates at the election, although it was possible, in case turnout did not reach a 50% quorum, to have a second round with non-union lists. Second, the reforms of industrial relations, through which French governments (of different colours) tried to decentralise collective bargaining (Howell 1992; 2009; Amossé, Bloch-London, and Wolff 2008; Baccaro and Howell 2017), encouraged employers to negotiate at the workplace level on questions such as work time flexibility.

In sum, as any medium-sized employers based in France, Amazon had on the one hand the obligation, and on the other hand the incitation, to establish dialogue with union delegates or, in case unions were absent, worker-elected representatives. Furthermore, as explained by the site director (Fieldwork Quote 47), with the progressive growth of the workforce, there were bigger chances that at one moment some workers would decide to unionise. On top of that, in the French system of industrial relations it is very easy for a union to appoint a “union delegate” among the workers (*délégué syndical*, DS)²⁷⁷. In these circumstances, management understood, it was better to “orchestrate” union presence rather than being subject to it.

I have showed in Chapter 3 how management co-opted unions during the first period. The cooptation of the union not only allowed Amazon to comply with formal requirements of industrial

²⁷⁷ In workplaces with 50 employees or more, members of the same union (at least 2) have the right to set up a “union section” (*section syndicale*), which is entitled to certain facilities such as an office inside the premises of the plant (in workplaces with 200 employees or more). Representative unions – i.e., until 2008, CGT, CFDT, CGT-FO, CFTC, CFE-CGC, which were bestowed the status of “nationally representative” unions after WWII; any union with a 10% score at professional election in a given workplace or 8% in a given sector – are entitled to appoint one or more union delegates, depending on the size of the workplace. Since 2008 only candidates for the workplace election who have personally obtained at least 10% of the votes can be appointed as union delegates. Union delegates have time-off to rue their union activities. Individual accumulation of mandates (DP, CE/CSE, DS) is common and allows for the accumulation of time-off facilities.

relations but also to sign agreements that made work time more flexible. In that phase, the autonomy of union delegates was very weak and the direct relations between management and employees left very narrow margins to any independent union strategy. The subaltern incorporation of FO in the “internal state” (Burawoy 1979a) was consistent with FO’s tradition of “bread and butter” unionism (Benquet 2015; Rehfeldt 2018), which made it a quite reliable partner even for a company such as Amazon. As showed in Chapter 3, the situation changed after 2007: the transfer of the warehouse in a new facility, the taylorisation of the labour process, the quantitative and qualitative change of the workforce, and the erosion of the workers-managers personal relations jeopardised the social bases of the labour regime. Furthermore, these structural changes in the labour process and in managerial policies generated latent tensions that could be activated by new political actors at the workplace level.

7.3. *The new union politics and the rise of labour conflict in France (2007-2015)*

Around 2007, rapid changes took place in the union landscape of the new Amazon site in Saran. FO underwent a change in its leadership at the workplace level. The previous union delegate, that had signed the collective agreement on work time modulation left the company. His departure gave way to a new group of union members, willing to gain independence from management. The former general manager of the warehouse explained that the growth of the company brought in new workers. These new employees were more likely to support militant unionism, either because working conditions had objectively got worse or because these workers had already an experience of union militancy at their previous jobs (Fieldwork Quote 58). In this regard, there is evidence of a change in workplace politics. At FO Amazon, a new union delegate, a worker that had been just hired, was appointed. The new DS prompted a U-turn in the political line of FO at Amazon²⁷⁸. FO members formed a union section, opened a blog online and started recruiting new members on a set of demands on wages (pay increases) and working conditions (rhythms reduction, break duration etc.)²⁷⁹.

These claims were rooted in a context of growing conflict in the whole commerce sector (B. Giraud, Pélisse, and Penissat 2014; Pélisse, François, and Voldoire 2023). Since 2005, nominal hourly wages bargained in the commerce sector had stagnated and this was amplified by the diffusion of part-time jobs (Askenazy 2008). In Autumn 2007, several retailers had been touched by scattered

²⁷⁸ I know the identity of this union delegate, but I could not get in touch with him nor with any FO representative at Amazon. When I started my research, FO was had become a very tiny union. Old FO representative had either quitted the company. Information about the trajectory of FO, then, were provided by all other actors: workers, managers, and members of other unions, as well as press and other written sources.

²⁷⁹ The blog is no longer available, but some archives have been saved by the *Internet Archive*, and can be retrieved at this URL: https://web.archive.org/web/*/http://foamaz.over-blog.fr/. I was able to retrieve 25 blog posts, spanning from January 2009 to June 2011.

strikes. Few months later, in February 2008, in front of employers' refuse to negotiate wage increase, for the first time three French unions (FO, CFDT and CGT) called a nationwide strike in hypermarket chains which was described as an unexpected success (*Le Monde* 2008a; *Le Monde* 2008b; *Le Monde* 2008d; Askenazy 2008; Benquet 2010). The new-born e-commerce sector would not remain isolated by this movement. Yet, the first firm to be hit by a strike was not Amazon, but its French competitor CDiscount (part of the supermarket chain Casino, one of the biggest French groups). In May 2008, around 100 out 300 employees in CDiscounts warehouse went on strike over difficult working conditions and poor salary, responding to the call of FO. Strikers resisted ten days. Eventually, in front of wage losses and the company's legal counter-attack (a lawsuit for blocking access to the plant), they had to suspend the strike (01net 2008; 20minutes 2008).

The mobilisation reached Amazon months later. It started in in January 2009, when FO published released a list of claims:

January 2009.

CLAIMS 2009.

- 6,3% wage increase for the T1,T2,T3 and T3+ levels
- Introduction of an extra-month salary for all employees
- Team-level bonus
- Tickets restaurant: paid 40% sby the worker and 60% by the employer.
- Increase of break time: 10 minutes more
- Works Council's budget increase for recreational activities
- Night shift extra pay at 50%

Fieldwork Written Document 18 – FO Amazon France Logistique, list of claims, blog post, January 2009

Management did not accede to these demands. Hence, the FO union section called the first strike at Amazon France (and the first at the global level) on December 15th, during the Christmas peak of activity (*L'Express* 2009; *Le Figaro* 2009). The FO union delegate denounced harsh working conditions in the warehouse:

We're under a lot of pressure, we always have to go faster to satisfy the customer, and sometimes that puts our safety at risk. (*L'Express* 2009)

We're storing more and more, unloading huge pallets without any security. When we point this out, we're told 'deal with it'. Out of 7 hours' work, we only get 23 minutes' break, which is why we're asking for 10 minutes more. (*Le Figaro* 2009)

FO demanded 4,8%, a team-based bonus and an extra-month pay (*troisième mois*). Management did not open negotiations but decided unilaterally to increase wages by 1,5%. That was the last straw and FO called a strike, the first one at Amazon in France. In fact, it was the first strike ever at Amazon worldwide, but at that time it did not get any international resonance. The strike attracted attention from some national media, but participation was not very high: between 50 and 60 workers according to FO – only 40 according to *Le Figaro* (2009) – out of over 500 permanent workers (to which we should add over 700 seasonal temps. Eventually, the strike lasted a day and was not followed by any improvement in working and economic conditions. FO members were aware of the failure of their action. Before the press they denounced management's pressures on workers:

There are management services in the plant. Since Tuesday, managers have been coming to us saying “think about what you're doing”. (*Le Figaro* 2009)

On top of that, few weeks later, workers were informed that their PRP bonus would not be awarded. Over this issue, FO promoted another walkout on December 29th. This time participation was significantly higher, with around 170 workers (reported by FO). Yet, it did not force management to make any concession. Again, in front of management's rejection of any negotiation, workers returned to work without any concession. Nevertheless, the strike had some consequences in the longer run. symbolically marked the end of the small family start-up and the beginning of a phase of normalisation. As summarised by the HR director of the site:

We realised that we had become a big company. As usual, there was more and more standardisation of things like that, that people knew each other less, and that, yes, we had... we had passed... we had passed a stage. That's clear.

Fieldwork Quote 104 – Former HR director (2001-2013), ORY1, woman, ca. 60 years-old, interview, June 2023

7.3.1. *CFDT ex machina*

The experience of the mobilisation produced a chain reaction in the union landscape. Dozens of workers had joined the two strikes, although they were far from the majority. The movement, however, did not pay off, all claims being ignored by management. Workers that did not participate to the strike, however, were not necessarily pro-management. The transition to algorithmic bureaucracy was making many veteran workers discontent. Among them, there was a small group of workers. They were mainly women, had no previous experience in unionism but were not necessarily anti-union (see par. 3.1.2). The years spent working in Amazon's warehouse under the initial regime of responsible autonomy had developed a spirit of cooperation among them. On the one hand the y

considered that such a spirit was being betrayed by the new managerial orientations. On the other hand, they were distant from the new militant and adversarial course of FO. With professional elections approaching in 2011, these workers considered that unless they intervened directly in the process, FO would have had the monopoly of union representation. An alternative union had to be established. I was able to talk to two of these workers, two women who had joined the company twenty years before. At the time, they were in their 40s, and they were two veteran workers as well as experienced CFDT members.

Worker 1: Let me explain. In the company, as long as we had the management to put things in place, we didn't have any trade unions. Then, things changed and a union was formed. And indeed, the three of us quickly realised that it was the unions that were going to be able to negotiate on behalf of the employees. Right? Now, we had a union that was well established [FO, *author's note*], but we didn't necessarily have the same ideas about unionism, right? So, we thought that if we wanted to convey the ideas of the employees, we'd find it a bit... that didn't necessarily correspond to us... personally to our ideas, right? So, we decided to set up a union so that we could also bring our ideas to the table. Because the problem was that we knew that *that* union wasn't going to push our ideas.

Author: What ideas did they "represent" ?

Worker 2: Well, let's just say it was... Us, for example.... How can I put it... I don't know. I don't want to criticise.

Worker 1: Yes... it's complicated

Author: I understand, but you have legitimacy to say why you were not happy with that union

Worker 2: No, it is not a matter of being happy or satisfied...

Worker 1: We knew that eventually it would not work... it would not be in dialogue...

Worker 2: There was no constructive exchange! That's how we saw it. Afterwards, we may be wrong, but in fact, it was a bit like: "I present my thing, I want my thing!" We, the CFDT, were like "we present our thing, we develop it, we exchange ideas, we come up with solutions".

Fieldwork Quote 105 – Amazon workers and former CFDT union delegates, ORY1, women, ca. 40 years-old, collective interview, July 2018

Author: On what issue did you disagree? Was there any specific question?

Worker: It was much more about... about principles. So, in fact, it was much more about ... how would I give examples? About... For example, if management arrived at a meeting and didn't have the mandate to chair or gave a mandate to someone else. Well, they [FO unionists] didn't want to hold the meeting. You see, it was... things like that.

Fieldwork Quote 106 – Amazon worker and former CFDT union delegate, ORY1, woman, ca. 40 years-old, over 20 years-seniority, collective interview, July 2023

In the French system of industrial relations, forming a union was relatively easy. The only condition was that the unions was officially considered "representative" (Box 5). It suffices for a worker to join

a “representative” union to set up a union section. This small group of workers rapidly decided to get in touch with the CFDT. At that time, CFDT was the second largest union in France (in electoral terms), and, as we saw (see 7.1), had undergone a process of organisational renewal and political re-orientation that would let it to top CGT in a few years (Haute 2018). It was therefore likely that a group of workers in search of a “pragmatic” and “moderate” union would target CFDT. I tried to understand what role management played in this choice. After all, in 2002 the set-up of the FO unions section had been orchestrated by plant-management (see par. 3.3.2). However, the actors directly involved, interviewed managers and CFDT union members excluded this possibility, and no other evidence emerged in this sense. The founding members of CFDT-Amazon just told me that they got in touch with the local office of CFDT (*Union locale*) and then informed the HR director about their decision to bring the CFDT in. Management, on the other hand, did nothing to oppose.

However, it is important to consider that management had good reasons to allow this initiative. FO members were fiercely preparing for the next professional election of 2011; the appearance of an alternative union meant an opportunity to tame FO’s initiative. Amazon’s management was aware that professional elections were as unavoidable as union presence and mandatory negotiations. The new strategy was not to oppose elections but to navigate the system by taking advantage of the opportunities it provided.

There were two main advantages that management could secure by promoting professional elections. The first was, as in the case of the company-level collective agreements signed between 2002 and 2004 (see 3.3.1), legitimisation. Internal legitimisation in front of the workers; external legitimisation, by showing compliance with French labour law and customs. The second advantage was electoral competition among unions. Inter-union competition would break the union front and leave management with much more latitude, including the possibility of playing one union against each other.

7.3.2. *The professional elections of 2011*

CFDT members recollect that they presented their list only 15 days before the elections. Yet, they managed to undercut FO supremacy. At the first round, where only union lists could run, turnout got stuck under 50% in either worker/employees, supervisors, and engineers/managers electoral colleges. Hence, a second round took place, without quorum and open to union and non-union lists. Turnout remained relatively low in all colleges. Among workers and employees, FO collected 52% of cast valid votes, while CFDT summed up 48%. It is particularly remarkable the fact that in the *ouvriers/employées* electoral college, out of 235 voters, only 185 cast a valid vote, a sign of

dissatisfaction for the two union lists and of the difficulties for the two unions to consolidate their presence and popularity among the workers (see Appendix 2).

Elections took place also at the second FC that Amazon had opened in 2010 in Montélimar (MRS1). There, there was not any FO presence, nor CFDT. Instead, some workers presented a CGT list at the first and at the second round (since the *quorum* had not been reached at the first one). Thus, the CGT list had to compete with a non-union list. The result in the *employées/techniciens* college was of 29% for the CGT and 71% for the non-union list²⁸⁰. Like in ORY1, this figure underlines the difficulties of unions in electoral politics in this early phase. Turnout was over 60%.

To sum up, the first cycle of labour struggle in 2009 bore ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, it activated political tensions that had been accumulating in the workplace. The strike paved the way to the consolidation of a “renovated” FO, but also led to the immediate appearance of a challenger of FO’s monopoly representation: the CFDT. For what concerns management, they did not have any choice but to accept the rule of the game, namely the mandatory presence of unions through professional elections. However, apart from this formal obligation, management showed its strategic ability to navigate the institutions of industrial relations and especially to prevent an excessive strengthening of the unions and a possible extension of conflicts. In other words, to politically demobilise the workforce.

In the following years, social peace seemed to be secured in spite of the attempts of mobilisation of FO. In fact, with the arrival of CFDT union delegates, a certain normalisation of labour relations took place, with the signature of three important company-level collective agreements. One allowed occasional work on Sunday (2011); a second one (2013) opened to seasonal night shifts; the third one (2014) established special shifts (*équipes de suppléance*) for weekends and holidays. These firm-level agreements were signed in the wake of a broader process of deregulation of work-time in the commerce sector started in the 1990s and that would continue through the 2000s and 2010s, often resulting of strong mobilisations orchestrated by commerce firms such as Virgin or Conforama (Grimaud 2018; 2022). The first agreement was signed right after the elections, only by CFDT union delegates, which had just been elected at the works council. The second and the third, instead, were signed also by the FO and the CGT. The CGT had just opened its own union section and appointed its delegate in the workplace, after a split from the FO section. An agreement was signed by management and the CFDT (without FO) over occasional work on Sunday. The agreements, which remained valid through all the 2010s decade, included economic compensation in some cases higher than those prescribed by sectoral collective bargaining (for instance, 27% extra pay for night shifts

²⁸⁰ During fieldwork research, it was not possible to collect further information on this non-union list.

instead of 20% set by the non-food retail industry collective agreement), but allowed the company to significantly increase work-time flexibility.

At the same time, the taylorisation of the labour process continued and the expansion of the company in the French market reflected in growth of the logistics network. In 2010, before the elections, the second FC was open in Montelimar (MRS1), followed by the further expansion of ORY1 with the opening of two new picktowers (2011). In 2012, the third FC (LYS1) was opened in Chalons-sur-Saône, in an area which had lost more than 3.000 jobs with the shutdown of the local Kodak factory in 2007²⁸¹. Finally, in 2013, a fourth FC was inaugurated in the outskirts of Lille: LIL1, the largest French FC. The opening of these three warehouses in the space of three years illustrated the acceleration of Amazon's and e-commerce growth even in a country such as France where e-sales had grown slowly for years. It illustrated Amazon's will to invest in France, but also showed to the workers of ORY1, who had tried to raise their voice, that they were disposable. The multiplication of Amazon's warehouses not only in the transnational space, as it was stressed by some scholars (Vgontzas 2020), but also in the national space, created redundancy for the company (who was able to redispach its orders in case of strikes or blockades) thereby undermining workers' structural power. For those workers of ORY1 that wanted to carry on a struggle the obstacles increased. Not only they had a competing union with a more moderate stance, but they had to cope with the fact that a shutdown in the only site of Orleans would have been easily bypassed by the company's capacity to use its algorithm to rapidly re-plan its flows so as to elude any chokepoint. The solution was to mobilise at least another warehouse, but it took time before the new workforce became available, at least in part, to engage with industrial conflict. Thus, for the four years following the strike of 2009, Amazon enjoyed relative social peace, during which no strike was declared, volumes increased, and the labour process was further taylorised.

7.4. The state of Italian unions. Neo-liberalisation and neo-corporatism

In Italy, the development of labour conflict and industrial relations took place later but more rapidly, and it followed another pattern. First, as I showed in the previous chapters, the stage of development of Amazon's labour process was more advanced, and growth progressed more quickly. While in France, it took a decade to open a new warehouse and the new warehouses were all of the second generation, in Italy it took six years. In 2011, Amazon inaugurated MXP5 in Piacenza/Castel San Giovanni; in 2017 Amazon Italy opened two robotised FCs (TRN1 and FCO1) and a non-sort

²⁸¹ With the enthusiastic approval and support of Arnaud Montebourg, socialist Minister of industrial recovery under President Hollande and MP elected in the area. Amazon also received important financial support from the government as reward for the creation of jobs in that territory (*Le Monde* 2012a; 2012b; *Les Echos* 2012; *L'Humanité* 2013).

FC (MXP4), dramatically increasing its logistic capacity. Second, and this is the aspect that I am going to analyse, the situation was different in terms of union politics and labour regulation.

When Amazon arrived in Italy, the labour movement was amid a deep crisis. In the early 1970s Italian unions stood out as extremely militant, highly political, and “pan-syndicalist” in their strategic orientation and behaviour. Then, like in the rest of western countries, the Italian labour movement underwent a trajectory of decline. Following the traumatic defeat of the metalworkers’ union in the FIAT strike of 1980, the three confederal unions, CGIL, CISL and UIL, suffered an erosion of their political, economic and organisational power (Accornero 1993; Locke 1995). Capitalist restructuring drought the sources of union strength in the manufacturing sector (Graziani 1975; 1998; Barca and Magnani 1989; Barca 1997). A pro-market turn in the ideological reorientation of political elites, including the Italian communist and post-communist Left (Cattabrine 2012). The specificity of the Italian case was the rapidity and the radicality of this twist (Baccaro and Howell 2017, 121). In the space of a decade, between the beginning of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the trade union movement found itself devoid of its structural and ideological tenets. In the midst of a deep political and financial crisis, the two tripartite agreements signed in 1992 and 1993 radically reformed the industrial relations system. The automatic wage indexation to inflation (the so-called “*scala mobile*”; the architrave of the previous regime), was abolished; the rules of collective bargaining formalised a two-level system, with the company-level agreements completing the provisions of industry-level collective agreements (*Contratto collettivo nazionale di lavoro*, CCNL) setting; for what concerns wage formation, industry-level negotiations linked negotiated wage increases tightly with the expected inflation rates decided by the government; productivity increase were not to be distributed at the industry level, but only at the firm or territorial level. The political rationale was keeping inflation under check: planned inflation became the ceiling within which wage increases could move (Gaddi 2023). The new bargaining structure, however, had also the potential to determine a growth of real wages below productivity, precisely because of the under-development of company-level negotiation. The result, in fact, were two decades of real wage stagnation combined with economic slow-down (Tronti 2007; 2010; Fana and Fana 2019; Maccarrone 2023). Despite this had become clear by the mid-2000s, no significant change in the bargaining structure was introduced to correct this problem. As stressed by Baccaro and Howell (2017), the new system represented a delicate political equilibrium among different interests, and this made it difficult to reform it.

Indeed, unions reacted quickly to the crisis, already in the 1990s. The specificity of this reaction, however, was that this “resurgence” took place not in the workplaces but in the arena of tripartite concertation and policymaking. The participation of the unions to the process of reform has been read under different perspectives. The dominant interpretation, developed at the turn of the century,

stresses the capacity of unions to react to the crisis by taking responsibility and engaging with concertation *and*, at the same time, to increase unions' internal democracy by undergoing organisational reform (Baccaro 1999; Baccaro, Hamann, and Turner 2003).

Yet, this optimistic reading started to be more nuanced one decade later. The slowing down of union and collective bargaining reforms, which had already been signalled at the beginning of the 2000s (Baccaro, Carrieri, and Damiano 2003), was confirmed in the following years. On the one hand, Confindustria withdrew its support to the reform process of workplace representation. On the other hand, renewed divisions among confederal unions cooled down the enthusiasm for union democracy. The preferences of actors returned toward a more classic form peak-level of bargaining.

On the other hand, the choice of confederal unions to accept fiscal restraint and labour market deregulation only gave an *appearance* of union strength. In the medium/long term, this choice undermined unions credibility in front of the workers (Tassinari 2019). Engaging with tripartite concertation meant that unions neglected workplace organising as the source of their power. On top of that, whereas the neo-corporatist phase of the 1990s helped to resolve the inflation emergency and the financial crisis of the Italian state, the payoffs for workers were poor as real wages stagnated and precarious employment spread over the Italian labour market.

In the aftermath of the Great Recessions, the situation changed radically (Regini and Colombo 2011; Baccaro and Howell 2017; Tassinari 2019). Governments needed to push forward a new agenda of reforms. This time however, the alignment was not in favour of union involvement. On the one hand governments were either centre-right (Berlusconi IV, 2008-2011), technical (Monti I, 2011-2013) or centre-left (Renzi I, 2014-2016) which for different reasons were less inclined to negotiate with unions. The consolidation of a more bipolar party system and the resulting increase in government strength reduced its reliance on concertation as a source of legitimation (Negrelli and Pulignano 2010). On the other hand, unions had been politically worn out by their commitment with a series of reform that did not compensate the workers; this meant that unions had lost a great deal of legitimacy among Italian workers, so they added little political capital to policy-making.

The unions could not stop the wave of reforms on labour market, pensions, and collective bargaining. Especially from what concerns this last element, two events undermined the primacy of sectoral collective bargaining. First, in 2009, a national agreement explicitly set out to reform the architecture of Italian collective bargaining. Hailed as a historic event, the 2009 agreement did not fundamentally alter the existing system. Rather, it confirmed the dual structure introduced by the 1993 protocol. The 2009 agreement also increased the duration of industry-level agreements, from two to three years, linked industry-level wage increases not to Italy's planned rate of inflation but to an EU-wide predictive index. Moreover, it reiterated the commitment that decentralized bargaining

should take place only on issues explicitly delegated by the industry contracts and therefore not concern topics already negotiated at other levels. Finally, it affirmed the need for government to increase the diffusion of decentralized bargaining by introducing special tax advantages. The CGIL refused to sign it (Pulignano, Carrieri, and Baccaro 2018). Then, some major employers, such as FIAT, decided to opt out from the metal industry CCNL (2010) (P. Ichino and Leonardi 2011; Gourgues and Sainty 2015); Confindustria and confederal unions reached an agreement that allowed for further collective bargaining decentralisation, while maintaining the existence of national-level sectoral agreements (Meardi 2014)²⁸²; the Berlusconi government, who was under the pressure of the Eurozone crisis, considered the agreement unsatisfactory and approved an emergency austerity budget unilaterally. The budget decree introduced a significant reform of collective bargaining, allowing company-level agreements to derogate *in pejus* from CCNLs and labour law on several subjects, including regulations on unfair dismissals (A. Perulli and Speziale 2011; Leccese 2012). This constituted a considerable decrease of coordination, at least on paper (Tassinari 2019)²⁸³. A few years later, a centre-left government would also change the rules for layoffs (see Chapter 5). In sum, in comparison with the previous decade, 2010s was a particularly favourable context for employers such as Amazon, who faced politically fragile unions and a policy context favourable to pro-market reforms²⁸⁴.

* * *

In comparison, France and Italy underwent a similar pattern of neo-liberal reforms (Amable, Guillaud, and Palombarini 2012; Amable and Palombarini 2021). At the industrial relation level, both in France and Italy collective bargaining was being decentralised, and the discipline against unfair layoff was under pressure (Amable 2016; Baccaro and Howell 2017).

However, two structural differences between the Italian and the French system must be stressed. First, the role of the state as coordinator of the labour market dynamics, from wage formation to

²⁸² The June 2011 inter-sectoral agreement on representativeness and derogations from industry-wide agreements states that company-level agreements can introduce temporary and experimental modifications to rules set by industry-wide agreements, although in accordance with the limits established by the same industry-wide accords. The agreement introduces new rules on the certification of representativeness for participation in industry-wide bargaining at national level, and on the validity of company deals.

²⁸³ Scholarship on industrial relations suggests that in practice second-level bargaining did not grow as expected, despite the institutionalization of firm-level bargaining since 1993 (Pulignano, Carrieri, and Baccaro 2018). According to a study of *Banca d'Italia*, the number of workers covered by firm-level collective agreement declined from 64% in the 1990s to 54% in the 2000s (Banca d'Italia 2009). In fact, scholars stress, a single event gave a lasting boost to decentralized bargaining: the entry of the public sector into collective bargaining, after a wage freeze imposed in 1994-1995. Collective bargaining covers almost all civil servants, including decentralized bargaining (Rehfeldt 2007; Carrieri 2010).

²⁸⁴ The context was also more favourable internally since Amazon had consolidated its position in the European market.

collective bargaining coverage, remained crucial in France. In Italy, for different historical reasons²⁸⁵, state intervention in collective bargaining and wage formation is weaker (or less intrusive). There is no statutory minimum wage (and confederal unions have been traditionally hostile to it) and no legislative extension of sectoral collective agreements.

Second, the political role that unions played in the transformation of industrial relations has been different in Italy and France. In a first phase unions, united, actively participated to the reforms in Italy. This gave them influence in policy making and contribute to reinforce them institutionally. At the same time, confederal unions, spent all their political capital in this process but failed to obtain substantial gains for the working class. In the new millennium, they were no longer able to impose their role. It was up to government whether to resurge or dismiss concertation according to their preferences at the moment (Pulignano 2003; Tassinari 2019). Unions in the beginning of 2010s were organisations that kept a remarkable organisational strength. They were entrenched in a set of labour regulation institutions such as sectoral and territorial collective bargaining. They had a network of offices for the provision of administrative services to their member. Also thanks to this, union density of confederal unions is among the highest in Europe. Unions are imbricated in a complex multi-level machine of labour regulation – the reader should remember, in this respect, the way how unions had the latitude to intervene in the training process of Amazon’s temporary workers (Chapter 5).

However, the content of these influence, the results of this widespread presence were more and more eroded. The decline of real wages in the three last decades, Renzi’s jobs act of 2014, and the possibility for company-level agreements to derogate CCNL illustrate this hollowing out in the most effective way. In France, as we saw, unions did not take the same responsibility in the process of neoliberal reform. Reforms were mostly state-led, and unions were much less involved²⁸⁶. On the one hand they did not have the opportunity to influence the reform. On the other hand, their opposition to them, even if not unanimous and not equally radical, this prevented the informal co-optation of French into the neoliberalised framework of industrial relations. French unions maintained an antagonistic attitude towards employers and a greater capacity of mobilisation during crucial political conjunctures (1995; 2003; 2016; 2019; 2023). The political fragmentation and the competition within the union front (both superior to Italy), as well as employers’ recalcitrance to negotiate, contributed to the survival of an adversarial approach and to the instability of social dialogue (Morel 1994; Bevort and

²⁸⁵ One of the founding principles of the Italian system is “collective autonomy” i.e. a considerable space of self-regulation that heteronomous sources (the law) is supposed to leave to organised interests (unions, employer associations etc.) in order to discipline their socio-economic relations by means of contracts and negotiations. In this respect, the system has traditionally retained low legislative regulation (Accornero 1993; Regalia and Regini 1998; Cella and Treu 2009).

²⁸⁶ Even if some unions were more involved than others, see the 1995 peak-level agreement (*Accord National Interprofessionnel*) of 1995 and the partial support of certain unions on pensions and labour market reforms.

Jobert 2011; Pélisse 2019)²⁸⁷. French unions also maintained a greater capacity of mobilisation – although less in the workplace than in the street; in addition, unions’ opposition rarely succeeded in thwarting the main reform projects²⁸⁸ – while Italian unions lost a great deal of this capacity²⁸⁹. To be sure, Italian unions have one of the highest rates of membership in Europe, while France one of the lowest (Batut, Lojkine, and Santini 2023); however, in the last two decades, France reported a much higher level of labour mobilisation than Italy (Vandaele 2016; Pilati and Perra 2020).

In other words, the consequence of the restructuring of Italian industrial relations were not so much in the formal institutional re-design, as in the impact on concrete unions politics. At the central, as well as at the workplace level. The wave of labour conflict that affected the logistics sector since the beginning of the 2010s in Italy is the most evident representation of this problems. During the previous decade, the logistics sector had undergone a deep restructuring, with increasing capital centralisation but also increasing employment fragmentation and outsourcing (Mento and Violante 2015). As a result, work in the warehouses had been subcontracted to pseudo-cooperatives who recruited mainly immigrant workers. These workers had to endure deteriorated working conditions and very unstable employment conditions. In most of the cases the confederal unions ignored this segment of the workforce or were not able to intervene. While centralised collective bargaining was under the attack of employers and government, in the logistics sector an unexpected cycle of mobilisation emerged, carried on by COBAS unions (SI-COBAS and ADL-COBAS) and immigrant workers (Cuppini and Pallavicini 2015; Benvegnù and Cuppini 2018; Cillo and Pradella 2018; Massimo 2020c). The COBAS challenged the capacity of confederal unions to represent this specific workforce and imposed themselves as interlocutors of employers’ associations (Bologna and Curi 2019).

Table 28 – Comparing Italian and French industrial relation systems.

Author’s elaboration based on Baccaro and Howell 2017; Tassinari 2019.

	France	Italy
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²⁸⁷ Although other scholars stress the organisational weakness of French unions, the emergence of a professionalised trade unionist system and also the dependence of unionists on their employers for their funding (Andolfatto 2010; Andolfatto and Labbé 2011; 2012).

²⁸⁸ The most renowned occasion in which union and other social movement mobilisations obtained the withdraw of a reform project was in 1995 with reform of *Contrat première embauche* (CPE), which aimed at reducing employment protection for young workers (under-26) in order to encourage job creation (Béroud and Mouriaux 1997).

²⁸⁹ The last massive mobilisation of Italian unions dates to 2002, when the CGIL alone gathered 3 million persons in the streets of Rome, against the project of abrogation of “Article 18” – a part of the 1970 Workers’ Statute protecting workers on open-ended contracts from unfair dismissals – brought about by the centre-right Berlusconi government. Eventually, the government renounced to the reform. Twelve years later (October 2014), as recalled by Tassinari (2019, 21), the CGIL held another demonstration in Rome. Matteo Renzi’s centre-left government was putting Article 18 under pressure again. This time, “only” one million workers rounded up to protest the reform project called “Jobs Act”, while CGIL and UIL called for a general strike (CISL acquiesced to the reform). The outcome this time was very different: the unions failed, and the reform was unilaterally adopted by government and voted by the parliament.

Union Density	7,9% (2009-2011)	35,13% (2009-2011)
Union landscape	Pluralist fragmented	Pluralist unitarian
Neo-corporatist experience	No	Yes (1990s; partially in the 2010s)
Sectoral CB Coverage	92% (2004-2008)	85% (2009-2011)
Main mechanism of coordination	Statutory (minimum wage; extension of sectoral CB; professional elections; mandatory negotiation); Conventional (<i>Conventions collectives de branche</i>)	Conventional (CCNLs)
Estimated union density at Amazon	10% ²⁹⁰	20% ²⁹¹

In Piacenza, as I discussed in Chapter 4, the situation was particularly tense since the area was one of the epicentres of the logistics sector and, consequently, of the labour movement. Here the presence of the COBAS was particularly strong: all the largest warehouses were run by cooperatives on behalf of multinational companies such as IKEA, GLS, TNT, XPO etc., and they had been affected by labour mobilisations led by the SI-COBAS union. When Amazon arrived in the area, the “threat” of the SI-COBAS was real. Yet, as we discussed in Chapter 3, the specific characteristics of Amazon’s labour regime (the politics of the labour process and the internal labour market), made MXP5 immune to the external pressure of SI-COBAS²⁹². In this respect, we could see a parallel with the French situation: it was not an outsider union that managed to unionise Amazon.

I have already illustrated the structural conditions that explain the isolation of Amazon’s workplace in Piacenza, from the real battle that was taking place in the surrounding logistics area, but it is important to summarise them again. In the few years following the opening of the FC (2011-

²⁹⁰Unions did not precisely declare their membership. As reminded by Kassem, disclosing such figures may impact their leverage vis-à-vis Amazo (Kassem 2022b). Drawing on information given by CFDT members, i.e. that by between 2018 and 2019 their union had around 250 members, I estimate membership of other unions proportionally to their share of votes at 2015 professional elections: CGT ca. 145 members, SUD ca. 70 members, CAT ca. 52 members, CGT-FO ca. 20 members, CFTC ca. 20 members. The total is ca. 550 members, out of 5.900 direct employees, corresponding to over 9%, which is a realistic measure of union membership in a private company in France.

²⁹¹Italy had the same problem of lack of transparency on union density. The only data I was able to collect were limited to the MXP5 plant. I estimated, on the base of unionists’ partial declaration, that CISL had around one hundred members, CGIL also one hundred but slightly less than CISL, UGL around fifty members, and UIL around thirty. Considering that the FC’s permanent workforce counts around 1.600 workers, we can therefore estimate a membership rate of 20%, temp workers excluded.

²⁹² Even at the time of my ethnography, despite the degradation of worker-management relationship, SI-SOBAS failed to make inroads in the workforce.

2014), Amazon recruited predominantly local and young workforce; the labour process was still relatively simple (even if more advanced than in France at the beginning of the 2000s); the internal labour market offered opportunities of professional ascension to loyal workers; the relatively slow numbers of employees allowed a direct relationship with the site's top managers. The difference with France, is the rapidity of this process of construction and the fast superseding of this initial labour regime, that in France survived for almost ten years, while in Italy lasted half a decade. We can now dig into local Amazon's relations with Italian unions and the institutions of labour regulations.

7.5. *The exclusion of unions in Italy in the first phase (2011-2015)*

Differently from what we saw in France, Amazon was able to keep the unions out of the workplace during the first phase. The reason of this divergence is in the articulation between the micro-level of the workplace and the macro-level of the national system of industrial relations.

In France, at the moment of Amazon's establishment in the beginning of the 2000s, labour law imposed mandatory professional elections; furthermore, the Aubry laws of the late 1990s prolonged a trajectory of reform aiming at fostering company-level collective bargaining. For instance, firms were allowed to introduce more work time flexibility but had to negotiate it with union-elected or union-appointed worker representatives²⁹³. Furthermore, it is useful to recall it, Amazon management was so convinced of the necessity of having a (controlled) union representation in the workplace that it made efforts, successfully, to persuade Amazon's US headquarters to accept a form of union presence.

In Italy, at the beginning of the 2010s, union representation in the workplace did not rely on legal provisions but on *de facto* presence in a workplace. Because of the long tradition of "collective autonomy" and the rooted mistrust of state intervention in the matter, industrial relations have remained much less formalised in law. Much was left to actors' self-regulation and to labour jurisprudence. This resulted in the absence of any mechanical form of recognition of unions in the workplace, even if in practice employers used to recognise them once that a union proved to have membership in the workforce.

Amazon, however, was not an ordinary employer. Its antiunion approach to employment relations could be constrained only by strong legal mechanisms or by an exceptional labour mobilisation. Therefore, in France management accepted unions in the because it was aware of the

²⁹³ To be sure, the spirit of industrial relations reform was to question the monopoly of unions on the representation of employees in the firm. The increasing possibility for firms to negotiate with non-union worker representatives is particularly meaningful in this respect (Howell 1992; 2009; Baccaro and Howell 2017). Nevertheless, other authors stressed that this intention remained largely on the paper and unions' *de facto* monopoly of representation is far from being eradicated (Yon 2019).

legal obligation. In Italy, instead, Amazon had no incentive or constraint to recognise unions. This aligned with the company's antiunion stance. Therefore, unions had to build up an actual presence among the workforce before.

In order to get in touch with workers, the unions had two weapons. One was the role unions played in the bilateral body of temporary work. As we saw in Chapter 6, via the bilateral body, the unions intervene in the process of training of temporary workforce (see par. 6.1.3). The second instrument, more extensive, is service unionism. In the last decades, confederal unions (but also, alternative unions such as the COBAS), have developed a network of offices providing administrative services for members. These services are offered not only to workers but also to retired or unemployed people. The only condition to access these services is union membership. This *quasi*-Ghent system contributes to keep union density relatively high in Italy (Carrieri and Feltrin 2016; Moro 2019; 2020; Bellini et al. 2022). The provisions of these services (the so-called *Sindacato dei servizi*) is a base for the embedding of unions in the Italian society, an alternative way of organising that allowed unions to maintain a spread presence in the territory and a link with workers, in an increasingly fragmented productive fabric where unionisation in the workplace has become more difficult. Critiques of this phenomenon stresses precisely that this adaptation reinforces the disconnection between unions and the workplace, replacing intervention on working conditions with the intermediation for the provision of welfare benefits. We will see that in Amazon these ambivalences of Italian unionism emerge and bear with them a series of consequences on labour politics.

During the first four years of operation of MXP5, unions did not manage to build up a presence in the workplace. No evidence was found of a specific attempt of confederal unions to organise the workplace. This is not a great surprise, since scholarship on union revitalisation stressed the lack among Italian confederal unions of an explicit organising policy (Heery and Adler 2004; Nizzoli 2016). Italian unions, which during the 1990s increased their institutional resources through participation to social pacts, had less incentive in engaging with classic organising strategies (Baccaro, Hamann, and Turner 2003), intended as campaigns and other social movement strategies for the extension of membership among the “unorganised” (namely in the service sector, among immigrant workers etc.)²⁹⁴. By the turn of the decade, despite some attempts of innovation (Ambra 2013; Pirro and Pugliese 2015), the situation had not considerably changed. Italian unions had not fully integrated the new strategies of revitalisation, even if through the provision of welfare

²⁹⁴ The literature on union organising is extremely rich. It built up on a theoretical renewal that in the end of the 1990s brought mobilization theory into industrial relations, then dominated either by institutionalism or rational choice (Kelly 1998; Atzeni 2005); for important empirical and theoretical contributions, see (Johnston 1994; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; L. Turner, Katz, and Hurd 2001; Frege and Kelly 2004; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Milkman and Voss 2004; Ibsen and Tapia 2017; Holgate, Simms, and Tapia 2018) ; for the import of this literature in France, see (B. Giraud 2006; 2009; Bérout et al. 2008; Bérout 2009; A. Thomas 2016); in Italy, see (Ambra 2013; Pirro and Pugliese 2015; Nizzoli 2017).

intermediation services unions maintained a link with their membership *out* of the workplace (Nizzoli 2017).

When Amazon opened the warehouse (MXP1), it complied with the constraint of adopting a CCNL of reference, apparently without hesitations. The application of a sectoral agreement entailed the obligation to adopt the contract's qualification/remuneration. The company, or to be more precise, the Amazon subsidiary who runs Italian FCs (Amazon Italia Logistica, AIL), chose the CCNL of "*Terziario, Distribuzione, Servizi*", one of the largest CCNL in Italy, covering over 2.8 million employees. Sometime later AIL would also join Confcommercio, the main business association among the signatories of the CCNL. It adopted also a territorial collective contract for the province of Piacenza that had been signed by the territorial branches of Confcommercio and confederal unions²⁹⁵. Interestingly, Amazon changed its orientation toward the CCNL of reference in the following years. Already in 2015, when the company moved to the new MXP5 FC, it opened, in the same plant, a sortation centre (MXP8). This SC was run by another society (Amazon Italia Transport, AIT). The employees of AIL were covered by another CCNL: Transport and Logistics.

Why did Amazon choose to adopt a CCNL and why *that* CCNL? I interrogated Italian management (January 2023) and Confcommercio representatives in Piacenza (March 2019). On both occasions responders avoided to explain. We can make the hypothesis that a CCNL was not only a constraint but also a framework that management could use to define employment relations. After all, the provisions of the contract on work time and the use of temporary work offered already margins of flexibility large enough.

In absence of unions and company-level collective bargaining, and with a CCNL flexible enough, management was able to govern employment relations unilaterally during the period between 2011 and 2016. As we saw in Chapter 4, management first introduced the global PRP bonus based on collective performance of workers; then; around 2016, it replaced it with a standard wage increase for all workers, who were paid slightly more than the wage set by the CCNL.

The provisions of the CCNL allowed management to organise work shift with a certain autonomy as well. When the volumes started growing, around 2015, the company introduced night shifts which were allowed by the CCNL. Night work was formally on a voluntary base but *de facto* the burden was passed mainly on the increasing mass of temporary workers.

The increasing activity of the warehouse, the (digital) taylorisation of the work process, and the introduction of night shifts contributed to a significant degradation of working conditions. In this

²⁹⁵ The contract included a bonus, awarded to workers in case of an annual increase of the whole workforce of the commerce sector of the province, that would become a matter of negotiations between the unions and Amazon.

context, however, unions were not able to intervene. By that time, unions had no official presence in the workplace.

However, there were some members among Amazon employees already. This was not the result of a deliberate campaign of organising. More prosaically a significant number of workers had become members the union to access the administrative services provided by the unions. At least once a year, many Amazon workers showed up at the local offices of unions to complete their income tax return or to submit demands of social provisions. In exchange for the assistance received, employees could join the unions. They went there not as Amazon workers, but as users of a service provided by unions to ordinary employees. Their membership did not mean any special involvement in union activities at Amazon. Therefore, for years, their membership went unnoticed in the workplace. Unions, on the other hand, did not pay special attention to Amazon workers during the first three years. Between 2011 and 2014, the number of employees had exploded from 61 to more than 450, Amazon was the largest creator of employment in the area, its working conditions appeared better than the average logistics sector: unions did not have any special reason to focus their union activities on this workplace²⁹⁶.

On the other hand, COBAS unions, that in that same period were engaging in a fierce battle to unionise the sector of outsourced warehouses were too busy in subcontracted warehouses to dedicate efforts to Amazon workers. After all, as a SI-COBAS members explained to me, “the strategy of the COBAs is not to run after the worker. We wait. It is the worker that, when he can take it any longer, has to come to us. We can help, we can organise blockades and strikes, but the initiative must be of the worker’s”²⁹⁷.

In conclusion, between 2011 and 2015, Amazon management had the time to establish the plant, kicking off operation and run them unilaterally. The only, slight, constraint was the application of a sectoral collective contract, which was flexible enough. Unions were *personae non gratae* in the warehouse, because the company’s anti-union ideology combined with the orientation of local management. Unions, on the other hand, were still far from understanding the impact of Amazon on the logistics sector and on local and national industrial relations.

²⁹⁶ The warehouse’s workforce constituted already a large pool of potential members; yet, as we saw, the unions had already their way to recruit them through their offer of services.

²⁹⁷ Interview with N.H., migrant warehouse worker and union leader for SI-COBAS, 2015. The interview was carried out during the research for my master dissertation at the ENS and EHESS (Massimo 2015).

7.6. *The unionisation of the Italian workplace (2015-2016)*

Things started changing between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016. Working conditions got worse in the warehouse. The direct relationship between workers and management also deteriorated, as we saw in Chapter 3.

A bunch of workers decided to get in touch with unions. I was able to interview and meet several times one of these workers, Tommaso. This worker was one of the veterans and he was one of those workers that management had been capable to mobilise for years with the promise of professional ascension (namely of becoming team leader and one day manager). In 2015, he was sick of his workplace and, he said, he was ready to quit. Yet, he decided that it was better to remain and try “to change things from inside”. There is a certain amount of rhetoric in this story. Like it often happens in front of episodes of *voice*, it is hard to distinguish the choice from the constraint. Perhaps at that moment he realised that there were not many opportunities for him outside Amazon. Anyway, he made his decision and found in the union some help:

I found myself thinking about really creating something bigger and therefore something that went against what were the impositions of the company. And being unfamiliar with the union, I simply thought of a sentence that you may be familiar with. It's in *The Art of War*: “the enemy of your enemy is your friend”, right? I always heard from managers, “Please let's avoid to let unions come in this year,” okay? This was one of the things I was hearing at that time.

Fieldwork Quote 107 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, September 2020.

He was not acquainted with the world of unions. However, he knew that there were some union members among his colleagues. Indeed, Tommaso was not the only one who was trying to open a channel. Another worker, that would also become union delegate for CISL, was scouting in the warehouse. He was already a member of CISL, since he used to go in the office of the union to carry out administrative procedures. Together with a third worker, they formed a small group. They organized a secret meeting with the head of the local commerce branch of CISL, Francesca Benedetti whom I interviewed in November 2018, and I met several times during the meetings of the international coalition of Amazon unions. Benedetti, at that time was a young, charismatic and ambitious union official. She understood that those workers were an opportunity for her union to increase its members and its standing. She summarised the process of unionisation in this way:

Our union story inside Amazon, begins roughly in November 2015, when I am contacted by a couple of workers whom I meet at a pizzeria to talk about problems inside the plant. Immediately we understand... the fear of being discovered by Amazon and also the mistrust towards us... it was the result of rumours

circulating in the company: “the union shuts down companies”; “the union in an American company is forbidden”; “the union deceives workers and does not help them”, etc. Considerations that highlight Amazon’s aversion to the union... and, on the other hand, a lot of fear... fear that the union might find out what is beyond Amazon’s nice cover, the image it wants to give of a company. A company where people work with music, air conditioning in the summer, and heating in the winter... “Lucky you, this doesn’t happen in any warehouse,” as managers used to repeat! Well... The meetings get more frequent and quite crowded. Every Saturday morning at *La Fenice* brewery, together with another union official from CISL I meet with groups of 10-15 employees at a time, and every Saturday the group increases. They are convinced by those we met on the previous Saturday. In other words... we enter Amazon thanks to word of mouth and hidden pieces of papers listing the name of the new members. Our 3-4 trusted contacts pass around the pieces of paper in the hallways (supervised by managers) and in the locker rooms. We begin to collect 20, 30, 40 ... 50 proxies. All within 3-4 months.

Fieldwork Quote 108 – Francesca Benedetti, local head of the commerce branch of CISL, interview, November 2018

Accounts given by senior workers and CISL members that I interviewed during my fieldwork confirm this development of the unionisation process:

I contacted the union [CISL], I went there, we had the first meetings in the bars with Francesca Benedetti, whom I trusted from the beginning... and I had also checked with other people and I found good feedback. And she had, it seemed she had, the same... the same thought as me so I was able to do what I... talk to her. And I brought her more people every week. G. came, V. was there, S. was there, there was a hard core of 7-8 people, there was also F. etc... and every weekend, or every other weekend, we met. With more and more people.

Fieldwork Quote 109 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXP1/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, September 2020.

The process took place secretly, with workers inside the warehouse trying to convince as many colleagues as possible, while trying to remain undercover, and the union official of CISL, advising them from outside. Once the unions collected 40 cards, some workers wanted to come out. Union officials, however, recommended to wait the right moment. As reported by Francesca Benedetti in her written account:

The membership cards, despite workers’ pressing invitation to submit them to the employer, remained prudently locked in the desk drawer. In fact, I did not want to expose a group of workers to company reprisals. Before sending them to Amazon, I want to get to a, shall we say, “safety” threshold, with the purpose of protecting them and not to risk losing their hard-won trust. These boys mainly needed two things, to trust and to feel protected.

Fieldwork Quote 110 – Francesca Benedetti, local head of the commerce branch of CISL, interview, November 2018

The right time was not far. A couple of months later, in March 2016, CISL submitted to Amazon its first 50 cards and appointed three union delegates. CISL was the first union to enter Amazon's Italian warehouse. This process of unionisation²⁹⁸, presented by Benedetti as a "success story", to borrow an Amazonian expression, was indeed more complicated. The fact that union officials wanted to keep secret the membership cards did not reflect only the intention of protecting the workers. At the end of 2015, Amazon had already 750 direct employees, leaving aside temporary workers. Did it make any difference to wait two more months to present 50 cards instead of 40? Maybe yes. But there was perhaps another explanation: union competition. CISL had the advantage of being the first union to open a channel with Amazon workers; yet, CGIL had its own "sleeping" members in the warehouse, that could be persuaded to become active members. CISL officials meant to keep the lead as long as possible. This could have pushed them to keep their recruitment secret as long as possible. This matches with the account given by other workers. Workers recollect that CISL officials manoeuvred to exclude the CGIL, at cost of bringing onboard UGL, a union marginalised (even if less and less) for its historical proximity to the neo-fascist party MSI (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*) during the post-war years:

I asked CISL officials: "Is it better to go in with more unions or just one?". At that point they gave me some opinions about some unions: "If you want, we can bring another union on board, I trust another trade unionist. If you want, I can introduce him to you," they told me. And they introduced us at the time to P. from the UGL – speaking ill of other unions, okay? Let's always bear in mind that I didn't know this union. I trusted them. We started by collecting signatures, we collected a packet of 55 signatures and sent them to the company with already the three appointed union delegates, among whom was me, and two others. Contextually, we right away requested an assembly²⁹⁹.

²⁹⁸ A process that could resemble a typical organizing campaign. Indeed, it was not the result of a campaign. The type of employer, an US-based multinational company with a strong anti-union culture contribute to fuel such an illusion. Indeed, as we will see, the process of unionization followed a very classic pattern typical of Italian industrial relations.

²⁹⁹ In the Italian system of workplace industrial relations, the assembly is a central moment. A legacy of the cycle of struggles of the 1970s, the right to assembly is regulated by the art. 30 of the Law 300/1970 (the so-called Workers' Statute). This right pertains to all employees of enterprises-regardless of union membership-and is a means of direct participation in union and labour issues at the place where they perform their work. The right of assembly can be held both during working and non-working hours. The power to call meetings pertains to workers' delegates (RSA/RSU). Ownership of the right to assembly, on the other hand, belongs to each individual worker, as long as he or she belongs to the group of concerned workers. In fact, as mentioned, the assembly can be general in nature (and, therefore, open to all workers in the company or one of its production units) or group-based, variously understood (department, category, gender, members of a trade union organization): in this second hypothesis, the individual worker has the right to participate in the assembly as he or she belongs to the group of workers summoned. Article 20 Law 300/1970 provides that "external leaders" of the union(s) to which the RSA/RSU convening the meeting belongs may also participate in the meetings. The only condition for such participation is prior notice to the employer.

Fieldwork Quote 111 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for CISL, MXPI/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, interview, September 2020

Precisely because of the “sentinels” they had in the workplace, union officials of CGIL and UIL heard that CISL had been collecting cards and knew about the assembly. As signatories of the CCNL, CGIL and UIL could not be excluded from the assembly, thus they decided to join it. Therefore, the day of the assembly, the group of workers that had joined the CISL were surprised to see those strangers that introduced themselves as officials of CGIL and UIL. Tommaso, recounts that his first reaction was of mistrust toward them, an hostility that the CISL officials carefully avoided to cool down:

I take the floor. Actually, I didn't want to speak in the assembly, right? But I had invited them [my co-workers, *Author's note*]. I ask Francesca [CISL official, local head of the commerce branch] “Can I speak?” and... I create a little problem. A small political case because I say: “Look, we called [the assembly], we have been talking to the union for 5-6 months. I can tell you that these two people – and I say Pino [UGL official, local head of the commerce branch] and Francesca – we know them, they are the ones we are talking to and working with. The others showed up today, but I don't know them.” That was a mistake, but in good faith. I have always been very close to the people with whom... to the “family”... the people I work with. So, I defended Francesca by going after the others. I did it because I didn't understand why they [CGIL and UIL officials] had come. I meant: “We did the job, who are you?”.

Fieldwork Quote 112 – Tommaso, Amazon worker, CGIL member and former union delegate for Cisl, MXPI/MXP5, man, Italian, 35-40 years-old, 9-years seniority, September 2020.

Eventually, the “misunderstanding” was clarified. At that point, no union could be excluded: CGIL and UIL because they were part of the “cartel” of the three main Italian unions; UGL because it was supported by CISL and had collected a significant number of cards. Anyway, comparing the accounts of these two protagonists, we shed light on two significant elements.

First, since the beginning, workers started losing control of the unionisation process. They participated actively to the collecting of membership cards, but the steering role shifted rapidly from their inexperienced, spontaneous leaders to the hands of union officials. Union officials kept the membership cards “in their desk drawer”, union officials managed the politics of inter-unions relations, unions officials kept communications with the employer.

Second, since the beginning, the problem of union competition emerged. Workers were spectators of this competition, as showed by the episode of the unexpected presence of CGIL and UIL officials at the assembly (Fieldwork Quote 112). CISL initially manoeuvred to keep its main competitors out of the game as long as possible and embarked UGL as a junior partner, in order to prevent any allegation of planning a monopoly of representation. Furthermore, personal relations should be taken into account. The UGL official was on good terms with his CISL homologue, on the

one hand, and with a senior official of Confcommercio in Piacenza, the employer association which Amazon had formally joined. This could suggest another hypothesis, i.e. that the presence of UGL was somehow “negotiated” by CISL and the employer in a private deal. During my fieldwork I could not find further evidence in support of this latter hypothesis. Nonetheless we can conclude from these elements that the relations between unions were competitive and not particularly transparent for the workers. In other words, the political separation between members and their unions, on the one hand, and between unions themselves, on the other hand, appears already as a particularly salient and specific of the Italian unions representing Amazon workers. This episode contains in a nutshell some of the contradictions of Italian unions that will appear constantly during the further development of industrial relations at Amazon.

7.7. Conclusion

Industrial relations in Amazon’s French and Italian subsidiaries underwent two very different processes of unionisation. They correspond to the different temporalities in the evolution of the labour process and the construction of production politics. The combination of two dimension – Amazon’s product market and the local institutional constraints – is key to understand these differences.

In France, unions appear on scene since the beginning of operations (2000), while in Italy it takes three years after the beginning of operations.

	FRANCE	ITALY
IR INSTITUTIONALISATION	HIGH	LOW
UNION STRENGTH IN THE WORKPLACE	LOW	LOW
PERIOD OF THE LABOUR REGIME	2000-2009	2011-2015
BEGINNING OF OPERATIONS	2000	2011
UNION APPEARANCE	2000 (SUD, FAILURE) 2002 (FO, COOPTATION)	2015
MANAGEMENT’S STRATEGY TOWARD UNIONS	COOPTATION OF ONE SELECTED UNION	EXCLUSION
FIRST MOBILISATION	2009	2017
MANAGEMENT COUNTER-MOBILISATION	FOSTERING UNION COMPETITION	BUYING TIME

Yet, the formation of unions did not spark any apparent labour conflict in the workplace in France. After the initial attempt of SUD to mobilise the worker, almost ten years elapsed before a strike was declared. During this time only a union existed, FO, which signed collective agreements with management. Amazon's local management was particularly able to navigate the rules of industrial relations and even to take advantage of them in order to increase worktime flexibility. Union presence, however, was more formal than substantial, without any significant membership nor a strategy of mobilisation. The only actor capable to mobilise workers' commitment is management, in order to secure responsible autonomy in the workplace. In fact, it is only with the Taylorist transformation of the labour process (and, simultaneously, the defection of FO from cooperation with management) that labour conflicts emerged.

In sum, in this first phase, social peace is granted by the material conditions of the labour process, in particular by responsible autonomy in the organisation of work. The policy of co-optation run by management is remarkable, but we should consider it as a response to the institutional constraints rather than a pre-determined derivation of responsible autonomy in the labour process.

Now, in a labour process undergoing Taylorisation and bureaucratisation, tensions among workers multiplied while margins for compromise shrunk. Of equal importance is the centralisation of power from local management to corporate management, thanks to the digitalisation and bureaucratisation. In such a context, management's latitude starts narrowing. Thus, the co-optation of a union such as FO – a phenomenon of which we have evidence in the mass retail sector in France (Benquet 2013; 2015) – was not viable anymore, since management has much less self-latitude to make concessions. Similarly, Benquet describes the crisis of the alliance between FO and management in a mass retail firm, precisely when the financialisation of the group reduces the scope of action of employers. Using the words of Thompson, management “find[s] harder to keep [its] side of the bargain” (P. Thompson 2003; 2013). In front of the crisis of cooptation, management reacts by encouraging the formation of a more friendly union, the CFDT. However, the further degradation of working condition and of worker-management relations in the workplace, makes this strategy less effective as we will see in the second phase.

In Italy, less than two years elapsed between the formation of unions and the first strike. This can be explained by looking at the same dimensions: the economic side of Amazon's labour process and product market and, on the other hand, the political side of the institutions of labour regulation.

First, as showed in Chapter 4, the development and exhaustion of the start-up labour regime of Amazon in Italy was much more rapid and condensed in a shorter period: between 2011 and 2015. Second, the lower level of institutionalisation of labour relations (collective autonomy, no mandatory election, union's reliance on significant membership to obtain employer recognition and bargain),

makes unnecessary for Amazon to co-opt any union. Therefore, unions are simply excluded from production politics. When, because of the growing dissatisfaction of workers, unions finally found enough support, management was less constrained than in France, as there was no mandatory bargaining or professional elections. Thus, management delivered a union-busting guerrilla against the trade unions: non-recognition, discriminations of union members, obstruction of union meetings. We will see in Chapter 8 that this blatant refusal to comply with the conventions of labour relations eventually forced confederal unions to mobilise the workers.

In sum, even if in different temporalities, the same structural factors that undermined the start-up labour regime in France operated in the crisis of the Italian one. Within this process of change, however, management and unions followed significantly different strategies. The decisive element emerging from comparison is the degree of institutionalisation of labour relations. Where rules are particularly binding, like in France, Amazon is forced to involve unions in production politics. On the other hand, high institutionalisation without the material premises of an independent union action produced the subaltern co-optation of unions. No effective association of unions to the government of the workplace occurred, with the result of reinforcing managerial control on the labour process. Amazon proved to have a surprising capacity to navigate the institutions of labour regulation, so different from those of its domestic country. It is only this formal compliance (Edelman 1992; Edelman, Uggem, and Erlanger 1999), to be precise this *formal* co-optation (Selznick 1949) – i.e. a representation that does not imply a real transfer of power from management to the workers – that allows management to keep substantial control on production politics, at least in the beginning. In this respect, it is the formal incorporation of rules and practices that makes possible the “transfer” (Ferner, Quintanilla, and Sánchez-Runde 2006) of substantial organisational practices possible, i.e. those concerning essentially the organisation of work, on which Amazon manages to keep self-latitude. Such an arrangement was disrupted by material and subjective transformations in the workplace and, on the other hand, by a change in the politics of unions. In Italy, instead, where there was not such a legal constraint, Amazon acted unilaterally, ignoring the non-written rules of labour relations, thus accelerating the unravelling of the start-up labour regime.

In sum, we can conclude that the material transformation of the labour process and, more broadly of the company’s business strategy is the primary factor of change in production politics. Within this framework, institutions do play a role (Streeck 1997), but the outcome of their role is not predetermined – as it could appear for instance in Burawoy’s theory of production politics (see Introduction to Part III) – but shaped also by the strategies of actors (see, for instance, Crozier and Friedberg 1977; AK Strategic Unionism 2013). As Wright put it in its critical examination of Streeck’s theory of “beneficial” constraints (Streeck 1997), “the balance of power also needs to be

changed. And since this shift in balance of power will be costly to those in privileged position, it will only occur through a process of mobilization and struggle” (Wright 2004, 467).

8. Industrial relations under algorithmic bureaucracy in France and Italy

In the start-up labour regime, Amazon was able to keep unions at bay both in France and Italy, even if through different forms. Despite the relatively strong institutionalisation of industrial relations in these two countries, compared to the US, Amazon managed to make these institutions ineffective. “External” institutional constraints were not sufficient to allow solid union presence.

Under algorithmic bureaucracy, the “internal” conditions for a solid union presence materialised, namely the taylorisation of the labour process as a source of discontent, and the erosion of direct worker-manager relations. These internal factors carved out the space for unions’ independent action. Nonetheless, the resources available to union remained variegated across the two countries. Whether these variations would deliver different outcome is a matter that we will analyse and discuss in the present chapter.

8.1. Industrial relations in Amazon France under algorithmic bureaucracy (2014-2021)

Industrial relations in Amazon’s French subsidiary under algorithmic bureaucracy can be distinguished in three cycles. A first cycle of union resurgence between 2013 and 2014. A second cycle of stabilisation between 2015 and 2017, and a third one between 2018 and 2020, culminated in the Covid-19 labour crisis.

8.1.1. A local resurgence of strikes within a transnational cycle (2013-2014)

In 2013, while the Italian warehouse of Piacenza was still in its infancy, its French equivalent was in its full maturity. The old labour regime had already given way to the new one, marked by a first strike in 2009. The strike however, had not produced remarkable consequences, nor the unions who had led it, FO, obtained any remarkable result. In 2013, things were different. Since then, Amazon had accelerated its growth, three new FCs had been opened, and the workforce had recorded a fourfold increase up to over 2.000 direct employees; almost 900 of them were in ORY1; during peaks, the number of temps could reach 2.000 individuals. New unions had been formed, namely a CGT section (in MRS1, the FC opened in 2010 at Montelimar, there was already one); in fact, one of the leaders of this section was the former leader of the FO, which had split after internal conflict in 2013.

Box 15 – The waltz of unionists in France

During my fieldwork in Amazon France, I could not but notice that it is quite common that worker delegates switch unions, following internal conflicts over the political orientation of the section, or just over because personal contrasts. Sometimes, this sort of union mobility can be a real *waltz*: the above-mentioned former FO unionist would eventually abandon also the CGT and join an independent union, the UNSA. There, he run the UNSA Amazon section with another worker for a few years, before definitively quitting Amazon in 2018. The other worker continued to run the UNSA section for four years, with an ambitious, but quite personal, project of forming a UNSA transnational union. Eventually, he would also leave UNSA for divergencies with the union external leadership and join FO. FO, which after the split of its leader in 2013 had almost disappeared from the workplace, resurged. These were not the only episodes. During an interview with a CGT union delegate in ORY1, I figured out that a member had left and formed a CFTC union section bringing a dozen members with him. In another case, an almost entire section of the CFDT in LIL1 split and joined a small independent union (USID) right before the professional elections, inflicting dramatic vote losses to the CFDT.

In sum, splits and re-compositions of the union landscape at the workplace level to be a structural element of union politics in Amazon France. They are the consequences of two structural elements of the French system of labour relations. First, institutionalisation: mandatory professional elections, mandatory bargaining, the possibility for any representative union to appoint a union delegate, the frequent accumulation of mandates, by which union delegate are often also elected members of the works council, a position that they can “trade” with their new union. The second, related, dimension is competitive union pluralism which is exasperated by the electoral competition for shrinking institutional resources. The workplace competition between unionist for appropriating shrinking institutional resources, combined with the availability of unions to recruit members from other unions, exacerbates this phenomenon. In Italy, I did not observe such a level of inter-union turnover. Only one delegate, Tommaso, switched from a union (CISL) to another (CGIL), but much more slowly and discretely. Both the delegate and his new union carefully tried to avoid any critique of opportunism, a sign that the move was an exception rather than a rule. Also in this case, structural elements explain this relative stability. First, the lower institutionalisation, which imply less resources and (until 2021) no professional election in the workplace, which makes the union delegate much more dependent on the external union structure. Second, the nature of union pluralism in Italy, with the three main confederation betting on oligopoly-like cooperation rather than on disorganised competition.

However, another union, SUD-*Solidaires*, had been able to recruit members. After a dozen years of absence, following the unsuccessful leaflet distribution organised in partnership with the organisers of the POF, SUD had managed to enter Amazon in a more conventional way. Until then, winds of rebellion had been weak, but things were in rapid change.

Summer 2013 was special for other reasons, that concerned Amazon but on a larger scale. In Germany, a documentary on working conditions in Amazon warehouses was broadcast in February

on the ARD public television. It reported that an Amazon subcontractor employed security guards with neo-Nazi ties to oversee immigrant worker hired for the peak season. According to the film, security guards scared and intimidated hundreds of temporary workers. the accusations ignited an outcry on social media and calls for Amazon consumers to reconsider their choice (*Der Spiegel* 2013; *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2013; *The New York Times* 2013a; *Le Monde* 2013b). In France, the journalist Jean-Baptiste Malet had just released its book *En Amazonie* (Fayard, 2013), based on its undercover reportage in the warehouse of Montelimar. The book delivered a critical account of working conditions that management imposed on workers, and it questioned Amazon self-representation of a modern and progressive employer

The increasing journalistic coverage of Amazon, certainly not an apologetic one, occurred at the same time of a resurgence of conflict and union mobilisation in France and across the border. In Germany, in April 2013, the United Service Sector Union VERDI (*Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft*) organised a strike in the FC of Bad Hersfeld (FRA3, opened in 1999), one of the oldest in Europe³⁰⁰. Soon the strike extended to another FC, in Leipzig (*The New York Times* 2013b; *Le Monde* 2013a). Overall, there were hundreds of workers who walked out. The strikes were not a spontaneous uprising, but the result of a coordinated campaign of union development started in 2011 (Blado 2015; Boewe and Schulten 2019). VERDI considered Amazon a battleground for its development; Amazon's anti-union management was a threat that the union needed to domesticate by renewing its repertoire of action. For example, by building workers' organisational power rather than focusing on social dialogue, that the company refused³⁰¹. Within two years, thanks to the efforts made to build up intensive contacts with the workforce, nearly a thousand workers joined the union, a rate of union density between 30 and 50% in the oldest locations (Boewe and Schulten 2020). Nonetheless, Amazon refused to negotiate with the unions, thus pushing VERDI to call the strike. It would be the first of a long series³⁰². Amazon would respond with a counterstrategy that hampered unions' ability to mobilise workers across its national and international network. Anyway, in that period, news of the first strike in the core of Amazon's European network, raised much attention and expectations. The *New York Times* correspondents reported about the visit that the head of VERDI union paid to the strikers in Leipzig: “‘You are making history by striking,’ Mr. Bsirske told the crowd. ‘You are making history by demanding higher wages. We are not going to let

³⁰⁰ In 2013, Amazon Deutschland employed 9.000 people at nine distribution centres across Germany, its second-largest market after the US (accounting for \$8.73 billion, or 14 percent, of total company revenue in 2012) (*The New York Times* 2013b). The company also hired seasonal workers to help in in high-volume periods. That year Amazon Deutschland padded its workforce with additional 14.000 seasonal workers.

³⁰¹ This thesis is supported by observers of union politics in Amazon Germany (Boewe and Schulten 2020). Others agree less with this interpretation, stressing that the German unions remained “captured” in the institutional mechanism of representation (Vgontzas 2020).

³⁰² Drawing on data provided by VERDI union, I calculated 302 days of strike in Germany between 2013 and 2018.

a big American company come here and play Wild West. This is a clash of cultures.” (The New York Times 2013b).

Echoes of the strike crossed the Rhine and arrived in France, where after four years of quiet, the unions seemed ready for a comeback. In June 2013, the CGT delegates in the site of ORY1 called for a strike to protest “Amazon’s disdain” in dealing with its employees and an unfair economic reward for Amazon workers, in a period of spectacular growth for the company (according to CGT, the site of Orleans/Saran had recorded a growth of 38% in revenue) (LSA Conso 2013). The claims included a wage increase from gross €1700 instead of 1500, an extra-month salary (*trezième mois*), the respect of unions’ rights and pauses from work of 20 minutes every 6 hours³⁰³. Other unions, namely CFDT, who had a comparable present in the workplace, did not join this mobilisation. According to the press, one hundred workers among the 900 direct employees took part to the action. This low level of participation, and the lack of unity of action among unions, would become the norm in the following years. However, this would not prevent unions from increase the frequency of strikes.

Meanwhile, union action was continuing in Germany, where workers went on strike for 18 days in 11 occasions; in December a five-days strike took place and solidarity action was organised in Seattle at the same time, with the help of US activists. The CGT launched a second strike in February 2014, denouncing managerial repression, the massive use of temporary work, the unequal distribution of wealth produced by the company and the company’s intention to extend work shifts to Sundays; unions pointed also at the absence of social dialogue in the firm. Workers who responded to the call were not significantly more this time, but they decided to block the entry of trucks for the entire day (LSA Conso 2014b).

In March, Amazon workers of the site of Chalons-sur-Saône (LYS1), who had been opened in Autumn 2012, went on strike over a CGT’s call. The site employed over 350 workers and about fifty workers walked out. That strike had an impact not only because it was the first strike in the new FCs that Amazon had opened just a few years ago, but also because the French strikers were joined by a delegation of German Amazon workers and activists from Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig.

The cycle of struggle continued in ORY1. In the end of May, forty workers walked out over a call of the CGT. A couple of weeks later the CGT called for another strike in ORY1, this time together with FO and SUD (Challenges 2014). As declared to the press by unionists, management’s pressure inhibited the mobilisation of many workers, but unionists also recognised that workers were not eager on losing an entire day-worth pay for striking:

³⁰³ At that time there were 2 pauses of 15 minutes each, at every shift. Workers complained because most of this time was eroded to move from the work floor to the break rooms (see Chapter 4).

“People won’t be risking a day’s pay, but they’ll be taking an hour off at the start or end of their shift to get involved,” hopes Michaël Soullier, an FO delegate with ten years’ experience in the company. “It’s not easy to go on strike here. The managers are putting on the pressure, checking up on the time clocks...”
(*Libération* 2014, *my translation*)

The strike was declared to support unions that were bargaining with management, as provided by the mandatory annual negotiations (*Négotiations Annuelles Obligatoires*, NAO³⁰⁴). Management was refusing to increase the wage of most of the workforce (4 levels out of 6); in exchange, it promised to introduce a *trezième mois* and one single pause of 30 minutes (of which only 20 were paid). Unions replied that the extra salary was in fact replacing the PRP collective bonus on productivity, quality, and safety – that Amazon was withdrawing unilaterally in all countries (see Chapters 3 and 4). The CFDT did not take part to the strike. The CGT continued keeping the pressure on Amazon, denouncing to the press and to the public authorities the hard-working conditions and the massive use of temporary work³⁰⁵. On this last issue, the local labour inspectorate opened an inquiry and concluded that Amazon should moderate the share of temporary workers in order to reduce precarious employment. In the Nord-Pas de Calais Region, the CGT reported, labour inspectors instructed an inquiry for illegal Sunday work (*LSA Conso* 2014a; CGT Amazon 2014).

In December 2014, the CGT launched the first strike during the winter peak, three days before Christmas. Strike was called in all four French FCs; in the meantime a strike was also going on in Germany, in the sites of Bad Hersfeld, Leipzig and Rehinberg, where one third of the workforce, 2.400 strikers, was reported to respond to the call of the VERDI union (*Die Zeit* 2014; *L’Humanité* 2014). Thus, the strike movement extended to France, and the connection was stressed by the unions as well as by the press: a coordinated strike. In terms of worker participation on the terrain results were again not particularly exciting for the CGT (*Le Figaro* 2014; *Le Monde* 2014). Yet, from a political point of view, the strike was really connected to the mobilisations in Germany. The goal was to avoid that Amazon easily re-dispatched logistics flows from the German sites on strike to the French cross-border facilities. Therefore, a delegation of German workers and union activists went to Chalons to meet the few strikers of LYS1.

The strike, however, was a watershed in the pattern of mobilisation of French unions, especially for what concern the relation between local and transnational organising. On the one hand, the link

³⁰⁴ NAO must be held over three blocks: (1) pay, bonuses and working hours; (2) job and career planning; (3) gender equality in the workplace. In Amazon, as we shall see, conflict during NAO would take place essentially over wage and work time issues. Since 2013, the NAO at Amazon France Logistique take place at the company level, usually in Paris.

³⁰⁵ According to the CGT, during the months of 2013, Amazon had an average of 1.021 temp workers, while permanent workers were less than 3.000. In the new FC of Lille/Lauwin Planque (LIL1), the number of permanent workers had even decreased by 97 units: 239 permanent workers had quitted, while only 139 permanent jobs had been created (*LSA Conso* 2014a).

with unions in other countries was established, especially the German ones, and transnational union coalitions would progressively take form in the following years (Goldmann 2023). On the other hand, the pattern would change in another direction: more solid but more centred at the national level, synchronised with the schedule of annual negotiations rather than following a strategy of transnational coordination with German or Polish unions.

8.1.2. Strikes become more NAO-centred than connected to transnational mobilisations (2015-2018)

If we look at the period after 2014, the rhythms of strikes and walkouts remained relatively high (lower than in Germany but, as we will see much higher than Italy), with peaks in 2015 and 2018. However, in this period, the frequency of strikes tends to follow the cycles of NAO (mandatory annual negotiations), i.e. to become more embedded into the company-level institution of worker representation.

To be sure, there are some strike events of strike which are disconnected by the NAO, but they are less significant in terms of length and participation. In 2015, for instance, the strike called in May is linked to NAO, but the following one, in November, is called over mandatory overtime work imposed by management during the winter peak. In 2016, three out of the five strikes were not linked to the NAO, but to nation-wide mobilisations: in January 2016, the CGT called for a strike in all Amazon sites in solidarity with the workers of Goodyear in Amiens³⁰⁶; in March, April and in June, the CGT called for a strike in all Amazon sites to support the general struggle against the labour reform of the PS-led Valls government; however, in these three occasions worker participation was very uncertain. Similarly, between 2017 and 2019, the only strike over a “general” issue was declared in July 2018 by FO and UNSA union; in that occasion, I was working in ORY1 FC as a temp. During my shift, union militants distributed leaflets at the entrance, but I did not notice any gathering of workers, nor many absences in the ranks of the workforce.

Instead, the most significant events in terms of participation, such as the strikes of May 2015 (that I have already mentioned), May-June 2016 (20 days long), May 2017 and April 2018, were all linked to NAO negotiations. On May 22nd, 2016, the CGT started a 20 days-long conflict over wage increases. During the annual negotiations, Amazon France’s board proposed a wage increase of 0,5%, which was refused categorically by the unions, which invited workers to mobilise. In the beginning also the CFDT participated to the strike but defected quite soon. During the first days of the strike,




³⁰⁶ In 2013, Goodyear announced the final closing down of its site in Amiens, in Northern France. Dozens of workers decided to occupy the factory for a couple of weeks and, for thirty hours, they kept the HR director and the director of operations detained in the site. After the end of the occupation, a trial was instructed, despite the two managers had withdrawn their complaint during the following negotiations on the closing down of the factory. In January 2016, the defendants were sentenced to 9 months in prison (Pélisse 2016).

workers participation was considerable in LIL1, MRS1 and LYS1. Dozens of workers (150 in LIL1) walked out and prevented the trucks from entering or accessing the warehouse. As the blockade continued, after a couple of days the board called for the intervention of the police, which intervened with anti-riot squads and cleared the accesses to the plant. Yet, the unions continued the strike for the following fifteen days. Eventually, in front of the board's refusal to concede more than 0,5% the movement lost momentum and in June, the CGT had to stop the mobilisation. Management unilaterally introduced a bonus for attendance (*prime d'assiduité*) worth gross €160. On top of that, in October, the CGT denounced, management sanctioned three union delegates and threatened them of dismissal for disciplinary reasons.

In April 2017, a new round of NAO took place and a related strike occurred. The CGT organised a survey among the workforce and submitted a list of claims to the board of management during the first meeting. The board proposed to abolish the attendance bonus and to replace it with an end-of-year (“*Q4*”) bonus: gross €100 for full-time and €66 for workers of the *équipe de suppléance* for weekends and holidays (“*SDJF*”). CGT, CFDT and SUD refused. The board reviewed the offer upwards: €144 and €96. Unions refused altogether the proposition, since it was a net reduction of the previous bonus; furthermore, they raised also the question of noncompliance of Amazon's job greed with the sectoral grid; in addition, union stressed the narrow perspectives of professional growth for Amazon workers. Since the board refused to respond to these issues, CGT, SUD, CFDT and even the CFE-CGC refused altogether to sign any agreement. The CGT asked the workers to mobilise in a strike. Participation was over 70 workers in LYS1 and 160 in LIL1. The board remained resolute not to give an inch to unions' request. This time the mobilisation was even weaker than the previous year. Like the year 2016, 2017 ended up with no agreement on wages.

BILAN NAO 2017



Augmentation AG "brute" en %	Augmentation brute annuelle en €	Baisse annuelle brute en € (majo Q4 2016 et prime assiduité)	Bilan NAO en € brut annuels	En clair:
T3: +0,7%	200,80 €	-195,00 €	6,24 € (+0,02%)	
T2: +0,7%	171,10 €	-157,00 €	14,10 € (+0,06%)	
T1 (+24 mois ancienneté)+1,9%	377,00 €	-151,00 €	226,00 € (+1,1%)	
T1 (jusqu'à 24 mois ancienneté)+0,6%	122,00 €	-150,00 €	-28,00 € (-0,1%)	

On ne vous parle même pas de ce qui est réservé aux futurs CDI, c'est indécent... (environ 10% que les embauchés à l'heure actuelle...), ni même de la tentative d'imposer plus de flexibilité à travers une nouvelle grille de classification.....

MERCI AMAZON !!!!

Toutes nos revendications ont été refusées (équipe de nuit permanente, augmentation budget CE, 30 minutes de pause payée par jour, etc.....)

Par conséquent la CFDT ne se portera pas signataire de cette « proposition » et appelle donc les salariés à manifester leur mécontentement de 08h30 à 10h30 et de 17h à 19h chaque jour, et dès demain et déposera un préavis de grève auprès de la direction

Figure 58 – A leaflet diffused by the CFDT from its Facebook page during the NAO (April 2017).

The union considers the board's offer largely insufficient and refuses to sign the agreement

The third significant conflict took place in April 2018. The negotiations concerned wage increase and work time arrangements. The discussion started on night shifts. The CFDT historically claimed for the constitutions of voluntary but permanent night shifts in all FCs, instead of only where and when needed by management³⁰⁷. In addition, the board asked to extend the night shift work time from 7 hours to 8 hours. For what concerns wage increases, the board offered a 1,5% increase for workers with seniority inferior to six months and 1,1% for all other workers; the unions considered the proposition largely insufficient. In the meantime, workers were invited to mobilise. About 50

³⁰⁷ This was agreed in 2013 in a company-level collective agreement signed in 2013 by CFDT, FO and CGT. *Accord sur le travail de nuit 15/07/2013*. The agreement established a 27% extra-rate for night hours.

workers went on strike in LYS1 on April 10th; the following day, in MRS1 and LIL1, over 150 workers walked out, without an official call of the CGT; the management of the plant tried to calm down the mobilisation and invited CGT delegates for a meeting, while negotiations were continuing in Paris. That night I was in Paris, in the hotel where the negotiations were hosted. I had an interview with the central union delegate of CFDT, Julien Vincent. He was quite sceptical about the results of such a spontaneous initiative, and reproached the CGT to instigate the workers without any strategy:

Author: What do you think of the walkouts that took place in Douais [LIL1]? ... Were they in Douai or Chalons [LYS1] ?

Julien Vincent: Douais.

Other CFDT member [present during part of the interview]: Douais, Montelimar [MRS1]...

JV: Well... [dismissing the colleagues' comment]. In Douais, it was significant, there were 150 strikers. Montelimar was 15 strikers and Chalons was 8. My opinion is that [these strikes] are not the right strategy. And that it's not the right timing. And that it's above all a manipulation by the CGT... the CGT made the employees believe that a strike... Let me explain. There was a strike in Madrid [in the Spanish FC of MAD1]. The CGT persuaded the employees that they had obtained a 5% increase. It's a distortion of the discourse, in fact. Because 98% of the Spanish workers walked off the job because their collective contract had been changed [unilaterally by management] and their wages lowered. They obtained a small pay rise, but it barely brought them up to their previous salary. So, there was no 5% increase. In the end, one plus, one minus, it's all the same. [...] Except that they convinced people to walk out by saying, "Look at Madrid! They went out and got a 5% increase!" That's not a very honest discourse.

Author: What's the purpose of the strikers in Douais and Montelimar?

JV: They want more money.

Other CFDT member [in a typical CFDT style]: People always want more. Then there are different ways of asking.

JV: They [the CGT delegates] didn't really manage to control the movement in Lille. They got the workers so excited that they went out on their own, without necessarily having any strike notice, demands or anything else. They [the CGT delegates] tried to hijack the movement, but... It just slipped out of their hands

Author: So, the workers walked out and...?

JV: The workers walked out saying: "Yeah, yeah, we're going to get something" and in the end they lost two days' wages and that's just what they got.

Fieldwork Quote 113 – Julien Vincent, Amazon worker and Central Union Delegate (DSC) for CFDT, man, French, ca. 35 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, April 2018

The board, who was ready to bargain more money over longer night shifts, reviewed its proposition to a general increase of 2,2% for less-than-six-months employees and 1,8% for the rest,

and added a bonus for workers every 5 years of seniority³⁰⁸. The board also offered an attendance bonus (gross €150) for workers who, during the last quarter of the year, worked six days out of seven (42 hours) without any absence or delay. The CFDT declared they would reject the deal and, together with SUD, insisted on the review of the whole job classification greed of the company. The CGT was more ambivalent. Eventually, the dialogue went astray. The board proposed a wage increase of 2%, lower than the previous proposition, plus a Q4 bonus of gross €150 for full-time and €100 for part-time (SDJF) workers. All unions, CFDT, CGT, CFE-CGC and SUD, rejected the proposition, but tensions emerged among them. The CFDT accused the CGT of running undercover negotiations with the board. In the end, the CGT decided to accept and signed the deal on the wage increase, proclaiming its capacity to mobilise and represent the workers. SUD accepted to sign as well but stressed that the agreement was far from perfect. After two years without wage increase, union pressure, supported by an unexpected spontaneous walkout, not particularly overwhelming, helped to reach an agreement on general augmentations.

8.1.3. The erosion of the strike tool and the research of alternative forms of mobilisation (2018-2020)

The 2018 NAO sounded like the swansong of a mobilisation strategy based on multiple but disorganised strikes. Since late 2018, a new pattern of union mobilisation seemed to emerge. We should bear in mind that 2018 was also a year in which the expansion of Amazon's infrastructure took off again at full scale, with the opening of new FCs in Amiens (BVA1, October 2017), and Bretigny (ORY4, October 2019, equipped with Kiva robots) as part of a wave of vertical integration that had already started at the global level³⁰⁹.

After a period of conflicts imbricated with negotiations (2016-2018), in which unions had struggled to mobilise the workers and obtain results, strikes became rarer and less participated. No major conflict emerged over wages, work time or other issues. Instead, two different forms of mobilisation can be noticed. On the one hand, unions, aware of the difficulties in mobilising workers in massive strikes, started submitting unlimited strike declaration. The trendsetters were UNSA and FO, two very small unions at the time, in the warehouse of ORY1 in January 2017. They were followed by SUD, which was much larger, in 2018.

The goal of these particular strike-calls was *not* to organise a mobilisation for a specific day or a specific claim, but to provide the individual workers a juridical shield to take day offs, in other

³⁰⁸ Five-years seniority: €940; Ten, Fifteen, and Twenty years: €1.880.

³⁰⁹ By the end of 2018, Amazon's transport subsidiary in France (Amazon France Transport), run two sortation centres in Orleans (ORY8, 2016), and Lille (LIL8, 2017), and seven delivery stations (from where orders were shipped for the last mile delivery) spread around the main urban centres of the country.

words to resist everyday pressure at work. During my fieldwork in Orleans, when I spent time with SUD and UNSA union delegates, I observed conversations between delegates and Amazon employees. They informed the workers about the possibility to stay home without need to ask permission or submit a medical certificate. The only procedure workers should take care to comply with – unionist insisted a lot on this – was to send an email to their supervisor saying that they would not show up at work because they were on strike. It was important to do it since, otherwise, the worker could be sanctioned and even dismissed for unjustified absence. This form of individual strike was particularly used during the winter peak, when management could impose mandatory overtime or mandatory work in the weekend. Thus, in November and December 2018, the CGT declared a strike throughout the whole last quarter³¹⁰. Workers who wanted to stay home and protest against managerial decisions, had thus a tool to do it. In this way, the unions tried to mobilise absenteeism and incorporate it as part of their strategy.

³¹⁰ Indeed, I could find evidence of a precedent during the winter peak of 2015. However, in that period, most of the strike were linked to NAO, while in the period that we are discussing this turned into the dominant form of strike.



TG 10

QUAND LA VIE TOURNE AUTOUR D'AMAZON

NON, NON ET NON !!!

Chers(es) collègues, nous avons demandé à la direction d'enlever le critère obligatoire concernant les Samedi 23 et 30 Novembre, aucune négociation possible. Leur regard sur la situation vise seulement la croissance de notre entreprise et la satisfaction de nos clients. Des salariés(es) vont donc travailler 6 JOURS SUR 7 pendant 4 semaines d'affilées. Alors que dans le même temps, pour maintenir le caractère obligatoire de ses SAMEDI, la Direction propose aux salariés des différentes équipes annexes de poser congés ou de prendre des départs anticipés.

Sommes-nous, des employés(es) KLEENEX ?

Tous les sites n'emploient pas la même politique, les Samedi annulés n'ont pas été reportés. AMAZON LIL1, Avec cette obstination, la Direction nous démontre le peu d'intérêt pour notre santé et pour le respect de notre vie privée.

Pour démontrer notre désaccord, nous appelons à une grève d'absentéisme, le Samedi 23 Novembre, pour éviter toute appréhension concernant l'amalgame entre jour de GREVE et absence injustifiée (ANAP), nous tenons à vous informer sur les modalités, pour se mettre en GREVE. *C'est un droit*, vous n'avez pas besoin de faire partie d'un syndicat et l'employeur ne peut pas vous pénaliser car vous êtes en GREVE.

Cependant, vous devez le justifier,

La première étape est d'être au moins deux et d'avoir deux revendications qui le plus souvent sont :

Conditions de salaire / conditions de travail et vu, la situation à LIL1, nous sommes en plein dedans, ensuite, vous trouverez ci-joint, un exemple de mail à envoyer pour justifier votre absence, à l'adresse mail suivante : absence@amazon.fr, nous vous conseillons fortement de suivre cette procédure par mail, car en cas de litige, vous aurez en votre possession, une preuve écrite de votre bonne foi.



Absence ce jour du ++ Novembre ++++

Bonjour, Mr ou Mme nom prénom
,équipe:++++,site:++++login:++++Je vous
envoie ce mail pour vous faire part de mon
absence, ce jour du +++ Novembre 2019
pour grève avec les revendications
suivantes:conditions de travail,conditions de
salaire.Cordialement



Suite, à cet appel, si la Direction reste campée sur ses positions, nous ferons un appel à une grève d'actions, nous ne sommes pas des moutons. Dans ces différents mouvements, nous tenons également à soutenir nos 4 collègues, en situation de mise à pied conservatoire et en attente de savoir, si, ils vont être licenciés ou pas ???

De plus, à un mois de Noël, 2 collègues ont été licencié pour des enfantillages,
LE PÈRE FOUETTARD D'AMAZON LIL1 A ENCORE FRAPPÉ !!!

L'oppression et la répression à AMAZON LIL1, un autre verset de la Direction Amazon LIL1. C'est invraisemblable, c'est inacceptable et cela suffit, nous réclamons un climat sain au niveau professionnel, ainsi qu'au niveau syndical. Nous vous invitons, à vous joindre à nous dans ces différentes actions. La Direction d'Amazon LIL1 pense : {On est bien content de travailler pour Amazon et d'avoir un salaire tous les mois} ou nous, amazoniens, nous savons qu'en cette période de forte activité, nous devons organiser notre vie, par rapport au bien-être de l'entreprise et de la satisfaction de nos clients, par ces excuses, nous devrions accepter n'importe quelles conditions de travail et de salaire ???

Crions NON, à cette mascarade, unis, mobilisés et déterminés.

DÉMONSTRONS LE VRAI VISAGE D'AMAZON LIL1

- ⊗ LA REVALORISATION SIGNIFICATIVE DE LA PRIME Q4 !!!
- ⊗ L'ANNULATION DU GEL DES CONGES ET DES SAMEDIS OBLIGATOIRES !!!
- ⊗ LA FIN DES DÉRIVES DISCIPLINAIRES DE LA PART DE LA DIRECTION AMAZON SUD LIL1 !!!
- ⊗ LE SOUTIEN AUX COLLÈGUES EN ATTENTE DE LEURS SANCTIONS !!!
- ⊗ LA RÉOLUTION DANS LES PLUS BREF DÉLAI DE TOUS LES SOUCIS ADMINISTRATIFS (PAIE, SUBROGATION, PRÉVOYANCE, ETC...)

C'EST DANS LA MOBILISATION QU'ON OBTIENDRA LA NÉGOCIATION



Figure 59 – Leaflet distributed by SUD (January 2019)

The leaflet protests about working conditions and call for an “absenteeism strike” (grève d’absentéisme), providing instructions in order to avoid write-ups and sanctions from management.

The research of alternative weapons, allowing to obtain results without depending on worker mobilisation is epitomised by the strategy developed by SUD. This union was the first in Amazon to leverage a provision of the labour code called *Droit de Retrait* (“Right to retreat”, DdR).

Box 16 – The *Droit de retrait*, a juridical tool in the hands of the unions

The *Droit de Retrait* (DdR) is an individual abstention from work exerted by one or more workers formally based on a declaration of serious and imminent danger (DGI, *danger grave et imminent*). DGI and DdR are two distinct but interdependent juridical tools, established by the labour law to protect workers and public health. They are an exceptional instrument of workers' (at least those with a stable contract) self-protection. According to the French labour law (artt. 4131-1 and followings of the Labour Code) "a worker may withdraw from a work situation which he or she has reasonable cause to believe presents a serious and imminent danger to his or her life or health". The only condition is to inform a supervisor as soon as possible after the recognition of a danger. In the workplace, every worker can signal a danger, but the CSE has a more extensive right to alert than the employee, as it is competent for serious risks to public health or the environment. The DGI can be declared by a member of the CSE (or, before 2017, of the CHSCT) or by a union delegate. In fact, DdR and DGI can work as an instrument of workers protest against poor working condition. The *droit de retrait* is historically grounded in the repertory of action of the French labour movement both in the private and public sector, although used only under exceptional circumstances. It is an instrument through which workers defend their own health and the health of the public, thus assembling a narrative in which the general interest and the particular interest of the workers correspond. We will see how the *droit de retrait* would play a crucial role during the mobilisations of Amazon workers in France during the pandemic crisis (Tonneau 2021).

The earliest evidence of the use of the DdR/DGI dates to 2018. It concerned a health and safety issue signalled by a SUD unionist and workers representative in the CHSCT of ORY1. The problem concerned the position of bin-boxes. They were too low, often on the floor level, and they were often too filled of items, seriously increasing the risk of accidents for workers, especially for their wrists, backs, and knees³¹¹. Interviewed, the unionist explained:

First, I noticed the degradation of the storage method on a part of the bins, in particular level D in my picktower. At the same time, I noticed that accidents linked to these wrong stowing methods were reappearing (objects falling on the workers, shocks against the open bins, difficult handling, cuts due to unprotected objects). The problem quickly spread to levels C then E then B then X levels (top of shelves). In March [2018, *author's note*], we had a Q4 situation [an unexpected peak, *author's note*] even though we are supposed to be in an off-peak period. In we were going increasing the storage capacity of the sites, for ORY1 +15%. We had reached a filling rate of over 100% – consider that in practice it's already full when we are at 80%, the remaining 20% corresponds to the space needed to manipulate objects in the bin. So, after monitoring accident reports we alerted the site management and the work council [Danger Grave et Imminent, *author's note*]. Also, we alerted the labour inspectorate and health service (CARSAT). Joint field investigation (run by management and worker representatives) was instructed, for after the alert the site management was obliged to take corrective measures. Labour inspector and CARSAT recommended to lift up the bin boxes; we also suggested to better target the items that *really* need to stay in a bin-box

³¹¹ I have already mentioned this dysfunctional mechanism of bin overfilling, due to the pressure that managers exert on stowers (see 5.1.4).

instead of an ordinary bin (for instance, only items that cannot stand up alone, and not small items). Finally, they accepted to lift up the bin boxes, excluding those who are at the very bottom, on the floor level. We suggested that shoe boxes could go on the floor, since they are light and easy to handle when you are squatting, but they do not care, it is cheaper for them to store most of the shoes in another warehouse... Anyway, we managed to do something, but all this process took two years, and now they changed the rules again at the global level and we have to start again.

Fieldwork Quote 114 – Amazon worker and CHSCHT member for SUD, man, French, ca. 45 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, January 2019

In this case, SUD unionists and workers resorted to the DGI in order to increase pressure on management. There was no need to ask workers to strike. One year later, in LIL1, SUD used the DGI as a way for workers not to go to work without losing salary. It was June 2019, and temperature reached exceeded normal levels in the warehouse. Denouncing managerial inaction, SUD declared a DGI so that workers who did not feel ready to work at high temperatures had the option just not going to work and informing their supervisors. This tendency to extend the space of mobilisation of the strike would become particularly salient in 2020 during the pandemic crisis, and it will be decisive, as we shall see, for the success of union strategy.

During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, Amazon France was touched by a resurgence of labour unrest in all its FCs. Since the beginning of the lockdown orders on Amazon's website soared and the company increased its operation massively and its workforce accordingly, thereby jeopardising workers' health and safety. A nation-wide company-level inter-union committee (with SUD, CAT, UNSA, CFE-CGC and CGT) was formed, and another one in the site of Lille (with SUD, CGT, FO, CFDT, USID and CAT)³¹². At the company level, the three main unions (SUD, CFDT and CGT) clearly demanded the temporary closing of the warehouses. According to them, it was not possible to maintain social distancing in the workplace.

³¹² USID is a small independent union formed by former CFDT members in LIL1 who split from the CFDT. Very few information is available on its structure, but it seems that USID is affiliated to a small-business employer association called SNTL (Syndicat National des Transport Légers). CAT is another independent union but relatively strong at Amazon (see 8.1.6.)



Figure 60 – Inter-Union leaflet calling for a strike at ORY1 (March 17th 2020)

Unions initially called for strikes in all FCs, but soon they switched to an alternative strategy of mobilisation: the *droit de retrait*, which allowed workers to remain home and maintain their pay. There is no available data about the participation to the protest, but its impact was likely significant: according to the CFDT, “absenteeism” was at 40% and hundreds of workers were declaring their DdR. Unions also alerted labour inspectorates and local sanitary authorities, which inspected Amazon’s facilities.

Meanwhile, the pressure on Amazon were growing not only in France but at the global level, including the US. In order to respond to this crisis, Amazon corporate management was forced to take some measures. On March 16th, Amazon announced a \$2/£2/€2 increase of workers’ hourly pay

through the end of April. The measure would be eventually extended until May and reintroduced in November 2020). It was a clear attempt to attract new recruits in a moment of soaring demand, rather than a compensation for hazard. On March 21st, Bezos letter “to the Amazonians” had been released, in which the CEO defended Amazon from critiques, insisted on the crucial contribution of Amazon in the struggle against the pandemic and illustrated the special measures taken to accomplish this mission (hire more workers; give priority to “essential” goods) and to protect workers’ safety (cleaning and social distancing guidelines). However, the implementation of serious measures was taking time, and during this period Amazon was giving priority to keep operations at full capacity in order to catch most of the increasing e-commerce demand.

In France, where the situation was heating and unions seemed particularly active, corporate management gave to subsidiary management the mandate to negotiate an agreement with the unions, in order to stop the mobilisation. The agreement proposition (March 25th) contained an “extraordinary bonus for attendance” (*prime exceptionnelle d’assiduité*) of gross €2 per hour between March 16th and April 30th (art. 2), which in fact was already in place; an overtime rate of 100% from March 23rd to April 30th (art. 3); more flexibility on employees’ paid leave (art. 4); more flexibility of operation executives (art. 5); paid five minutes prolongation of break time in order to avoid gathering at the beginning of shifts (art. 6); Amazon’s non-recognition of the legitimacy of DdR but renunciation to pursue workers for unjustified absence (art. 7).

Unions reacted with outrage to this proposition, rejecting to bargain on workers’ health in exchange for economic concessions:

Price of your health proposed by management: workers/supervisors: +€2 per hour until 30 April. Overtime paid double. For managers: say “bye-bye” to your holidays.

CFDT response to this proposal: the priority remains the health of employees. Negotiating a pseudo-agreement is indecent in this context. We will keep in mind that Amazon is capable of substantial wage increases once the health crisis is over. In the meantime, the only thing we want to negotiate is a reduction in activity. Management will therefore have to decide unilaterally whether or not to temporarily increase your wages.

Fieldwork Written Document 19 – CFDT statement, March 25th, 2020

Unions had few reasons to sign an agreement containing norms, such as the economic bonuses, that had not been discussed and that corporate management had already planned to adopt. As a SUD union delegate in ORY1 declared: “they would do it anyway, unilaterally”³¹³. Moreover, unions had agreed

³¹³ Amazon worker and union delegate for SUD, Man, French, ca. 40 years old, 10 years seniority, ORY1, Phone conversation, March 25th, 2020.

on a common position. For unions, Amazon was not able to guarantee workers safety, not even the 2-meters social distancing measures that Amazon had established or the priority for “essential” goods:

In France, management wants negotiations to apply to the letter what has been already decided in the USA. It's clear to us that we don't want that. Given the current conditions, the only thing we would agree to negotiate is the [suspension of activities and the] conditions for partial unemployment. The rest is just folklore so that Amazon can clean up its conscience.

Fieldwork Written Document 20 – CFDT statement, March 23rd 2020

The conclusion, according to unions, was that Amazon warehouses had to be temporary closed, and workers given unemployment compensation. Differently from Italian unions, who were in strike but started negotiations for a collective agreement with management (see par. 8.2.4), French unions refused to negotiate any exchange, considering that worker safety was under the company responsibility and kept pressure high on management. Furthermore, Amazon management in France had still not recognized workers DdR (art. 7). Therefore, unions refused to sign. Additionally, they engaged a judicial struggle on this point. First the CGT, then CFDT and SUD, contested in front of *Prud'Hommes* (labour courts) management's refusal to recognise the DdR. In LIL1, CGT also announced to press charge against Amazon for “endangerment” (*mise en danger de la vie d'autrui*, a criminal charge).

With unions intensifying the legal battle and multiplying the terrains of conflict, events were undergoing a turning point. Unions started mobilising the public administration bodies in charge of enforce law into the workplace: labour inspectors, labour medical officers and prefects. The goal of unions was to obtain support of public authorities.

Labour inspectors and medical doctors were particularly under pressure in the acute phase of the pandemic. However, between the end of March and the beginning of April, they intervened in almost all Amazon FCs. The territorial medical officer suggested twice to temporarily close the site of Montelimar (MRS1). On March 19th, the labour inspector visited the site and, on April 7th, sent a formal notice reporting the lack of adequate safety measures. Similar notices were sent by other labour inspectors to the management of the sites of Chalon-sur-Saône, Bretigny, Lille and Orleans (April 3rd). The labour inspector also intervened in the site of Amiens (BVA1) (March 30th) though no formal notice was issued. In these notices, labour inspectors certified that Amazon took measures to protect workers health and safety into the warehouses but that these measures were not sufficient to the purpose. Report signalled the “absence of a formal plan” of reorganisation, the “absence of procedures for treatment of suspect and verified cases of contagion, scarcity of hand sanitizer, flaws in the organisation of social distancing, lack of inclusion of the site CSE in the drafting of the Risk

Evaluation Document (*Document Unique d'Evaluation des Risques*, DUER). Amazon did not recognize those decisions and filed an appeal, but at the same time declared it was reacting promptly to these notices, by improving the taped indicators on the floor, the hand sanitiser distribution, and employee's safety training. Moreover, the company announced the introduction of "Safety Angels". According to my union sources, the company recruited 350 workers as Safety Angels to patrol the FCs in order to monitor the respect the anti-contagion measures.

Box 17 – The pandemic crisis as an opportunity for augmenting control: Safety Angels and Amazon AI system for social distancing

In front of the labour and political crisis during the outbreak of the pandemic, Amazon introduced two devices to ensure the respect of social distancing and other safety rules. The first one, safety angels, can be considered as a classic form of direct control. The second one, an AI system for video-surveillance, a sort of augmentation of direct control by digital means.

In April the company introduced, in France and Italy as well as in Germany, a new job in its facilities, the "Safety Angel". Safety Angel were recruited among volunteer workers and their task was to monitor the behaviour of their colleagues and the respect of physical-distancing and other measures introduced by the company. Safety Angels, also called "Patrol" was a special team created by Amazon in charge of the monitoring of anti-Covid measures. They were recruited among workers on a voluntary base. Their tasks were multiple: organising the flow of persons at the beginning and at the end of the shifts, count the number of workers in the areas of the warehouse, control the respect of social distancing and the correct wearing of masks. Apart from these formal tasks, safety angels were a contested figure in the workplaces, as they functioned and were perceived as another instrument of control in the hands of management. I will account for the tensions arisen in the next sessions.

In June, Amazon decided to introduce an AI system for social distancing, that controlled workers movement in the workplace and signalled gatherings and workers coming closer than two meters. This was an artificial intelligence system that analysed images from special security cameras and alerted management of potential social distancing violations. Proxemics was built by AI experts in Amazon robotics division and deployed in mid-March in the US, and the company referred to the software in an April blog post (Amazon.com, Inc. 2020b). It was introduced progressively in other European countries, 1.000 Amazon buildings around the world according to *Wired* (*Wired* 2020). The system consisted of a television screen, depth sensors and an IA-enabled camera, which are installed in different points of the plants. The camera registered images on real time, tracking people moving through the warehouse. When they passed in the visual field of the camera, workers appeared on the screen surrounded by "augmented reality" circles. The IA used the apparent size of people in the frame and the number of pixels between them to calculate distance. If social distance was respected, circles were green; otherwise, circles were red, a possible violation was flagged, and management was alerted. Reviewers included the details in a regular report sent to building managers that summarised recent social distancing violations in their facility. These features of Proxemics aimed, Amazon declared, to provide a quick response to contagion risk and was used only for Covid-19 safety. However, this system raised many concerns about privacy from the part of unions and other independent observers, as well as, of regulation authorities (Delfanti, Radovac, and Walker 2021).

The interventions and assessments of public authorities reinforced unions convictions that Amazon's operation had to be suspended. To achieve these goals, union delegates mobilised strikes as well as judicial instruments. Thus, CGT, CFDT and SUD, filed petitions against Amazon before the *Prud'Hommes* court; in LIL1, the CGT filed a criminal charge for the critical situation in the local Amazon warehouse. CFDT central delegate in Amazon, Julien Vincent, called for the multiplication of judicial conflicts:

We recommend proceeding warehouse by warehouse and launching all imaginable procedures. In Prud'Hommes courts, criminal courts, civil courts... we set no limits. (*Mediapart* 2020)

In a context of upcoming judicial guerrilla, SUD made a breakthrough. On April 8th, SUD filed an urgent complaint (*Référé d'heure en heure*) to the *Tribunal Judiciaire* of Nanterre. The lawyers of the union formally asked, on the base of labour inspectors' formal notices as well as of elements collected by worker delegates, a drastic reduction of Amazon operations, until management safety measures prove to be effective against the epidemic risk. Interviewed, the SUD union official in charge of the lawsuit, explained:

How to explain the genesis of all this? In fact, it was after three weeks that the need to take legal action became imperative. In the first week, Amazon was open while one would expect it to be closed. People [workers] started to fear for their health and began to mobilise. The second week it's more of a fantasy. We had the first cases of Covid arriving and in the third week, at the beginning of April, we even had the first hospitalisation of someone who ended up in hospital. And since, during this time, the management was still in denial - talking rubbish! - we said to ourselves "we've got no choice but to go to court". So, who actually put the case together: the delegates, me and the lawyer. And I was in the middle. For example, I said to the delegates, "Send me everything", "Please give me some information", "Give me, for example, photos of the goods you handle, because that's when Amazon lies and says: 'We only deliver essential goods'". It was totally false, so it was important to take photos, collect evidence, of what was in the plastic bins. So, on the 1st of April... we really did a great job, the lawyer worked through the night, at the weekend and so on... So between the time we filed the case [April 8th] and the time we had the hearing [April 10th], it was extremely quick. At first, we thought we weren't going to get any dates, but in the end we did. We got a date very quickly, and that put a lot of pressure on the employer.

Fieldwork Quote 115 – Laurent Degousé, Union official for SUD-Commerce, interview, February 2021

One week later, on April 14th the decision of the Tribunal was taken. The court stated that Amazon had failed to protect workers health:

The company Amazon France Logistique has clearly disregarded its obligation to ensure the safety and health of its employees, which constitutes a manifestly breach of the law. The failure to comply with this obligation also makes it necessary to prevent imminent harm resulting from the contamination of a larger number of employees and the subsequent spread of the virus to new people.

Fieldwork Written Document 21 – Tribunal Judiciaire de Nanterre, Ordonnance de référé, April 14th 2020 (p. 13)

Consequently, Amazon France Logistique (AFL, Amazon's subsidiary running French FCs) was first summoned to discuss the whole set of anti-Covid measures in concertation with workers representatives. Second, until this was not done and certified, AFL operations had to be limited to the handling of essential products, i.e., food, drugs, and health products. Except the threshold of 100 persons, which was not retained by the court. All SUD's argument were confirmed by the court. Not only in the media, but also during the hearing, Amazon insisted on the measures taken to protect workers health. However, it is reported in the Court's decision, Amazon failed to show solid evidence in support of its claims.

8.1.4. Amazon's de-mobilisation strategy during the pandemic crisis

Amazon's response to union's offensive deployed on different levels. As we saw, following the instruction of corporate management, French executives tried to bargain in order to nip the mobilisation in the bud. In front of unions' intransigence Amazon found itself initially vulnerable. In no other country unions were exerting such a pressure, thanks especially to the judicialisation of the conflict.

Then, progressively, the company decided to take the initiative. At the legal level, the company considered that the battle was lost. Amazon decided to respond to this judicial decision by closing its FCs, deeming that it was impossible to satisfy the demands of the court. During this period permanent workers continued receiving their pay (although all temp contracts were terminated). The court decision was a great victory for SUD, but also for CFDT and the CGT that supported the initiative. However, in this way, management displaced the conflict were the unions when it considered to be stronger: the labour market and the labour process.

For what concerns Amazon's supremacy in the labour market, the company decided to put unions under pressure by threatening employment. In fact, the decision to suspend the activities of its French FCs looked like a lock up. Amazon organised to deliver its customers even with its French warehouses closed, thus circumventing, at least partially, courts' judgements. To achieve this goal, Amazon relied on its European network. Products started coming from Italy, Germany and Spain and

channelled in Amazon France Transport's (AFT) distribution network, the subsidiary in charge of sortation centres and last-mile delivery stations, who had not been affected by labour conflict and judicial decisions. AFT was relatively younger than AFL. There, unions did not have time for organising, also because of the smaller size of the sites and the high workforce turnover. On March 19th, while AFL was hit by strikes and absenteeism, at AFT an agreement had been signed between workers representatives and management of AFT in which were simply formalised the world-wide wage increase of \$2 per hour and introduced some flexibility on workers' day offs. Only one AFT site, that of Les Blanc-Mesnil (Paris) had been touched by a labour protest, in October 2018, but later no other remarkable episodes had been signalled. As reported to *Le Monde* by a local CGT union official, unions demanded de reduction of the activity but the plant workers' representative, he said, was closer to management than to the union (*Le Monde* 2020). This person declared to *Le Monde* that "workers in the station do not understand the court's judgement and ask we they should work less" and considered safety measures (social distancing, gloves, temperature controls) "satisfying". In other words, Amazon had a safe inland through which resisting and organising its response. Of course, this network could not fully replace the six closed FC, but the source suggested that AFT was filling half of its usual orders. If we consider that the appeal decision entailed that Amazon France could still deliver around 50% of its catalogue, we can understand the political valences of such a choice. Instead of delivering around 50% of its catalogue respecting judges' recommendations, Amazon preferred to keep on delivering around 50% of its commodities circumventing the sentence and unions claims. In this way Amazon proved its force. It was still possible for customers to order and for seller to offer their product on the French website. For unions at AFL, it was a blow, since in the previous years they had not built stable contacts with their co-workers at AFT. Thus, they were not able to coordinate their action with workers and unionists in this crucial chokepoint. In other words, Amazon's structural power could be counteracted by unions' associational power, but French unions lacked it.

Workers, in the meantime, remained at home but continued receiving their salary. However, many employees started worrying about their job in the medium long term. Minor unions such as CAT, UNSA and CFTC leveraged on these concerns to attack SUD, CFDT and CGT, accused of being indifferent to workers' job security. This put the main unions under pressure and softened their stance. On May 15th, more than one month after the closing, an agreement was reached between unions (SUD, CFDT, CGT) and the board. The agreement established the reopening of all six AFL sites and the progressive return of work of the workforce within three weeks. Unions obtained that the reopening was scheduled on a voluntary basis: first a group of 50%, from May 18th to May 25th. Then, a second wave of 80% of the workforce (with a minimum threshold of 50%). Finally, from June 3rd on, 100% were expected to be back at work. Workers who decided to postpone their return

to work maintained their pay (included the night and the weekend bonus) until June 3rd. The wage increase worth €2 per hour was maintained until May 31st but this was a corporate decision, since the increase had been introduced and would be withdrawn at the global level). Daily shifts were reduced by 15 minutes (paid): morning shift would have left 15 minutes earlier and afternoon shift would have entered 15 minutes later. The Central CSE would be provided with resources to order and finance a special expertise about the progressive restart of operations. AFL, whose appeal had already been rejected by the *Cour d'Appel* of Versailles, renounced to re-appeal the court decisions before the *Cour de Cassation*.

In the labour process, Amazon responded to the crisis by managerialising rules (Edelman 1992; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001) and increasing control on the workers (R. Edwards 1979). Before the lock up, Amazon had introduced a series of standard measures following the guidelines established at the corporate level for all countries: hazard pay increase, distribution of masks and sanitising gel etc. However, as we saw, no structural measure to reduce the volumes was taken. The company introduced new rules for workers in the workplace, namely social distancing, the wearing of masks etc.. Consistently, it established new means for their enforcement, including Safety Angels and the AI systems. As we saw in the chapters on algorithmic bureaucracy, the overproduction of rules and standard turned into a way to show compliance, prevent critique, and increase control over the workers.

The introduction of these measures had already influenced certain workers, which declared to be satisfied. Later in May, I interviewed a non-unionised (although not necessarily anti-union) worker who had applied as a Safety Angel just for the week preceding the lock out. He appreciated the measures taken by Amazon administration, although he considered it insufficient to protect workers, because some places such as the canteen and public transport, remained unavoidably crowded:

Worker: I have to admit that the measures they took were good... the two-meter distance, no more than one person in the same lane, they did not bother you for productivity, because if there was already a person in a shelf lane you did not go too... and they did not come to ask you "why don't you work?".

Author: When did they introduce these measures? Was there a lockdown already?

Worker: Wait, let me remember. It was either right before or right after the lockdown. There was sanitising gel everywhere, wipes everywhere, and these things so, although at one point I also declared a DdR: a person had taken the Covid and they had also quarantined people who worked on the dock... when this thing happened our manager said "Don't worry... for government we are OK, there is no need to close the site"... but anyway he was cool: if you didn't feel safe and you went home he would say "It's OK". Anyway, I was on DdR a few days... less than a week. And when I came back, they started to put these safety measures...

Author: Who suggested you take the DdR?

Worker: A friend of mine who didn't work at Amazon. In fact, there was also a problem with public transport. Many friends who do car sharing with me stayed on DdR, and I didn't have any solution other than going to work with them... taking the bus was not the case... in the bus, you know, it's a pain in the neck because some buses passed by and didn't take you [because they were full] and anyway people were all on top of each other. I repeat, the measures were quite good... even if from a certain point of view, from the data it seems very difficult to avoid it... for instance, when you go to get a sandwich at the canteen everyone puts their hands on the sandwiches... and then a few days later they closed everything.

Fieldwork Quote 116 – Amazon Worker, Docker/Receiver, French, ORY1, May 2020

This example shows how even workers who were not necessarily pro-employer or anti-union could be either counter-mobilised or de-mobilised by Amazon so as to displace union action. Amazon's strategy of increasing control on the workers, instead of reducing its activity, continued in the months following the re-opening. Workers came back and found a long series of rules to respect, interdiction to stay close to each other under threat of disciplinary sanctions. Unions bitterly criticised the appointment of Safety Angels, accusing management of "policing" (*fliquer*) employees' behaviour and creating an atmosphere of "denonciation" (*délation*) and distrust among workers.

Another major controversy took place in August about Proxemics and other system of social distancing surveillance. On August 20th, with a short delay, the board of AFL announced to the central works council the decision to introduce the Proxemics system in its warehouses. In addition, another system was introduced, including a real time control by camera with an alarm that sounded every time that two or more persons appeared at a less-than-two-meters distance.

Unions reacted harshly to the announcements, considering that such a system jeopardised workers privacy in violation of labour law. On top of that, unions denounced the short delay of communication and the refuse of the company to provide workers representative with the necessary information about the storage of data, the location of cameras and other details. Unions emphasised that some weeks before, the CNIL (National Commission on Information and Liberty), the independent administrative body for the regulation of personal data and the protection of privacy, had already alerted about similar surveillance systems introduced during the pandemic crisis to monitor workers behaviour (Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés 2020).

Amazon replied to worker representatives that Proxemics was about to be introduced for "pedagogical reasons" but was unclear about the possible psycho-social impact of such a device on working conditions. Finally, in front of the possibility of resistances coming from the workplace and the legal fronts, Amazon suspended the introduction of Proxemics. Anyway, Amazon had managed to introduce it in the US, UK, Germany, Spain without any special opposition, while in Italy the device obtained the authorisation of the labour inspector in spite of unions' opposition.

Despite Amazon failure to impose an AI-equipped surveillance system, the displacement effect of Amazon policies was evident. Daily life in the post-Covid workplace turned out to be no less stressful and disappointing for Amazon workers, as anti-Covid measures revealed their ambivalent nature, especially when Amazon management started giving them an individualising and repressive spin. Workers denounced that management was using the new anti-Covid rules to increase control on employees. Social distancing also affected the relations among co-workers: discussing was more difficult, many common spaces had been closed and in general any occasion for chilling was discouraged and targeted by managers. The workplace became a space where any other activity beyond a strict definition of work could be forbidden. A SUD union delegate in ORY1 reported:

We used to work as a team and now we work... we're more and more isolated at work... [...] they [management] are putting Plexiglas everywhere so that we can work at all the shifts, otherwise the 2-metres distance would force management to leave half the workstations empty. So, they're putting us in Plexiglas which is going to isolate us even more, what I call 'putting people in jars', and since the government says that we can work with a distance of one metre, it's OK with them. So, it's a bit the same [as in other countries], it's punishment because we dared to defend ourselves.

Fieldwork Quote 117 – Amazon worker and union delegate for SUD, Man, French, ca. 40 years old, 10 years seniority, ORY1, phone conversation, March 25th, 2020

Unions were in a difficult situation, because the new wave of surveillance, “policing” and managerial repression was part of a process of managerialisation of anti-covid policies that was difficult to counter. During the outbreak of the pandemic unions had struggled to protect workers safety, that Amazon was neglecting, but now Amazon had change approach and safety protection became a double-hedge sword. The new surveillance procedures were justified by management as a method for protecting workers health.

Putting their signature on the agreement, unions had recognised that some improvements had been achieved. Unions were in an uncomfortable position, as it was not easy to criticise Amazon for being relentless in enforcing safety in the workplace. Furthermore, unions had obtained satisfaction on the issue of DdR, with an agreement in which Amazon accepted to pay workers absences during the pandemic peak. Finally, the lock out had worried workers about their employment. As declared to the local press by a UNSA delegate in ORY1:

We'll see what happens during the peak period. But people need to work at this time of year. Action would not be very popular. (*La République Du Centre* 2020)

Unions conceded that management had reorganised the workflow – they had signed an agreement, after all – but stressed that this reorganisation risked being useless if the company decided to hire too many workers in the warehouses.

Unions' preoccupations made sense considering the pandemic recrudescence. In autumn, the contagions rose again. With Black Friday and Christmas peaks approaching, Amazon started recruiting new temporary workforce and this was seen by unions as risk-increasing factor. However, unions were not ready to organise a mobilisation exclusively on the issue of safety. Finally, a strike was called in November when Amazon planned, like in the previous years, three days of mandatory presence during the winter peak. SUD, CGT and FO, in outrage, declared an indefinite strike against this decision and annexed a set of claims regarding Covid-19 safety (especially on the issue of overcrowded buses and the excessive presence of temps) and economic improvements (wage increase and extra bonuses for “essential” workers). Even the usually moderate CAT adhered to the strike. The CFDT, instead, did not, estimating that there were not the conditions for an effective mobilisation.

In fact, the strike failed in term of worker participation. After the great labour crisis of the spring, a normalisation had taken place. Unions were too weak to contrast Amazon profit strategy with the same strength showed during the Spring pandemic peak. Amazon proceduralisation had worked as a screen of compliance that kept public authorities quiet and deprived unions of ground for their critiques and revendication. New procedures had been introduced and many of them – such as social distancing, personal hygiene, and mask-wearing – on the principle of individual responsibility. And even if contagions started growing again, there were procedures for the treatment of these cases. In other words, there were plans and protocols to face the emergency and unions had no excuse to complain and not enough strength to mobilise. The only, macroscopic, problematic point was the vast recruitment of temporary workers, but it was hard to mobilise workers against the recruitment of other workers.

8.1.5. The imbrication of strikes and negotiations and its impact on industrial relations

The strike activity between 2016 and 2018 and the peak of conflict during the pandemic outbreak must be analysed through under two typical dimensions of French industrial relations. One is the specific institutional design of company-level industrial relations; the other, intertwined, element is the competitive and fragmented nature of French union pluralism.

First, as it emerged especially during the peak of strike activity (2016-2018), union mobilisations are entangled in the institutions of labour regulation. All main conflicts occur during NAO, when unions and management are meeting to bargain particularly over wages and work time. Events occur as if it was the annual meeting to negotiate that beat the time of conflict. Conflict and

negotiations interlock, following a routinised and dramatized pattern (R. A. Friedman 1994; Khalidi 2011; Batstone 1978). I could not attend any of this meeting, but I could follow them indirectly by the words of trade unionists collected in interviews and in the analysis of union communication on tracts and social media. At each NAO unions present a list of demands. Unions usually set the bar very high, because they know that the board of managers will dismiss most of the. If things work out, the negotiation will be on one issue. Unions are also in constant competition among them, so they tend to enlarge the scope of claims as much as possible so to appeal all potential voters (so, excluding temp workers). Sometimes, even workers reproach the unions for exaggerating with their claims.

When the negotiation takes place, every actor follows a script. Management tries to downplay unions' complaints and to elude demands. Management can also play a little bit dirty, by trying to bypass unions and consult directly the workers. It happened for instance (as reported by unions) during negotiations over amendments to collective agreements on night shifts (2013) or on part-time weekend shifts (2011); the first agreement include a wage increase of 27%; the second establishes teams of employees working only on weekends and holidays i.e. 24 hours per week and paid as much as 35 hours. Workers are particularly attached to these agreements and worried about possible changes, thus management spreads the rumour that unions behaviour in negotiations could undermine these advantages, a tactic resulting into increasing pressure on the unions.

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Communication sur la négociation du 20 novembre 2018

VOUS AVEZ DES QUESTIONS? NOUS Y REPONDONS

Nous souhaitons pouvoir offrir des horaires qui conviennent aux salariés. Nous vous avons écoutés et avons ainsi proposé un schéma avec 3 types d'équipes aux organisations syndicales qui répondent aux souhaits que vous avez émis dans le sondage :

Equipe de nuit permanente sur volontariat avec un horaire de 21h10 – 4h30	Maintien des équipes alternées actuelles, sans changement	Equipe de journée sur volontariat de 10h – 17h45,
Nouveauté		Nouveauté
<p>Equipe de nuit permanente</p> <p>Pic d'Activité (Q4 et Prime Day) 6 semaines au maximum par an avec l'équivalent d'un jour en plus. Récupération de ces 6 jours au cours de l'année</p> <p>Prime Day: Pas de gel de congés <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inchangé</p> <p>Possibilité de sortir de l'équipe de nuit sur demande <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inchangé</p> <p>Horaires: 2 pauses de 20 minutes dont 20 minutes payées <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inchangé</p>	<p>Equipes alternées actuelles</p> <p>Pic d'Activité (Q4 et Prime Day) 6 semaines au maximum par an avec l'équivalent d'un jour en plus. Récupération de ces 6 jours au cours de l'année</p> <p>Prime Day: Pas de gel de congés <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inchangé</p> <p>Horaires: Pause de 30 minutes dont 20 minutes payées <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inchangé</p>	<p>Equipe de journée permanente</p> <p>Pic d'Activité (Q4 et Prime Day) 8 semaines au maximum par an avec l'équivalent d'un jour en plus. Récupération de ces 8 jours au cours de l'année</p> <p>Prime Day: Pas de gel de congés <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inchangé</p> <p>Alternance d'une semaine à 5 jours et d'une semaine à 4 jours</p> <p>Horaires: Pause de 30 minutes dont 20 minutes payées <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inchangé</p>
<p><i>Et pour les SDJF - équipe de week-end</i> L'équipe de week-end reste en place dans les conditions actuelles. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inchangé</p> <p><i>Que se passe-t-il en cas de non signature de l'accord?</i> Le projet d'accord ne sera pas déployé et l'organisation actuelle des équipes ne sera pas changée.</p>		




Figure 61 – Amazon’s poster affixed on the wall of an FC
Management attempts to establish direct communication with workers during negotiations

Unions try to control the narrative and release harsh statements where they stigmatise the greed of the company and confirm their will to win the battle. On the contrary, the few declarations I collected from the managerial side provide us with another picture. For example, according to a former assistant

to the HR director, “the situation during meetings was cool and relaxed, people discussed during coffee. Breaks... it was quiet”:

Author: Have you seen her [HR Director Amazon France] deal with the unions?

HR Intern: Yeah, totally! I was there for a few months; we were more or less in the same office. She took me to several negotiations with her.

Author: And how did that go?

HR Intern: Honestly? Very well, which is to say not at all like what you hear in the press... the negotiations I went to... after the negotiation, we had lunch with managers and [she names a unionist] at the same table. We had a drink together and everyone was talking to each other. We’d finished negotiations before the end of the hour... frankly... afterwards it’s not always like that, but honestly, I find that... it’s not really what’s said in the press that happens in real life.

Author: But there was only [the above-mentioned unionist]. Were there no representatives from other organisations?

HR Intern: Yes, yes... there were all the others. There were about twenty people around the table. [The HR Director], [the President] and about twenty other people around the table, but to be honest, they all got on really well! [she laughs]

Fieldwork Quote 118 – Interview with a former HR Intern, Amazon France Logistique, phone interview, April 2020

Although I could not triangulate this source with others, this contrast suggests a divergent representation of union meetings by the two parties, and could confirm those readings of collective bargaining at the company level through a dramaturgical perspective (R. A. Friedman 1992; 1994; Khalidi 2011).

The decoupling between the frontstage and the backstage of negotiations, and the imbrication between conflict and negotiations are confirmed by the fact that every union signed at least one collective agreement with the company. In the period following the constitutions of independent unions in the workplace, unions signed two important agreements, mentioned above, which remained two milestones for the regulation of work time in at Amazon. Even in the period between 2016 and 2018, where the harshest conflicts emerged, agreements were signed. In 2016, one month after the strike over wage increase, unions and management started new negotiations and, in November, CFDT, CGT, SUD and CFE-CGC signed an agreement on non-discrimination policies and gender equality at work. In 2017, during the mobilisations over wage increases, CFDT, CGT, SUD and CFE-CGC signed the renewal of the agreement on part-time weekend work. In 2018, the agreement on wage increases was signed. These agreements were signed despite the bad relations between unions and the board, at least as long as we rely on unions representation.

The fact that, while union strikes, negotiations take place, is indeed a typical feature of the French system of industrial relations (Batstone 1978; Morel 1994; Bérout et al. 2008; B. Giraud, Péliisse, and Penissat 2014; Desage and Rosankis 2015; Blavier and Péliisse 2022; Lescurieux 2024); in this regard, it seems that even within a US-based multinational company, the local pattern of management-unions relations prevails. Further, this historical tendency has been reinforced by mandatory annual negotiations, as provided by the micro-corporatist Lois Auroux of 1982 on collective bargaining. No matter how much anti-union a firm is; it is mandatory for management to open negotiations every year, and it is mandatory to organise professional elections. To be sure, management can develop strategies to circumvent these obligations. At Amazon, it happened during the first phase, and it happened even in the second.

Anyway, there is another element in the structure of the French system of industrial relations that favours the coexistence between antagonism and, though limited they are, negotiations. This element is the fragmentation of the union front and the competition between organisations. In the French system, in firms with 50 employees or more professional elections are mandatory every four years, and Amazon is no exception. While professional elections introduce mechanism of democratic representation, they also trigger a mechanism of political competition between unions. In a union landscape such as the French one, historically divided across political/ideological but also professional lines (think about the existence of a union for supervisors and intermediate profession such as CFE-CGC), professional elections reproduce fragmentation and conflicts among unions that are expected to represent the same constituency.

8.1.6. Union competition as a source of mobilisation and de-mobilisation

In a highly competitive system, unions follow strategies of distinction that are in part the result of the political connotation of their confederation. In part, though, they are the result of endogenous mechanisms of workplace labour politics.

CGT is the organisation who called for the vast majority of the strikes in the period between 2014 and 2019. However, evidence shows that strikes are only one facet of the politics of the CGT in Amazon. First, in most of the cases, the union was not capable to massively mobilise the workers. Strikes were a tool of pressure toward management but also toward other unions, especially the CFDT which is regularly accused to desert the struggle for workers' rights. As summarised by a CGT union delegate in MRS1:

What makes the difference between our organisation [and the CFDT] is that, rather than being relativistic and accepting anything and everything on the grounds that there's worse elsewhere, we prefer to push our demands upwards and aim for improvements for everyone.

Fieldwork Quote 119 – Amazon worker and union delegate for CGT, French, man, ca. 30 years-old, seniority unknown, MRS1, September 2020

Sometimes even workers in the shopfloor are blamed by CGT unionists for not mobilising enough, and this contributes to the declining popularity of the union in major sites such as ORY1 and LIL1 in terms of votes at the professional elections of 2019 (see Appendix 2). Second, while maintaining a hostile discourse toward management, the CGT is far from being a union that rejects agreement; sometimes, as we saw, the CGT signs agreements that are refused by the CFDT. This should not surprise the reader. Scholarship has showed that the CGT is quite keener on signing agreements than what is suggested by stereotypical images (Pélisse 2019). Even at the CGT, unionists are aware that “if, at the end of the strike, you never sign any agreements, you run the risk of appearing as those who always say no, and employees will end up wondering what you're good for. You must always combine mobilization and negotiation. You can't do one without the other” (B. Giraud 2014, 53). In this case, the incitation to sign the agreement comes from the fact that a direct link between mobilisation and wage increase can be argued and that CFDT seems not willing to sign: a good reason to explain to the workers that there is a union capable to get results and another which is not.

However, this kind of pragmatism or ambivalence toward bargaining seems to be limited mainly to the wage and work time questions, only marginally involving working conditions (especially the risk for health and safety). In the ORY1 warehouse, where I worked as a temp, the CGT was accused by other unionists and even by workers to defend only narrow professional interests, such as those of forklift drivers. It is precisely in ORY1, where the electoral scores of the CGT were worse in 2015 and 2019 elections.

For what concerns the CFDT, the profile of this union is even more ambivalent and not a mere reflex of the national CFDT. Created a few weeks before the elections of 2011, with the goal of gathering those workers that did not agree with the oppositional stance of FO (see par. 7.3.1), the CFDT remained for years under the leadership of the founding-members of ORY1 section. However, after 2016, the growth of the union section of MRS1, where the votes for CFDT jumped from zero to 59% (and the CGT fell from 29% to 11%), propelled the rise of a new DSC, Julien Vincent. The electoral success of the CFDT was not the result of a moderate attitude (as it had been the case in ORY1 in 2011). With the degradation of working conditions and the relationship between management and workers across all the FCs, the opportunities for a more adversarial style increased, even within a union such as the CFDT.

Box 18 – An unconventional CFDT unionist

Hired as a temp worker a year after the opening of MRS1, Julien Vincent, at that time in his early 20s, got a permanent contract some months later. His story of disaffection vis-à-vis his employers is the same I heard from other unionised workers. Once on a permanent contract, he was gradually trained for new positions and, after a few months, his manager offered him the chance to become a leader, if he manages to perform even better. Motivated by this project, he redoubled his efforts, as did his colleagues. “Everyone believed in it, and I worked my ass off,” he says. Until his body stopped him. Having been with the company for around a year and a half, the young worker suffered sciatica triggered at work. He filed an accident report and was off work for three weeks. However, management contested the accident. This was a turning point for him. He realizes that his relationship with the company is not what he thought it was. It was his first disillusionment.

At first, he decided to scrupulously follow the “dumb” safety rules - as he calls them - laid down by the company, in particular the instruction to drink every hour to avoid the risk of dehydration. He started drinking a litre of water every 45 minutes and going to the toilet every 10 minutes. He also decided to stop being impressed by managers who come into the break room 5 minutes before the end time to tell workers to get back to work. He remained seated until the last minute, even though his boss sat silently in front of him for 4 minutes every day. He decides to join a union, and soon enough he is standing for election as an employee representative. His rebellious style does not meet with unanimous approval in the company. He even annoyed some established trade unionists and was criticized by employees still in the “honeymoon” phase, who found his methods a little too “brutal”, he says. Once elected to the CHSCT, he arrived at his first meeting with local management with 50 questions in hand:

I saw this phenomenon when we had the first team of elected representatives in 2015. I'd already been elected in 2012, so I'd already seen the system and I could see how they [management]’d fuck you up... The first few meetings I arrived in bulldozer mode as usual... “You’re idiots”, etcetera... And then all the elected representatives [talking to managers] said “No, no, you’re not idiots, Julien is talking shit!”. And after a year, they finally understood that they [the managers] were taking them for idiots.

Fieldwork Quote 120 – Julien Vincent, Amazon worker and Central Union Delegate (DSC) for CFDT, man, French, ca. 35 years-old, 8-years seniority, April 2018.

Mr. Vincent didn’t yet have the know-how to prioritize his demands, “but I got answers nonetheless”. As a unionist, he developed his skills, learned to draw up a bargaining agenda, to negotiate and, above all, to communicate effectively (in 2016, he opened the Facebook page of CFDT Amazon, which he used as a tool for communicating with workers³¹⁴). In spite of belonging to a union with the reputation of being a moderate organisation, he distinguishes himself for his direct and somewhat provocative style: “When something goes wrong, I go on the shopfloor, take photos, draw up a report and send it to all the managers, asking them to take action, and sometimes I post the photos on social media. It is important to harm them where they are weak, on their reputation”. Aware of the risks to which Amazon workers are exposed in the warehouses, he learned how to use standards on load carrying, postures, etc., to highlight the proven risk situations he encountered in the field. In 2016 he took on responsibilities at national level, becoming central delegate, and still maintaining his confrontational attitude. I saw this in action during a

³¹⁴ CGT and FO Amazon already had one, and by 2017 also SUD, CAT and UNSA had theirs.

visit to the MRS1 FC. I was invited by Mr. Vincent to attend a union meeting of the CFDT section in their office inside the warehouse. Mr Vincent told me that he could invite external persons, but when I showed up at the gate, the HR director of the site initially refused to let me in. Mr Vincent started shouting at the manager. The following excerpt is an example of the daily guerrilla between managers and unionists in Amazon France:

- *DHR MRS1: No, that's not the point. It's just that I need to see at least something that proves it's in good faith, you know? Right now I've just got your word... on a piece of paper!*

- *JV: You think that... if I'd called in a journalist, I'd have told you he was a carpetbagger.*

- *No, because in any case you need our agreement to be able to do that.*

- *But yes, that's what I'm telling you... you could follow him if he went to the toilet, that's really it.*

- *No, I'm not. Where I'm hedging my bets is just in terms of my consistency with the other [unions]... with the discourse, with the other organisations.*

- *I don't annoy the others, I don't.*

- *No, you don't! Like the others, I would have followed the same... procedure.*

- *Now I'm being patient, it's already 10 minutes.*

- *I don't feel like doing this all day either, so let me reassure you: I really don't! it's... once again...*

- *Do you want us to call Mr B [Amazon France HR Manager]? You've got a talent for wasting time on bullshit. When someone wants you to correct a pay slip, you're not that reactive.*

- *No, but here...*

- *You take 4-5 days. I sent you an email yesterday and got a reply 2 hours later saying "no, you're not coming in".*

- *No, wait a minute! I've already replied today. I asked you to provide concrete evidence of his... of his activities.*

I've just done a sworn statement, what more do you want? Don't you have anything else to do? You're looking for shit, frankly.

Fieldwork Quote 121 – Fieldwork observation, Dialogue between Plant HR manager and Julien Vincent, MRS1, September 2020

Such an open confrontational attitude is not shared by all CFDT members at Amazon, especially the old guard who founded the union section at ORY1 in 2011. However, they had to accept the appointment of Mr. Vincent as a DSC. For what concerns the position of the CFDT structure on the approach of Mr. Vincent, there is a certain ambiguity. During an informal conversation with the CFDT official in charge of the commerce sector, he admitted that the approach of Mr. Vincent was not typical of the union style, but at the same time he implicitly recognised that Vincent's leadership was also a precious resource for the union

Under the leadership of this unconventional delegate, the CFDT maintained a median attitude: on the one hand, it rarely participated to the strikes called by the CGT; this position is motivated, according to Mr. Vincent, by the necessity to organise effective strikes, capable to mobilise the majority of the workers, while the CGT in his opinion, "waste workers' money" by asking them to "walk out without a precise strategy" (Fieldwork Quote 113). On the other hand, it developed an intense activity of monitoring on working conditions, especially in the site of MRS1: here the CFDT

had 120 of its total 250 members in Amazon France³¹⁵. In this way the CFDT, far from being a union in permanent search of a compromise and subaltern to management as in the first phase, became active part of an opposition to managerial unilateralism.

A significant number of supervisors (from managers to leads) feel that their work is hindered by the majority trade union organisation (CFDT) and by the CHSCT, the two often being conflated in the discussions. There are several recurring themes in this respect:

- According to some managers, the CHSCT is blocking progress on projects. In fact, the manager who works with certain members of his team (in the form of Kaizen meetings) may consider that ‘the associates are in agreement with this project’, and, when the CHSCT asks for additional details or modifications to this project in the context of the information-consultation procedure, that the CHSCT is deliberately blocking or delaying the project.
- According to some managers, the CHSCT deliberately blocks or disrupts activity (“Sometimes the CFDT comes to shipping. They say that the employees don't have the right personal protective equipment, they come to raise the problems, it is a way of putting pressure on management. They block the activity”, “For us to work in better conditions, the CFDT representatives would have to stop coming onto the floor to question the associates, they create a bad atmosphere in the team”).
- According to some managers, the CFDT and the CHSCT intend to damage or even destroy the company's image (“They are writing articles in the press to smear Amazon”, “This expert report is yet another attempt by the CHSCT to destroy Amazon Montelimar”).
- Managers, and even leads, feel under pressure when their managerial practices are called into question in communications or e-mails from the trade union, adopting a tone that they consider inappropriate or even brutal, which is a source of stress for these managers.
- Some managers feel that CFDT members “arrogate to themselves the right” not to work or to refuse to change processes, and that this is unfair to other associates. It should be noted that this issue mirrors that raised by other associates who feel that certain leads “put their buddies in the best jobs”.

Fieldwork Written Document 22 – Internal Report, MRS1, 2018

An interesting case of “relative autonomy” of workplace unionism, that can vary according to the specificity of the firm’s industrial relations, including the company’s corporate culture, but also the individual temperament of unionists.

SUD is another example of how the general ideological orientations of a union do not explain the actual strategy deployed in the workplace. This organisation is conventionally considered an outsider union with radical and confrontational attitude (Connolly and Darlington 2012; Denis 2012), inspired to either self-management or even anarcho-syndicalism. In fact, within a couple of year from foundation of a section in ORY1 (2013) SUD became the first union at the 2015 professional election. SUD developed a pragmatic style of unionism based on the careful monitoring of working conditions

³¹⁵ Reported by Julien Vincent, Amazon worker and Central union delegate for CFDT.

and constant information on workers' rights, as we saw above. This is a convergence with the strategy developed by Mr. Vincent at the CFDT, a union whose modes of action are usually defined as "pragmatic" (Barthélemy and Groux 2012). However, SUD also developed an important capacity to mobilise juridical tools in the confrontation with Amazon, a practice which is part of the union's repertoire of action (Bérout et al. 2011).



Flash Information de ces derniers jours

Avancées et réclamations récentes :

Le repas de fin d'année

Après vos nombreuses remontées concernant deux problèmes récents, nous avons activement sollicité la direction pour trouver une solution et agir pour résoudre ces soucis.

Ainsi, en ce qui concerne le repas de fin d'année que la direction s'était engagée à payer hors temps de travail deux heures pour profiter de ce moment mais au final avait octroyé uniquement 1H30. Nous leur avons rappelé que le All hands n'est pas inclus dans ces deux heures et n'a jamais été hors temps de travail. La direction n'est pas restée sourde à notre demande et va ainsi **rajouter 45 minutes payées** pour les personnes présentes au repas et ainsi réparer cette erreur.

Les lettres de rappel à l'ordre excessive sur la performance

Après avoir collecté un maximum de ces dits rappels à l'ordre, nous avons eu des discussions avec l'équipe de management et la direction concernant la bonne application du règlement intérieur et de la surveillance de la performance. Car il est pour nous inadmissible de sanctionner une personne sur la performance et encore moins au bout d'une semaine de baisse ! La direction est en effet consciente de ces excès et va **s'excuser et annuler** l'ensemble de ces rappels à l'ordre !

Cependant, nous comptons sur vous pour vérifier ceci et ne pas céder face à certains excès. La productivité n'est **pas variable** à volonté !! Les coachings ne sont **pas systématiques** ! Et abuser de ceux-ci peut être perçu comme du harcèlement !!

A l'ensemble de l'inbound, nous vous remercions en ce qui concerne les courriers pour le 6 février. La direction a écouté vos arguments et va nous donner un retour dans les jours à venir, nous vous tiendrons évidemment informés !

Semaine du 7 au 13 mai pour SD :

Oyez, Oyez équipe SD ! Veuillez bien noter cette information !! **La semaine du 7 au 13** ou il y a 2 jours fériés, la direction vous demande de travailler les deux jours fériés pendant 7 heures sans préciser vraiment les conditions ! Vous avez effectivement la possibilité de travailler ces deux jours mais l'un des deux est un jour d'heures complémentaires. **Traduction** : Il sera au **volontariat** !!

Nous vous invitons vivement à le repréciser ce week-end et à demander lequel de ces deux jours sera au volontariat au cours par exemple de votre prise de poste.

N'hésitez pas si vous avez des questions à nous en faire part aussi bien sur le floor, à notre local SUD Solidaires ou même par le biais de Facebook !



Another key of the success of SUD was the control of plant-level works councils (*Comité d'entreprise*, CE), especially in the ORY1 plant, where I run my participant observation. In France, the plant CE are in charge of organising social activities (*oeuvres sociales*), such as trips or spectacles, and distributed gift checks and holidays check. It is also thanks to these institutions that SUD could consolidate its constituency among the workforces. A similar dynamic brought SUD to become the most important union also in LIL1, the largest French FC until 2019.

Beyond those three unions, which, between 2015 and 2019, were the only considered representative at the company level³¹⁶, the union landscape at Amazon is completed today by other unions. Most of them collected ephemeral or oscillating results, such as FO, UNSA or CFTC³¹⁷. One, however, has been able to constantly expand its presence in the company and became “representative” at the firm-level. This union is the CAT (*Confédération Autonome du Travail*), founded in 1953. Born during one of the most critical phases of the Cold War, it followed the anti-communist split of FO from the CGT. Some unionists did not want to join FO and remained autonomous. After few years, in 1953 they merged into the CAT. It is hard to find CAT section in the private sector, except for Darty, one of the major retailers in the country. There, CAT is known as a *syndicat maison* (yellow union). The CAT appeared in Amazon a short time before the professional elections of 2015 in the FCs of MRS1 and LYS1. According to interviewed unionists from other organisations, the creation of a CAT local was actively encouraged by Amazon, who helped the union to recruit members especially among team leaders. The journalist Jean-Baptiste Malet, author of the first undercover reportage on Amazon in France, reported that Amazon imposed the presence of the CAT union in the electoral lists (*L'Humanité* 2015). CGT, CFDT, FO and CFE-CGC alerted the labour inspectorate but, eventually, the CAT list was allowed. That time, the CAT did not reach 10% at the company-level but got significant score in MRS1 and LYS1. In fact, CAT proved to be a more ambivalent organisation. Even assuming that this union was a deliberate creation of management to further divide unions, this is not necessarily the outcome I found in the fieldwork. In 2017, for instance, the CAT distributed a tract attacking Amazon France Logistique's board for refusing to concede any wage increase, while in 2018 in LYS1, the CAT joined a strike called by the CGT. As summed up by a SUD unionist belonging:

³¹⁶ Together with CFE-CGT whose electoral scores are calculated only among supervisors and intermediate professions.

³¹⁷ UNSA and CFTC have an unstable presence in Amazon. Given the organisational weakness of their parent organisations, their existence in the workplace depends more on the choice of single members and elected representatives that rotate from a union to another (see note above). Scholarship on French unionism uses the football metaphor of the “*mercato*” (Andolfatto and Dressen 2012), others prefer the term of “transfers” or “*nomadisme syndical*” (Bérout et al. 2013). If these mechanisms allow union to emerge in the workplace, at the same time they do not secure continuity to the presence of a union. For further analysis of the strategies of union development of UNSA, see (Farvaque 2016). For what concerns FO the discourse is likewise. Despite being a historic union, at Amazon it rests on a very unstable base, reliant on the movements of union activists in and out other organisations.

Worker: Yes, the CAT was born like that, but the supervisors who joined recently are also those who didn't get the increases in previous years and others who were T2, the intermediate level abolished last year... and others who joined recently to avoid going to the CGT.

Author: So, the CAT recruited team leaders in its ranks who are pissed off at management?

Worker: Well, you don't "recruit" into a union, you take what comes along... at Saran, for example, the one who set up the CAT has already been a member of all the other unions...

Fieldwork Quote 122 – Amazon worker and CHSCHT member for SUD, man, French, ca. 45 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, January 2019

The CAT continued expanding in the following years and its presence in the workplace became more even and constant. During my second participant observation as a temp worker in ORY1 (fall 2019), I remarked an important presence of the CAT in the workplace and an intense activity of propaganda. It was the period of professional elections and eventually in that occasion, the CAT further increased its scores and became a representative union at the company level.

8.1.7. The unions and the problem of mobilisation in France

In the previous sections of this chapter, we discussed the patterns of union mobilisation in Amazon France between 2014 and 2019. In this period, the union landscape grew and became a complex social system with a variety of actors, of arenas and an entangling of different logics of collective action.

First, we analysed the pattern of strikes mobilisation, and we found evidence of a succession of patterns. In the first period (2014-2015), strike activities took off again and stronger: unions were more consolidated, and their mobilisation also had a symbolic impact and the interest of the press. In addition, the mobilisations in France connected with the mobilisations in Germany, even if they were smaller and less frequent in comparison.

In a second phase (2016-2017), conflict increased in intensity but became more entangled into the rhythm of mandatory annual negotiations, while mobilisations on the ground did not develop their transnational potential showed in the previous phase. This phase of conflict goes along with a centralisation of negotiations at the company-level (instead of the plant-level). Strikes and negotiations are thus concentrated in a median space between the plant-level and the transnational level. Finally, in a third phase (2018-2019), a new pattern seems to emerge. There is evidence of a decline of strike activities connected to negotiations. Unions seem less able or willing to mobilise workers and, especially SUD experiment new tactics to mobilise the workers in a way that reduce the

costs of participation while increasing its effectiveness³¹⁸. On the other hand, spontaneous mobilisations occur, for instance in April 2018 or during the yellow vest movement, when workers walked out in solidarity with the movement.

Finally, there is another peak of strike activity in Spring 2020, even if this time the conflict was quite atypical: it did not concern wage claims but specifically health and safety; in addition, the form of mobilisation switched rapidly and massively from strike to other forms of judicialized action such as the *Droit de retrait* and lawsuits³¹⁹.

For what concerns the previous cycles, what was their impact on industrial relations and working conditions? Effects of mobilisations were more indirect than direct. At only one occasion (2018) unions obtained a wage increase which was due, at least in part, to strike activity. However, the mobilisations helped maintain certain advantages such as the part-time and night shift agreement, to which workers were particularly attached. Furthermore, the deployment of union activity in the shop-floor, especially the initiatives of SUD and CFDT were effective and anticipated a pattern that will emerge during the pandemic crisis. Management played an important role in this pattern, actively pursuing worker demobilisation. We have already saw in Part II, how management operates in the workplace to prevent labour collective action. On the one hand, management deploy an arsenal of conventional tools for monitoring the “social temperature” in the workplace, from one-to-one meetings to surveys and recreational events. These are quite conventional tactics renowned within the ranks of HR management in France (Villette 1976; B. Giraud 2007; 2013). On the other hand, evidence suggests that these forms of “soft” control over the workforce do not have a decisive grip on the workforce, since they do not prevent unions to orchestrate conflicts, which compared to Italy, we’ll saw, are almost endemic. In fact, the pressure of workflow toughens the relations with employees, who are subjected to high work intensity without the reward they consider fair.

In this context, workers do not seem particularly motivated by these managerial policies. What politically forestalls worker collective action in the workplace, instead, is the structuring of the internal labour market. Segmentation separates the interests of temp workers and permanent workers and separately reconnect them to those of the company through economic coercion (Burawoy 1979a; Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982). At the same time, this divide is reproduced by the institutions of industrial relations. Temp workers are not Amazon’s employees, they do not receive many of the corporate benefits that permanent workers enjoy. Furthermore, since they are not Amazon’s direct employees, they are excluded by the company’s professional elections, so unions lack an important

³¹⁸ In this respect we join part of the scholarship in sociology of the labour movements that, based on the Ministry of Labor's “Reponse” surveys, point to a diversification of conflicts since the 1990s-2000s, involving “unconventional” forms of action such as slowdowns, work-to-rule strikes, refusal to work overtime, petitions, and even the emergence of new forms of “resistance” (B. Giraud 2006; Bérout et al. 2008; Péliisse 2009; Sainsaulieu 2017)

³¹⁹ For a discussion on the judicialization of union action in France, see (Péliisse 2009; 2010; B. Giraud 2017).

incentive to represent them. Only larger unions such as CFDT and CGT, which can rely on large apparatuses, organise sporadically specific initiatives for temps (tract distribution, essentially) (*Le Journal de Saône-et-Loire* 2015; CFDT Services 2016); however, they are organised by the federation of temp workers – which has an interest in doing it in view of professional elections of agency workers – without necessarily coordinating with Amazon’s workplace union section, thus producing poor results. Instead, it happens that unions such as CGT and CFDT even blame management for “privileging” temporary workers, for instance because management does not introduce a priority for permanent workers that apply for a transfer to the weekend team or to the night shifts.

Management also proved able to navigate the system of industrial relations, for instance by taking advantage of inter-union competition. At the beginning, as we saw, local management *de facto* established the first union in Amazon, in order to be compliant with French law and control union politics. Then, in the second labour regime, when unions became more independent and confrontational, management adopted a stance that was more careful and effective than an orthodox anti-union such as those adopted in US or UK – where until the pandemic all attempts of unionisation had failed – or even in Germany – where despite the strength institutionalisation of industrial relations, Amazon refused successfully to sign a collective agreement (Blado 2015; Boewe and Schulten 2019; 2020). In France, union presence in the workplace quite effectively protected by law, annual negotiations are mandatory and professional elections must be organised every four years. Thus, Amazon not only complied, but did more.

Conscious of the importance of professional elections for union politics, the company intervened directly by encouraging the fragmentation of the union front. Competition between unions is constant and widely considered as harmful for union action. Workers often regret it, and blame unions for being too busy in bashing each other. External observers such as CARSAT officials stated during interviews that during CHSCT meetings unions often are unable to cooperate. Nonetheless, we will see that in Italy, where unions tend to cooperate more, the ability to actually exert pressure on management is lower.

Hostility toward unions remains a feature of Amazon management in France. In the relationship with unions, especially with the more virulent unions, the attitude has remained was hard. Some examples illustrate it: the CGT central delegate protested at several occasion, complaining that his delegate had been harassed or threatened in the workplace (*L’Humanité* 2016); one year later, he denounced the illegal appropriation of the union’s laptop by the company’s IT services (*L’Humanité* 2017); in 2018, the CFDT denounced the harassment of a unionist in MRS1 (*Le Dauphiné Libéré* 2018). As showed above, even during negotiations, management do not hesitate to pull the strings for discrediting unions. On the other hand, unions’ oppositional stance that feeds managerial despotic

behaviours. In the workplace, we saw, this result in tense relationship not only between managers and unions but also between managers and workers. The struggle around workers' (mis)behaviour – described in chapter 5 – and the recurrency of strikes (including spontaneous walkouts) reported in this chapter – reveal an endemic but low-intensity state of conflict.

In this respect, French unions seem able to confront Amazon's hostility. Indeed, unions' antagonist register results galvanised by managerial hostility. Scholarship on company level industrial relations in a French mass retailer showed that unions can be co-managers of conflict and a factor of de-mobilisation (Benquet 2013; 2015). In Amazon this does not seem to be the case. On the one hand because, unions use the statutory work-based institutions as means of mobilisation, rather than of recognition, in this respect prolongating the French tradition of trade unionism (Batstone 1978; Morel 1994). On the other hand, Amazon is a company with very few chances of seeking union recognition, precisely because of the influence of a US-based antiunionism in the headquarters of the company.

In this regard, the financialisation of firms is a factor that help explain managerial hostility to collective bargaining. For instance, Benquet (2015) describes the crisis of this co-managerial role of the union in domesticating conflict, which is due to the progressive financialisation of the group (see also, B. Giraud, Signoretto, and Alfandari 2022; Pélisse, François, and Voldoire 2023). In the same vein, Thompson emphasises that in financialised firms, the priority of shareholder value reduces the possibility for managers to make concessions. Managers, Thompson concludes “are finding it harder to keep their side of any bargain with employees” (P. Thompson 2003, 361; 2013). Amazon was born as a financialised company, even if *sui generis*³²⁰. Its anti-union policies fit with its financialised structure, and are not a mere “cultural” fact. The result is that the company is uninterested, if not hostile, to bargain with unions. In most of the cases negotiations are opened because it is mandatory, and they result into an agreement in rare cases, when actors' orientation align. In addition, given its monopolistic growth, the company does not need concessionary bargaining either (which in France requires active union involvement): the massive use of temporary work and the self-latitude in the reorganisation of the labour process provide the company large margins of unilateral action. If student of industrial relations in France stress that, compared to the *Trente Glorieuses*, employers are able to exert a dominant role on negotiations (Pélisse 2019; Biaggi 2022; Brochard et al. 2022; B. Giraud, Signoretto, and Alfandari 2022), at Amazon the situation is more nuanced. Collective bargaining is not an optimum for Amazon, and unions proved able to transform the institutions of industrial relations in a battlefield. Here stays the difference with the Italian case, where the absence of statutory

³²⁰ In this respect, I disagree with Lazonick (2018), who sees in Amazon a challenger of the doctrine of shareholder value. I must add however, that Amazon's attitude had its own dose of rhetoric and opportunism, for the Seattle-based company did not post any profit for years, so there was not much value to distribute to shareholders. Furthermore, the company found in stock buybacks an alternative and effective way to pay shareholders and keep the course of stocks high.

rules that impose union presence and collective bargaining undermines unions mandatory seriously affects union action. This institutional vulnerability, combined with a micro-corporatist strategy further jeopardises the mobilisation capacity of unions and their chances to constrain managerial discretion, in the workplace and in employment relations.

8.2. *Industrial relation in Amazon Italy under algorithmic bureaucracy (2016-2021)*

In France, I found evidence of an endemic conflict both in the labour process and in the labour politics, with the frequently occurring strikes and other forms of conflict. In Italy, where the pattern of labour process taylorisation and a similar regime of algorithmic bureaucracy were in place, the situation in terms of labour politics was nonetheless significantly different.

In the labour process, as we saw in chapter 5, the relations between management and workers were not as much tense as in France. What happened, instead, in the politics of unions vis-à-vis Amazon and, mora broadly at the industrial relations level, is the object of this section. It will emerge from this analysis a divergence in the patterns of labour politics, in which unions are much less capable to mobilise the workforce and, instead, operates rather as factor of de-mobilisation.

8.2.1. *First phase (2016-2017). Unions' landing in the workplace and Amazon's hostile reaction*

We left Italian unions in spring 2016, when first CISL and UGL, and soon after CGIL and UIL, collected and submitted membership cards, officially appointing their union delegates. I do not know the precise number of members, but I can estimate them at several dozens, maybe over a hundred, while the total number of permanent employees was 1.088 at the second quarter of 2016, and it was increasing fast (they would be about 1.600 by the end of 2017). Anyway, the union officials considered this number enough to come out and call Amazon Italy to open social dialogue with the unions.

The unionisation of Amazon workers did not make much noise outside. However, within the warehouse it was an earthquake. Management, who had been able to keep the union outside for more than four years was now in a delicate position. While in France, local management had strategically selected and introduced unions, in Italy management had not deemed it necessary. After all, there was no legal obligation to have professional elections, nor annual negotiations. In addition, the CCNL provided already considerable advantages, and company-level agreement did not offer flexibility advantages that could offset the risk of bringing unions in.

Now, unions were in and by their own initiative. How did management respond to this potential crisis? Initially management adopted an orthodox anti-union strategy. Global management pressured local management to get rid of unions, as it happened in the early 2000s in France (see par. 3.3.2). In the workplace discontent had been growing among workers, management was losing its grip on employees that were once loyal and mobilised. The priority was to avoid that unions were able to *mobilise* the workforce.

In the workplace, managers attempted to isolate the most active union members. One of them was moved for months to one of the most using tasks in the warehouses, the so-called “*vasche*” (*vasca*, pl. *vasche*, means “basin”). It was the dead-end of a conveyor, where a workers had to move totes manually from a belt to another (the terms should refer to the repetitive act of moving back and forth in a swimming pool). The punished worker had to move from 18 to 24 thousand packs every shift”, reported Benedetti, “Later the ASL [local sanitary authority] would impose Amazon to review its risk evaluation report and today a worker cannot be assigned to this task for more than two hours and a half and for no more than two weeks”³²¹. Managers also tried to discredit unions, following the Amazon’s antiunion handbook: unions were a third party that would act in their own interest and break the direct relationship between workers and management.

When unions tried to organise assembly in the workplace, management initially refused. According to them, there was not enough space for safely gather hundreds of workers for the duration of the meeting. CISL initially proposed to unpack the assembly in different time slot, but when management insisted that it was not possible, the union threatened to file a report for illegal anti-union behaviour. Eventually, management gave in and conceded a space for the assembly: the dressing rooms. Benedetti recounts:

Communications with us were characterized by heated and threatening tones, demonstrating a total lack of competence in union matters, until, the day before the fixed date, we were informed that they were willing to let us hold the assembly in a space reserved for us: a locker room in which the workers were forced, due to the lack of chairs, to sit on the floor, with legitimate disturbances from other employees who, disregarding the fact that we were holding an assembly, came and went to store or retrieve their personal items in the lockers. The entrance was watched by two managers who checked and “greeted” personnel entering the room to attend the assembly, with the clear intent to deter participation.

Fieldwork Quote 123 – Francesca Benedetti, local head of the commerce branch of CISL, November 2018.

³²¹ Francesca Benedetti, local head of the commerce branch of CISL, November 2018.

Management's tense communications with unions continued on this register during the following months. Management accepted to meet union-appointed worker delegates in the premises of the company but refused to meet union officials. Meeting with union officials had to take place outside, in the local offices Confcommercio, which was used by Amazon as a screen between itself and the unions.

Although, unions started making progresses among the workers and formulated the first claims. The first dispute was about the way how Amazon applied the CCNL's job scheme. The CCNL provided that, after 18 months, workers qualified at 5th level (the entry level at Amazon) were promoted automatically at 4th level. Discussing with workers and looking at their pay rolls, unions figured out that Amazon had not applied such a clause for years and demanded the passage of all eligible workers to the 4th level. The company resisted but eventually upgraded the concerned workers; unilaterally, i.e. without any collective agreement.

The concession contributed to consolidate unions' appeal and credibility in front of the workers. Unions, in turn, increased their pressure. The strategic goal on which all unions agreed was to open collective bargaining at the plant level (in this case, it overlapped with the company level) collective agreement: a *Contratto Collettivo Integrativo Aziendale* (CCIA). Unions drafted an agreement proposal and submitted it to the company and to the workers. The draft contained provisions for the establishment of normalised industrial relations, basic and generic rules on the internal labour market (such as the regulation of labour mobility), company-welfare provisions, overtime remuneration, night shifts, holiday and Sunday work, and, above all a collective bonus for workers in case of accomplishment of productivity and quality targets.

Management declined to open official negotiations on the agreement and on the issues raised by the unions. Unions insisted, but management pursued its obstructive tactics. Eventually managerial behaviour prompted unions' reaction. The crisis escalated in November 2017, when unions declared a strike for the Black Friday. The strike was a dramatic moment and a turning point. However, we will see, far from being the beginning of a wave of labour conflict, as in France, it would start a phase of union stagnation at Amazon

Hundreds of workers took part to the strike, even if surely far less than 50%. The number of strikers was not clear: unions talked about 500 strikers (extrapolating it from the number of participants to the assembly), which corresponds roughly to 25/30% of the total permanent workforce (excluding temps, which in that period equalled permanents); for management 10% (about 160 workers).

Apart from real participation, which they either did not want or could not control, unionists stressed the symbolic meaning of this strike. Many union officials from the national organisation

hastened over Piacenza to be there in what was judged as an historic event. It was the first time that Amazon had to deal with a labour mobilisation in Italy. Meanwhile strikes were taking place in six German facilities (VERDI 2017) and French union CGT sent a message of solidarity. The news attracted dozens of journalists who came to cover the event for the main national newspapers and televisions. Massive media presence prompted the enthusiasm of unionists “I received dozens of calls, journalists were everywhere”, recount Massimo Mensi CGIL confederal official. Workers received much media attention that day and during the following days. Out of the plant, several dozens of workers were gathered, just next to the gate. Many wore union vests and waved the flag of their respective unions. The union structures, well-organised, had prepared the logistics during the week. Workers belonging to each union were given flags, vests and other symbols, in order to make their union well visible.

In spite of the enthusiasm, many lines of tensions crosscut the mobilisation. Strikers did not form a picket line – this tradition being almost unknown to the commerce unions in Italy. Yet, from their position they could oversee the passage of co-workers who decided to go to work. This created a first cleavage between strikers and “scabs”. Some workers who were going to work provoked, a part of strikers responded, and it was necessary to calm down the spirits. A couple of years later, a union delegate, who was then among the strikers, would remember this episode with regret:

With the strike, Amazon saw that they had nothing to fear anyway, because at the strike there was a war between workers, between those who were outside and those who were going in. And so, the insults started, the ironic clapping.... “Slaves!” said some, “go to work, instead of losing your time” replied others. And so, this was the victory of the company that still saw that there were not many strikers in fact and also saw the workers divided, so from that day they are not afraid of anything of anyone, so they feel and feel able to give us so many “no.”

Fieldwork Quote 124 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, June 2019

If for union officials the political/mediatic value of the strike was clear, for workers there was the awareness that many, if not most, of their colleagues had decided not to participate. It was an historic day, during my fieldwork I noticed that the day of the strike was impressed in the memory of workers, especially of the strikers. Inside the plant the situation was also tense, with management doing their best to avoid any impact on workflows. The company spent more words in declaring business as usual rather than respond to the claims of the strikers:

“We are not worried. We remain focused on the guarantees given to those who place orders with us even on this particular day. I am not able to say what the participation will be. But we will try hard to fulfill our

commitments. We will be helped by the awareness that we are part of a network that in our country alone now also counts on the warehouses in Vercelli and the one in Passo Corese in the province of Rieti,” said Salvatore Schembri Volpe, director of operations of the Amazon warehouse in the province of Piacenza. (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2017a, my translation)

That morning, another particularly meaningful episode occurred. When the news of the strike spread over the media and the territory, the local branch of SI-COBAS, the independent radical union that in the area organised most unionised workers in the outsourced warehouse industry decided to join the party. SI-COBAS had managed to unionise all the main warehouses in the area; it led important and dramatic strikes to improve working conditions of migrant workers, that were well above the minimum acceptable. However, for reasons that we have already discussed (see chapters 4 and 6), SI-COBAS had not managed to breach the walls of Amazon. Therefore, the leader of the organisation decided to participate anyway to the mobilisation, leading several dozens of workers from the surrounding warehouses. The goal was to bring solidarity to the strikers, but it was also a show of force and a way to mark their territory. The response of the confederal unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL, plus UGL) was clearly unfriendly. Amazon workers were discouraged from joining “the extremists” of SI-COBAS. Thanks to the interposition of a police line and unions’ security stewards, a “sanitary cordon” was established, and SI-COBAS workers kept at bay.

Some of the strikers, those more loyal to the unions at that time, were satisfied with the decision. SI-COBAS had the reputation of troublemaker. The success of their mobilisation strategy had been paid with arrests and fierce repression. Also, the relationship with confederal unions was at its lowest point. For other workers, however, those who felt closer to the practices of rank-and-file unionism or those who simply believed in workers solidarity beyond any organisational borders, the situation was difficult to understand:

It was a mistake, our union officials were cowards in keep us separated by the COBAS, but I did not care about this bullshit, it was ridiculous, our union officials are scared by the COBAS they fear the contagion eheh... but I know some of them and I did not care so I crossed the line of the police and got to their zone to say hello to some people I knew...

Fieldwork Quote 125 – Amazon worker and CGIL member, man, Italian, 38 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, July 2019

In fact, confederal unions were careful in avoiding any possible contact between “their” workers at Amazon and the “rebel” rank-and-file migrant workers of SI-COBAS³²². At the same time, they

³²² Racial assignation was not stranger to the divide between these groups: SI Cobas workers were overwhelmingly non-white; most Amazon workers local Italians or assimilated white from Romania or Albania.

knew that the external pressure of a radical union outside would push Amazon management to negotiate with the “reasonable” unions. “The presence of COBAS favours us, since they push the employer to have a dialogue with us, rather than meeting up with them”, explained a CISL official³²³. Despite these tensions, between strikers and “scabs” and between confederal unions and SI-COBAS, no accident was registered and after a couple of hours the demonstration ceased, workers came back home, and journalists to their offices. The following game would be essentially a matter of union officials and managers.

8.2.2. *From the first strike to the first agreement (2017-2018)*

After the strike, Amazon followed the antiunion textbook: buying time, doing nothing and waiting for the demobilisation. The strike had raised too much attention. Despite their long-lasting decline, Italian unions were still well entrenched in society and could not be permanently excluded from the workplace. However, management continued playing the hard line. In front of the press, Amazon’s spokespersons insisted that wages were the highest in the sector. Not in terms of base salary (which in fact was the same of the CCNL), but because of some “benefits”: discounts, career choice/the offer:

“Let me remind you that the salaries we pay here in Castel San Giovanni,” Schembri Volpe explained, “are perfectly in line if not higher than those set by our competitors in the logistics sector. Not only that. We comply, of course, with everything in the national labour contract. In fact, we guarantee a number of protections in addition to those provided by regulations such as free health insurance to all employees, supplementary life and accident insurance, discounts on products purchased on the Amazon portal, and meal vouchers. And there are also tools related to training and career paths for individuals”.

(Il Sole 24 Ore 2017a)

Benedetti (CISL) replied in the newspapers:

“The discount on Amazon products, amounting to 100 euros, is granted only upon spending a thousand euros, and not even on all products. And as for health insurance and life insurance, a virtual value is shown in a third column in the pay-check, representing neither a debit nor a credit, and this has never been advertised or explained to employees, so much so that no one knows how to use them”.

(Il Fatto Quotidiano 2017b)

In the workplace, strikers were targeted by managers, who let them know that their career would be affected by their insubordination. Strikers replied that anyway their career was already stagnating.

³²³ Francesca Benedetti, local head of the commerce branch of CISL, interview, November 2018.

In relations with unions, the company downplayed the participation level and continued refusing to have direct relations with union officials in the plant. The Monday after the strike, on November 27th, a meeting was already scheduled with union delegates, but the company postponed it to January 18 in the new year, with the goal of eroding the mobilisation. Unions reacted maintaining the “*Stato di agitazione*” (a pre-strike mobilisation), which allowed workers not to comply with mandatory overtime until the end of the year (a strategy that we already saw in France). If Amazon accepted a meeting in December 6th, unions would have suspended the mobilisation (*Il Manifesto* 2017; *Libertà* 2017)³²⁴. Eventually, Amazon accepted a meeting (in the office of Confcommercio) (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2017c). Meanwhile, the national labour inspectorate sent 11 officers to the plant. The purpose was to investigate the use of temporary work contracts by Amazon and verify their legal conformity; the news had national resonance in the press (*La Repubblica* 2017). The meeting between unions and managers resulted in complete disagreement. “They were very polite, as usual, they listened carefully” explained Molinari, the head of CGIL-FILCAMS in Piacenza, “However, they took no commitment, and they even refused to sign the minutes of the meeting”³²⁵. Amazon was continuing its strategy of bypassing union official; a dialogue was open with union delegates on the review of tasks, in cooperation with local sanitary authorities (ASL). This was unacceptable for unions who wanted an explicit recognition of their role. As a result, the *stato di agitazione* was renewed. However, no strike was declared, and workers were not asked to abstain from overtime work.

Meanwhile, government had intervened again. The Prefect of Piacenza invited Amazon executives to meet union officials and union delegates in the palace of Prefecture. However, the day of the meeting, Amazon’s representative did not show up. Executives explained that “there was too much pressure”. This was too much for the unions – even the prefect was more than annoyed – who cried scandal and offense to the institutions. After an assembly with the workers, unions declared an immediate strike and at the same time wrote a letter to the government claiming for an intervention. Government, led by the pro-market Matteo Renzi (PD) at the head of a centre-left coalition, limited itself to official declarations, such as those of the Minister of Labour and the Minister of the infrastructure (both natives of the Emilia-Romagna region) who mildly censured the impoliteness of the company and expressed support for the unions. The strike took place on December 20th, during the peak of the season, but instead of mobilising more workers, even less employees decided to abstain from work (temp workers of course went all to work, except some exceptions).

³²⁴ Meanwhile labour judges in Milan condemned Amazon for illegal dismissal over an employee who had an accident at work and then was fired for exceeding the allowed number of day-offs for a work injury: the worker had to be reinstated (*Il Fatto Quotidiano* 2017a).

³²⁵ Fiorenzo Molinari, local head of the commerce branch of CGIL, interview, November 2018.

After this episode, things started to move on slowly. Unions' mobilisation had been weakened by the procrastination strategy of the company. However, unions had been able to raise the attention of public opinion. Amazon was under attack inside and outside. Under the surface, government pressured the company to open some sort of negotiation. In addition, the situation of the workplace was far from being pacificated. Even if workers ready to mobilise were less and less, discontents were numerous (especially in the night shift, perhaps the shift more precious for Amazon) and relations with management had deteriorated after the strike. Both parties were weaker and had an interest in reach some sort of deal. Thus, with the new year, negotiations started again, out of the spotlight and more pragmatically. Eventually, a deal was made. The logic was explained very well by Benedetti in an interview we had in her office in Piacenza:

With respect to shifts, there were mainly three issues when we arrived. First, night work. It was not on a voluntary basis. Sometimes they would recruit people without even a medical examination. There were people who had been doing only night work for 18-24 months. I remember meetings with girls crying "I can't do it, I'm looking for another place because I can't live anymore." The other big problem was the fixed afternoon shift. Again, there were so many who came in as green badges and then to be hired permanently they agreed to stay on the fixed afternoon shift. They had not time to see their children. Finally, there was the distribution of work over the weekends: the outbound department practically did almost every weekend, 3 weekends out of 4, I won't tell you the detail but they basically did a lot of weekends and holidays. Inbound, on the other hand, much less. With this agreement we did something a bit revolutionary: everyone was put on shifts, morning slipped forward from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. The night shift, on the other hand, moves back, instead of 10 p.m. it starts at 8 p.m. and ends at 4 a.m. instead of 6 a.m. The overlap with the afternoon allowed the abolition of the fixed shift in the afternoon, accommodating the company's need for more work in the afternoon. In addition, the fixed afternoon shift was abolished. This allowed the company to close 3 hours at night, obviously saving the company money. That economic saving we "distributed" to the workers in the form of a bonus that increased to 25%, while in the CCNL it is only 15%. That means practically between €78 and 97 per month. That's between gross €900 and 1.160 euros per year. This has convinced a number of workers to make themselves available for voluntary night shifts. And we solved the fixed shift problem with rotation. By the way, with fixed shift scheduling, the worker now knows months in advance when he will be working, and in commerce you are supposed to be very happy about something like that.

Fieldwork Quote 126 – Francesca Benedetti, local head of the commerce branch of CISL, interview, November 2018

The agreement, in other terms, was the result of reciprocal concessions and advantages between the parties.

However, concessions and advantages must be analysed on two different levels and identifying three distinct actors. Levels are two: the specific measures and, on the other hand, the

political valences of the deal. Actors are three: the employer, the unions, and the workers. For what concerns the specific measures, workers obtained a definition of work schedules that was more transparent (thus reducing managerial discretion) and also fairer, since there was an objective discrimination of certain workers (those stuck in the afternoon and night shifts, the outbound department forced to work three weekends each month, etc.). In exchange, the employer obtained savings during the night shifts and important guarantees. First the right to modify the timetable in case of productive necessities (“for instance during the Prime Week”, on summer), subject to formal communication to union delegates and the concerned workers. Second the right to require one hour of compulsory overtime during the winter peak. Third, the parties agreed that in case not enough volunteers applied for the night shift, then a compulsory rotation of all employees would be introduced. Finally, the postponement of morning and afternoon shifts was particularly interesting for the company, since the hours in which labour, especially outbound, is much needed is in the late afternoon and night, as customers’ orders are processed and shipped in this part of the day³²⁶.

For the workers, the situation was more ambivalent. On the one hand, those who had been forced to work in the afternoon or in the night, were finally allowed to choose their shift. The premium for night shift was significantly increased. Other workers, namely those in inbound, lost their privilege position and were now subject to rotation in the weekend like all other departments. From the perspective of the unions this was an advancement since they had managed to establish a more equal treatment for workers.

The rationale for the agreement was to better distribute among workers the “inconveniences” involved in a production cycle such as that of this company. It allowed people to be direct protagonists in the company, in the organisation of work from a perspective of equity and fairness.

Fieldwork Quote 127 – Fiorenzo Molinari, local head of the commerce branch of CGIL, November 2018

Also, management had a certain benefit from this arrangement, because the agreement provided a solution for a situation that had become unbearable for workers and risked triggering a major crisis in the workplace.

The agreement, on the other hand, had also many blind spots. Nothing was decided on working conditions, the repetitive nature of tasks and health and safety, despite the fact that they were at the centre of workers’ and unions’ demands. On these issues, the company avoided any actual commitment. Furthermore, the company refused to negotiate any productivity bonus and unions had to drop most of the demands presented in the initial CCIA draft. Nothing, finally, was provided for

³²⁶ Even in the following years, the company would constantly pressure for pushing work time longer in the evening.

temporary workers, despite the fact that the labour inspector had opened an investigation on the possible abuse of this form of short-term contract. Instead, and *de facto*, the agreement implied their sacrifice: since the night and the afternoon shifts were not fixed for permanents, the company could still resort to temps to increase the ranks of workers during these time slots.

The agreement was given a duration of twelve months and a meeting on the state of application was scheduled after the fourth months. Its enforcement was limited to the warehouse of Piacenza, where Amazon applied the CCNL of commerce and retail services. In the new FCs of Vercelli (MXP4), Rieti (FCO1) and Turin (TRN1), all opened in late 2017, the company decided to apply another CCNL (Transport and Logistics)³²⁷, union presence was not established, and the agreement had no vocation to be applied.

Apart from its substantive contents, the agreement had also a valence in the politics of unions-Amazon relationship. The goal of the struggle had been for unions not only to improve working and employment conditions, but also to force Amazon to recognise the unions as a legitimate actor in the workplace. This was not an easy task. On the one hand, because of Amazon's anti-union culture and its consonance with the "neo-liberal" trend in industrial relations. In Italy, the vicissitudes of the last decade had been eroding the centrality of unions as an interlocutor of governments and employers (Tassinari 2019). All over the world the representativeness of unions had been questioned along with that of other "intermediate bodies": the buzzword in those years was "disintermediation" (on this notion, see (Biancalana 2018). Amazon, with his refusal of unions as workers spokespersons – "third party", as antiunion employers like to call them – epitomised the myth of the disintermediation of interests. This was compounded by the specificities of the Italian system of industrial relations and the autonomy it gave to the parties. Without the constraints of mandatory bargaining and mandatory professional elections, Italian unions were devoid of two key institutional resources.

In this light, the signature of an agreement, though limited were its provisions, could be considered a victory for unions. Unions even claimed that the deal was historic, "the first in the history of Amazon", I heard them state many times, including during transnational meetings with other unions. In fact, they ignored that French unions had signed agreements for the previous fifteen years and sometimes with better results, if one think about the agreement on weekend work (special teams working 24 hours paid as much as 35) or night shifts (27% extra hourly rate and supplementary rest). Anyway, Italian unions had *de facto* won the recognition of Amazon.

For what concerns Amazon, two points must be stressed. On the one hand, management obtained from the unions the explicit recognition of its ultimate power in the workplace and the

³²⁷ In July 2018, Amazon Italia Logistics became a member of the Federlogistica/Conftrasporto, the transport/logistics branch of Confcommercio (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2018a).

recognition of its need for flexibility. In return, the company accepted union presence. Yet, one could argue that it was not a big deal, since in a large company it is inadmissible to keep the unions outside the gates, at least in Italy. In addition, this recognition was ambiguous and precarious. As showed in the following statement, Amazon did not renounce to minimise the meaning of the agreement and reiterated that the company considered the direct relationship with employees as its favourite way of managing employment relations (i.e. without union intermediation):

This is not a precedent. In every country where we have a presence, we dialogue with workers' representatives. We firmly believe that dialogue and *direct relationship* [author's emphasis] with workers is the most effective way to respond to their needs. (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2018c)

As if it was necessary to sanction this involvement in an official way, the company demanded and obtained that the agreement was signed only by the union delegates (RSA) which Amazon considered, improperly, the only representative of the workers. Union officials, the local heads of the commerce branches of CGIL, CISL, UIL and UGL were excluded from the signature. This was a humiliation for the unions that nonetheless pragmatically accepted it. In public, unions celebrated the agreement, adding that “it is only the beginning of a season of dialogue with the company” (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2018c).

In fact, both parties avoided to face two uncomfortable realities. Reading the excerpt from the interview with the CISL official (Fieldwork Quote 126), one thing emerges. The unions had helped Amazon to solve a difficult managerial problem, i.e. the organisation of shifts. The agreement gave the new arrangements a surplus of legitimation, that Amazon's algorithmic bureaucracy alone was no longer able to provide. Unions were enrolled as guardians of the agreement. They were much more committed than management. In exchange, they received only a partial political recognition as interlocutors of management in the workplace.

For Amazon, however, there was another uncomfortable truth: the direct relationship with workers as a way to resolve organisational problems had become a mirage. Without the support of the unions who provided practical solutions and political legitimation, the company would have hardly come out of an impasse.

In sum, both parties were under double pressure. On the one hand Amazon's global headquarter were sceptical, if not hostile, with respect to the entente with unions. On the other hand, the Italian government pushed for a deal, no matter its substance. Finally there was the threat of SI-COBAS. Had confederal unions failed in reaching an agreement, the chances for SI-COBAS to make inroads in the workforce would have been magnified. In this respect, the agreement could have constituted a form of *ad hoc* micro-corporatist arrangement: unions provided a surplus of legitimation, while

management recognised the unions. However, this recognition was unstable, as the subsequent developments would prove.

Once the agreement was signed, the question was the ratification. Delegates who had signed the agreement were not elected but appointed by the unions. Unions felt that, without the ratification of the membership, the agreement would have lacked the necessary authority to be enforced. Thus, consistently with a practice which is current in the Italian labour movement and that had become essential to legitimise concessionary bargaining in the 1990s (Baccaro 1999; 2002b), the agreement was submitted to the vote of all Amazon's employees (so temps were excluded). Initially the vote was expected to take place by show of hands during the assembly of the workers. However, unions started realising that not all workers were happy about the agreement, especially those who were going to be affected by the new rotation system; other workers were upset by the postponement of working hours until 3pm and 11.30pm.

We did not want to take responsibility and being accused of influencing the vote, we wanted that worker took responsibility and decided autonomously" explained Molinari, "so we asked Amazon to organise a secret vote.

Fieldwork Quote 128 – Fiorenzo Molinari, local head of the commerce branch of CGIL, interview, November 2018.

Management in charge of negotiations consented but warned the unions not to wait too much because margins for negotiations were narrow:

They told us that Seattle could call at any moment and reject any agreement.

Fieldwork Quote 129 – Fiorenzo Molinari, local head of the commerce branch of CGIL, interview, November 2018

We had the feeling that it was not supported by everyone either in Italy or in Europe.

Fieldwork Quote 130 – Francesca Benedetti, local head of the commerce branch of CISL, interview, November 2018

We do not know whether management was telling the truth or bluffing. Anyway, the result was an increasing pressure to speed up the operations of consultation, a secret vote was organised and preceded by an assembly in which union officials presented the agreement. A worker and former union delegate clarified that the agreement was not "explained" but just "read":

On the day the agreement was presented, it was actually presented on a leaflet, not even the actual agreement minutes. This was another mistake, because the worker anyway has to read the whole agreement. He

shouldn't just sign "yes", based on what he reads on a leaflet, and then he goes and reads it on the union board (if he cares about it). He should have the possibility to read it in the assembly and get an idea, say "fuck, I'll sign it, or I won't sign it." Union officials talked for an hour, but it's really not like they explained it. In fact, at one point a CGIL delegate took the floor and said to his colleagues, "but did you understand it? Because I have to say that this agreement was not explained. Do you guys understand?" And the crowd murmured, "no... no... "

Fieldwork Quote 131 – Dylan, Amazon worker and former union delegate for CISL (currently out of the union), man, Italian, 28 years-old, 8-years seniority, interview, June 2019

Other interviewed workers added (retrospectively) that certain union officials stressed that it was the only chance to have an agreement and that workers should take it or leave it. Workers were also reminded that, if not enough volunteers showed up for the night shift, then all workers would be forced to rotate on the three shifts.

Then the vote took place. Across the three shifts, voter turnout was low: 317 voters out of circa 1600.

The agreement was approved with 232 votes, a majority slightly over 70%. It was an ambiguous result for the unions. The low participation showed a certain dissatisfaction for the agreement (or just a demobilisation of the workers). Unions such as UGL immediately noticed this discontent and declared that they understood the reasons of those who voted no.

8.2.3. Demobilisation and the demise of unions' micro-corporatist strategy in Italy (2018-2020)

After the ratification of the agreement, unions declared that it was "only the beginning", and that a new phase of normalised social dialogue had been inaugurated. The negotiations that unions wanted to carry on concerned health and safety, job rotation, and the productivity premium. On top of these issues, the national labour inspectorate added the question of excessive resort to agency contracts. The investigation, opened in December 2017 a couple of weeks after the Black Friday strike, was concluded in June 2018. It revealed that Amazon had exceeded the limit in the use of agency contracts, and that 1.300 temporary workers had the right to be hired by Amazon with permanent contracts (for more details, see 6.2.1.1). The unions, which in fact had been quite surprised by the announcement, tried to bring this dossier on the table of negotiations.

Meanwhile Amazon was expanding its last mile network. Just in 2017 Amazon had opened three new FCs, and in 2018 several new delivery stations across the whole national territory were all set to start. Vertical integration was proceeding at an even more rapid rhythm than in France. In these new facilities, that unions were not having the time to organise, the company could act unilaterally with the only formal obligation of respecting sectoral CCNLs. Furthermore, the opening of new facilities created stronger redundancy for Amazon. Now, in case of a shutdown of the MXP5 site, the only one that unions could hope to affect with a strike, most of the volumes could be re-dispatched

to the other FCs. Workers' structural power was thus undermined and the power relations went in favour of the employer. Thus, for the following five months, negotiations stagnated. "We went to the meetings but in fact nothing was decided: they just listened, said that they would consider our proposition but, in the end, it was always a 'No' or just procrastination", explained a CGIL RSA³²⁸. Unions were even struggling to have basic information such as the number of agency contracts³²⁹. Unions obtained concessions – for instance, the so-called "moms' shift", a special timetable for women who had to take care of their children – without written commitments. Furthermore, no significant change concerned working rhythms or economic compensation such as performance bonuses.

The straw that broke the camel's back was in November. Management had found a loophole in the agreement – which in fact recognised already multiple possibilities of derogation, as we saw, as long as they were communicated on time to the RSA. The escamotage was the following: the agreement specified that workers that committed to work in night shifts for at least nine months were compensated with a 25% increase on their hourly wage. That year, however, in proximity of the winter peak, the company unilaterally constituted a second night shift, this time with a shorter duration, a couple of months for the peak. Arguing that workers of this shift were required to be available only for two months, management deemed that the 25% clause did not apply to them; these workers were awarded only the mandatory 15% provided by the CCNL. Amazon also required workers, during four weeks of the peak, to spread their weekly 40 hours over 6 days instead of 5. Mandatory overtime was also imposed to workers. In front of a decision that they considered as the ultimate provocation, unions broke infructuous negotiations and declared a *stato di agitazione* with stop of overtime work.

During that period, I had multiple meetings, conversations and interviews with union delegates and union officials. Unions were aware that their capacity of mobilisation had further decreased. They also knew that now Amazon had increased its capacity to divert flows on the other sites, which were equipped with robots and more productive. The spectre of obsolescence was therefore haunting the warehouse of Piacenza, even if there was no concrete sign of this possibility – the company insisted rather on building an image of job creator and, given its healthy economic performance, it could not politically afford to close a warehouse³³⁰. Nonetheless, rumours recurrently circulated in the territory and in the warehouse and contributed to demobilise workers. When I met the CISL union official, she explained that despite the dispute was tense, unions did not feel strong enough to call for a strike:

³²⁸ Amazon worker and union delegate for CGIL man, Italian, 30 years-old, 7-years seniority, interview, June 2019.

³²⁹ In comparison, French unions have much larger rights of information. The employer must submit a *Bilan social* every year and unions have the right to command an expertise report on specific issue.

³³⁰ The MXP5 FCs would eventually (after 2020) be transformed in a FCs specialised on customer returns, although no dismissal followed this plant restructuring.

Look our goal is this, not to give them an alibi with a strike. We want to go to January for a proposal to renew the agreement with in it, or on the side, a proposal for a variable wage that can have the form of a company supplementary contract. These are things we cannot wait on. We don't want to go on strike, we're a little weak – we would be bulldozed by public opinion: could we call a strike for 4 overtime days a year, seriously? Outside, the ordinary worker doesn't understand how people work inside Amazon, so we'll just do a gift to the company that has its own popularity even among many workers

Fieldwork Quote 132 – Francesca Benedetti, local head of the commerce branch of CISL, November 2018.

Not only unions felt weak in the workplace, but they deemed that calling a strike over compulsory overtime was not worth the risk of jeopardising further negotiations with the company. In this perspective, negotiations on the medium-term were more important than “details” such as “overtime for 4 days”, in the words of the CISL official. However, unions were underestimating the impact that the renounce to the strike would have on their credibility in front of the workers. Amazon was not simply taking a decision that unions did not agree with; Amazon was unilaterally interpreting the provision of the agreement, thereby jeopardising the base of negotiations with unions. Any further negotiations would hardly be settled without the goodwill of the employer.

Anyway, unions renounced to strike. The *stato di agitazione* was confirmed, but it was eventually lifted in early December, when the company accepted to reduce the six-days weeks from four to two. It was the only concession, but it allowed the company to have peace in the workplace. The black Friday and the Christmas season concluded in order and Amazon closed the year with new records of sales in Italy. In the new year, unions tried to reopen the negotiation on the productivity bonus. Results were again deceiving since the company continued postponing any commitment. Meanwhile, discontent remained in the workplace, since workers were unhappy about the postponement of morning and afternoon shifts:

The situation had become unbearable, intolerable. With the timetable decided in the agreement we worked until 11.30 pm. We were always tired. On the other hand, the union could not help us because they were negotiating on other things.

Fieldwork Quote 133 – Amazon worker and former CISL member, man, Italian, ca. 30 years-old, 10-years seniority, interview, June 2021

In May 2019, when I started my job as temp in MXP5, a spontaneous but quiet protest spread in the workplace, over the question of work hours. Discussing with permanent workers, I heard about a new initiative concerning working time. It came from a small group of permanent workers, some of them CISL members, who had drafted a petition. Unfortunately, the text of the petition got lost,

but during my and after my fieldwork I discussed about it several times with the workers concerned. The petition expressed discontent with the new work-time organisation and asked to come back to the previous timetable i.e. anticipating the morning and afternoon shifts.

It was a request that, first, disavowed the unions. Second, it was at the opposite of the company's intention – management was trying to push shifts even later, to cover the evening time slots, when customer tend to concentrate. The petition started circulating informally among workers, but it was not possible to keep it hidden much longer, since it rapidly collected over 500 signatures i.e. twice those who voted yes to the agreement. It was tremendous in my view, but it did not make much noise in the workplace. Things were going on as usual, but there was movement behind the routine. Workers discussed about it informally and management eventually learnt about it.

However, the reply of management was the usual one: immobility and waiting for things to settle on their own. After all, the petition was primarily a blow for the unions, that had invested much of their capital on the agreement, and now a larger number of workers was explicitly speaking against it. An assembly was held, during which, among other things, the authors of the petition were invited to present their claims. I did not participate to the assembly – considering that my presence as a temp would raise suspects among managers (see the methodological observation on covert ethnography) – but several workers later reported it to me. Some union delegates were particularly harsh against the petitioners. They accused them of manoeuvring to overthrow and replace them: “Ok come to my place and let's see if you are better at doing the job”, used to say some delegates from CISL to the petitioners, which in fact belonged to the same union. Another union delegate, also from CISL defined the initiative as “anti-union”, accusing the petitioners of acting on behalf of Amazon. Personal attacks were not the only response. Certain unions played the card of co-optation. Right after the assembly one of the authors had a rapid dialogue with the union officials. He gave me an account during a conversation:

The unions had not wanted to help me because they had opened discussions with the company, and in addition on the timetable they said there had already been a vote. Someone accused me of trying to become an RSA. During the assembly I took the floor and said that whoever wanted to sign it was invited to do so. Eventually one of the external union representatives, having seen the number of signatures on the sheet, asked me if I wanted to be RSA and put a business card in my pocket. I felt disgust.

Fieldwork Quote 134 – Amazon worker and former CISL member, man, Italian, ca. 30 years-old, 10-years seniority, interview, June 2021

The petitioner eventually did seek an appointment as an RSA. Instead, its relationship with his own union, CISL, deteriorated, together with those of other petitioners. Unions did not provide any support to a spontaneous initiative that proved to win workers' consensus. The petition was disavowing at

least part of the work done so far. Furthermore, unions were busy with negotiations to renew the agreement of 2018 (which was expected to expire in May), so they did not want to undermine a negotiation that Amazon had been sabotaging for months. In July 2019, eventually, a renewal of the agreement was signed, confirming the previous deal. It was a good result, according to the unions, even if none of the additional demands of the unions was accepted by management. Unions decided not to strike on Prime Day, even if that year the international coalition of Amazon unions had decided day of action on prime day. Demonstrations were held in Spain and Poland, and a strike in Germany. The agreement did not mention the question raised in the petition either. Eventually the petition had an effect: the morning and afternoon shifts were slightly retroceded by 30 minutes.

The tensions accumulated during the process of negotiations and during the discussion with the discontent base affected the internal life of the then main union in the workplace, i.e. CISL. CISL-appointed delegates had a very strong relationship with union officials of the local commerce branch of CISL. Among them there was a charismatic official, Mrs Benedetti, the woman who had led the organising of Amazon workforce in MXP5. In general, union officials have a key political role in workplace industrial relations, especially when the workplace does not have a solid union tradition (which is often the case in the service sector) and when union delegates are not elected by the workers (RSU) but appointed by the unions (RSA). On top of that, this official had developed a direct personal relationship with CISL's RSA. The original group of four workers were called "the musketeers", and the larger group of early-unionised workers "the pioneers". CISL union delegates had developed strong loyalty toward their leadership. However, since 2019, some of these delegates progressively become more independent and started questioning the power of the external officialdom. In the lapse of a couple of weeks, in Autumn 2019, a short time after I left the workplace, the conflict escalated quickly, and three of the six delegates were purged. At the same time, the head of the local left the union and started a job as HR manager in a big firm of mass retail.

* * *

The structural lack of institutional resources was a main factor that explains the weakness of unions in the Italian context. However, there were more subjective elements that explain the crisis of mobilisation.

I found evidence of this during multiple meetings with union officials and conversation with workers. A first element that I noticed during interviews and observations of union meetings was that union officials, differently from what they declared to the press, considered working conditions in

Amazon relatively good, especially if compared to the rest of the retail and logistics industry. The union official of CGIL told me during a phone conversation:

Look at the supermarket industry, here you have full time direct employment, no outsourcing [to my great surprise, he ignores the condition of agency workers, author's note]... to be sure, at Amazon there is a problem of working rhythms and recognition of workers contribution to the success of the company... but looking at the whole picture... The Coop [Italian mass retail company] behaves worse, it is a complex reasoning. As commerce federation we follow 100 firms in the area; Amazon is among the top 5.

Fieldwork Quote 135 – Fiorenzo Molinari, local head of the commerce branch of CGIL, phone conversation, December 2018

The head of CISL made similar statements: with the agreement Amazon workers obtained conditions that in the retail sectors are “exceptionally good”. These opinions were expressed also in front of the workers. During a union meeting in the office of CGIL I observed this conversation between the head union official of CGIL and Amazon workers:

Official: if I were PR for Amazon, I would explain that the company gives more than other employers... If you compare with Esselunga [Italian mass retail company] for instance... at Amazon you have the health insurance, the break lasts 30 minutes and is paid... if they wanted, they could give even less...

Worker: Yes, but they have much more power... they do not pay taxes, they are almost a monopoly!

Official: Yes, I agree, but it is another discourse... we have other 100 commerce companies in the area... and I can tell you that Amazon is among the best!

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 41 – CGIL union meeting, MXP5, November 2018

During interviews, union officials explained that, despite Amazon's refusal to negotiate and to recognise them as legitimate interlocutors, in the everyday routine they were in constant dialogue with managers. The content of this informal micro-negotiations was always on individual cases. For instance, a worker with a severe disease that needed a personal work time, or a migrant worker who needed a special permission for a leave to see his family in another continent. Here is the way how the CGIL union official described this micro-level negotiations and opposed it to “strike as an end in itself”:

I talk to Amazon twice a day and solve things... they have an “American” approach, but we solve individual things based on common sense... there are individual situations that we are sometimes able to handle... maybe because they don't have money problems... all it takes is a phone call. The only condition is that it remains an individual accommodation: when it starts getting more collective let's say, involving more general problems, then they do not cross the line. I talk to them every day. There are 2.000 people, a lot of things we solve not at the tip of the law, no need to call the press... There is the asshole manager and there

is the common-sense manager. The company tries to play both, it's a role play. However, I report that never the plant manager does not answer the phone to me... There is a double track: they are fierce about the approach, firm, but then we all solve the problems on the base of common sense. And Amazon always answers me when I call. CISL and UIL tell me the same thing ... We have to get out of the strike setting as an end in itself ... yes, the newspapers call me every day if I go on strike, however, when I call a strike, I must have a goal. If we feel that the strike takes us away from the goal, then we don't call a strike... We need to get out of the dynamic whereby whoever organises the most strikes is good. There have been strikes in the agribusiness here in the area that have ruined production... We do assemblies with the workers, we look for the synthesis of a strategy, coordination from below, like Ulysses and Achilles who together, not only by force, but also by cunning, won the war.

Fieldwork Quote 136 – Fiorenzo Molinari, local head of the commerce branch of CGIL, interview, November 2018

For what concerns the role of the strike, in the conception of Italian confederal union, the strike is a tool that must be handled carefully and always subordinated to the goal of negotiation. The resort to strike appears also as a matter of reputation: for CISL union officials, strikes were even difficult to justify in front of the public opinion (Fieldwork Quote 132). From the perspective of these unionists, the strike could be a dangerous instrument if not well organised and participated. The strike is a sort of measure of union strength and if a union “miss” a strike then its credibility is undermined. Unions were also scared by the reaction of the public opinion. We saw above that Benedetti excluded to strike for overtime “because public opinion would not understand”. This sentence tells something about the state of unionism in Italy and the feeling of isolation that union perceive and de facto reproduce.

8.2.4. Mobilisation and de-mobilisation during the pandemic crisis in Italy

While in France, union politics inside the company is led by union delegates, in the Italian case, negotiations are under complete control of union officials. It is union officials that set, and filters, workers claim. Union delegates have marginal role in determining the decisions of the union. This create tensions between workers and the unions, divisions among unions delegates between those who are loyal to their officials and those who maintain a certain independence and, in some cases, as in CISL, were eventually accused of betrayal and removed by the head of the locals.

These tensions between the union structure and the base would emerge acutely during the struggles over the pandemic crisis in spring 2020. Like in France, Amazon knew labour unrest over working conditions during the peak of contagion (Fana and Massimo 2020; Kassem 2022a; 2022b).

During the first week, as we saw (see, par. 8.1.3), safety measures were still inadequate. The company was lacking hygienic gel, masks, gloves, and a serious plan for physical distancing. Moreover, local management was recruiting tens of temporary workers in order to adjust to the

increase in demand and managers approach to workers preoccupation was reported as dismissive. In this context workers start sharing their worries among themselves and started discussing possible collective responses to management inaction, thus paving the way for a collective mobilisation.

This mobilisation first took the elusive forms of frantic conversations among co-workers either physically at work (in the shopfloor at the dining hall or in the dressing rooms) or virtually in private chats on Facebook, Telegram or WhatsApp. These workers' chats were chaotic and crosscut along cleavages: one between management and the workers ("they are making profits on our skin"), one between the workers and unions ("why don't they protect us? They are colluded with the company") and one among workers themselves ("there is too many people at work", "my co-workers are irresponsible", "There are coffins in the streets of Piacenza and people compete to get overtime work"). Fear and tension escalated quickly. At work as well as in digital chats, workers expressed their stress and fear and denounced management's lack of initiative on workers' health. Meanwhile (8th-13th March), in other firms and sectors spontaneous mobilisations spurred among workers who walked out asking either more safety or the complete closing of their sites (Tassinari, Chesta, and Cini 2020).

Unions denounced the causes of this growing discontent among workers. At the territorial and sectoral levels, unions declared strikes in order to legally cover workers' abstention from work (De Sario, Di Nunzio, and Leonardi 2021). Employers and government, on the other hand, had the interest to appease. There was a growing consensus over the necessity of a general agreement at the national level, where unions recognised that some activities had to keep on operating in exchange of extraordinary measures to protect workers. On March 14th, the government, unions and employers signed a tripartite pact, a *Protocollo*, with workplace safety recommendations, designed to keep production going. Its prescriptions remained generic. More concrete measures had to be negotiated at the workplace, firm, and sector level, depending on the specific balance of power between collective actors. At the company and workplace level, the agreement was immediately endorsed by union officials, who asked the opening of formal negotiation between workers representatives and management.

However, negotiations could not take place immediately. On the one hand, the priorities of unions were not necessarily coherent. In agreement with workers' (and part of the public opinion) unions considered that Amazon operations were not essential. Union's demand was that either Amazon reduced its activities, or that it should be required to suspend operations. The problem was that unions had no authority or power to establish a shutdown. Moreover, not all the workers supported the suspension of operations. Like in France, in a situation of uncertainty, workers did not want to put their employment at risk. Both unions and management were aware of that. On the other

hand, the attitude of the company regarding a possible agreement was elusive, if not hostile. Corporate management considered that no formal negotiation was necessary and that unions only needed to be informed about new rules and changes. Subsidiary management for its part had the mandate to apply the general plan at the local level without amendments.

In a meeting held in the site of Piacenza on March 9th, the company declared its first unilateral measures: application of tape on the floor in the dining hall to maintain physical distancing among people at the queue; rescheduling of break time in order to avoid concentration of persons; granting of vacations for health and family reasons, as established by government decrees. Briefings were maintained because, according to the company, they were necessary for management to communicate with workers. Unions' main demands i.e., masks and frequent cleaning of devices (hand scanners) working posts (pack, for instance) were not satisfied. The same solicitations were made by union representatives in other sites, namely at FCO1, but were not satisfied either. Moreover, not only local management did not grant these requests, but also, in order to deal with an increase in sales and to compensate absences (which started skyrocketing), required workers to work extra-time and started recruiting temporary staff.

In FCO1 this situation of discontent led the unions to threaten a strike (March 11th). The day after however, unions delegates realised that they did not have enough support and, happy with some marginal concessions made by management, withdrew the declaration of strike (March 12th). On March 12th another strike was called by unions in TRN1. News about contagions, difficult relations between unions and management, and pressures from below eventually pushed unions to declare a strike in MXP5 (March 16th). Amazon became a national case. In a context of growing tension, the officials of confederal unions in Piacenza decided to send a signal to Amazon:

At that time the pressure was really sky-high in the sense that our requests, as I told you, were punctually neglected. [...] In short, tension in the warehouse was really high because people were legitimately getting very worried [...]. And then this national protocol came out and it really helped us in the sense that it gave a coherence to what we had already done in a common sense and that the company punctually rejected. It gave strength to our requests. So, we took this protocol, we studied it and we tried to apply it within the Amazon reality. We submitted it to the company asking them to sign it. [We had a meeting] where the company replied that on some things they could evaluate, on others they needed to take some time, on other points they didn't agree. So, it was their usual behaviour... a waste of time which we are used to. In this case we decided to go on strike because the pressure was really high, and time was passing inexorably. I don't know how to say, for weeks all our demands had been dismissed. So, even in front of a protocol that was nothing more than the translation of a nationally shared agreement and simply tailored to Amazon's needs, it was rejected by management. We were still being asked to wait, we were still being asked for patience. Therefore, we decided to call a strike, as you will certainly have seen, the call was for an indefinite strike, which is certainly a bit unusual, but the logic was that if the security conditions are not there, a one-day

strike is useless because we have to try to provide protection in some way and certainly to protest until the security conditions are restored. Obviously, our hope was that this test of strength would be as short as possible in the sense that the company would in some way understand our message, but as you know it lasted eleven days. So, in short, we wanted to get them to come negotiate.

Fieldwork Quote 137 – Elisa Barbieri, head of the local commerce branch of CGIL, Piacenza, Interview, March 2021

While Piacenza was on strike, a spontaneous protest took place in TRN1 on March 24th. The hub had opened in 2017, and unions had just started put their roots among the workers. A group of workers organised autonomously a sudden walkout and was able to involve half of the one thousand five hundred blue badges. Officially the action was not a proper strike, because the union did not declare it and was also surprised by the rank-and-file action. The action had an echo among the workers of the other sites. An anonymous union member in MXP5, unhappy with the moderation and disorganisation, according to him, of unions in Piacenza, praised his colleagues in Turin. Perhaps the interviewee emphasises some details of the story, but the account provides an interesting excerpt of how part of union members was discontent of their union's strategy:

A different case [compared to other sites] is what happened in Turin. Immediately the first days they opened the site [2017] a lot of people joined CGIL, but they signed up to CGIL as people used to do it in the past, in the sense that I take the CGIL card to show that I have a card, but then... I organise myself autonomously from the official union. So, they go to the CGIL and say "look, tomorrow we're going to take action. If we see that the situation is still like this, that there are no masks, no gel etc..., that we are working in 3 in 1m² etc., after 10 minutes we will walk out". The CGIL officials told them "but no, be careful, don't do it, because otherwise they won't pay you for the day, wait, we'll evaluate first some regular form of action" - as they usually do... And the workers of course replied "yes, yes, of course we evaluate... [ironic]", the next day they went to work and since they had many people on their side, they told them after fifteen minutes: "OK guys, everybody out and whoever doesn't come out slaps in his face!". This was just to be clear... thus, out of 1.500 workers, 900 walked out! Turin is a city that has always been used to struggles and used to dealing with a certain type of union. Union knows that militant workers rely on them up to a certain point, they know that you have to self-organise... because if you wait for them to say "Yes, let's see, let's check it out", in the meantime you're pretty much screwed... what you do in that case is that the union, in those cases, you lead it... it doesn't lead you... because the day after you come out with an action of force they do what they did in Turin, not to lose face: they say "Yes, OK, we'll give you the political coverage, we'll go and talk to the company", that is, they have to put their hat on it because, if not, they show that they don't count for shit, that they're useless... and so they send you the lawyer, they give you the coverage... and the day after they come and tell you "but we told you not to do it, they won't pay you"... there's a guy who answered him what I would answer too: "Look, we don't really give a shit about the day... if they pay us, good for us; if they don't pay us, I don't give a damn. We wanted to give a signal, don't you understand...?"

Fieldwork Quote 138 – Anonymous Amazon worker and union member, MXP5, May 2021

Despite these spontaneous mobilisations, labour action suffered from important organisational limits. One of the first problems was participation. Unions were not able to monitor the number of strikers every day. As reported by workers, participation to the strike was not particularly high, very discontinuous also among union members and delegates. Most workers did not want to go to work, as they felt in danger, but still did not want to lose a day of pay. Thus, employees preferred using vacations and sick days in order not to lose their daily wage for a strike. This was recognised also by union officers:

Look, I must tell you that it was very difficult for us to have objective data about participation to the strike, in the sense that unfortunately in that period there were many people who were absent for various reasons, in the sense that some had asked for day offs and sick leave because it was the outbreak of the pandemic, there was a lot of fear, there were no security measures, so many tried to protect themselves in that way. So I'm telling you that we know that there were few people at work in order to give you an answer, which I know is not precise, but it's the only one I can give you.

Fieldwork Quote 139 – Elisa Barbieri, head of the local commerce branch of CGIL, Piacenza, Interview, March 2021

Some strikers criticised not only the free riding of certain colleagues but also unions' leadership. The anonymous worker quoted above made a blatant critique:

They [union officials] do things without hearing the base, they start, and they make disasters. You know that not many people at the warehouse follow. So, if you do something you have to make sure that everyone with you follows. They declared a strike and I, of course, went on strike the first few days. Then I look at the chat and I see that a guy writes: "Come on guys, hang in there, just one more day", and I find out that all the people who said that... I didn't expect it because someone who writes like that you judge them to be on strike like you... most of them, including the union delegates, were on sick leave! On the third day I went to work, I went to a friend of mine who is a team leader, I said: "Listen, let me see the computer for a moment". There were 10 of us, out of all three shifts, who were really on strike, that is, who were losing the money for the days... there were just 10 of us! The others were all at home on sick leave etc... they were not on strike! So, when I had a discussion with the General Manager [of the plant], he told me "Listen... there are ten of you doing strike, that's ridiculous" ... Our union was not ready, and they didn't know how to get out of it, union officers didn't even understand that workers were all at home and no one was on strike... they weren't able to count the strikers because people didn't tell them the truth.

Fieldwork Quote 140 – Anonymous Amazon worker and union member, MXP5, interview, May 2021

In my opinion, participation was low, but we never had the official data eh. But I say in my opinion it was low because many were already on sick leave. And those who were on sick leave stayed on sick leave. Even

some delegates didn't go on strike. Not even one day. Because they had families. Well, so do I! I've lost my six hundred euros and I'd like to still have them in my pocket. However, we don't know how much the others... many union delegates worked overtime shifts, overtime shifts! You're either on one side or the other! You can't, you can't, you can't... I mean you can't.... call yourself Cicciolina and say you're a virgin, OK? so I ended up feeling very deceived.

Fieldwork Quote 141 – Anonymous Amazon worker and union delegate, MXP5, interview, January 2021

Furthermore, there was no effective coordination between union representatives of the different sites. At the local and site level, the three confederal unions managed to cooperate in a unitary way, but, in absence of any effective organisational mechanism of centralisation (except in CGIL, whose confederal coordination operates, despite many limits), unions were incapable to coordinate together at the nation-wide company level. The lack of coordination undermined the efficacy of the strikes and their duration. So, when on March 18th unions in FCO1 renounced to the strike, mainly because they were not able to mobilise enough workers, MXP1 strikers remained alone.

Unions were structurally too weak to impose their most advanced claims, i.e., the reduction of volumes and the, at least temporary, closing of the plants in order to reorganise production so as to avoid gatherings of hundreds of workers.

Without workers massive mobilisations, unions could only rely on government decrees and the new Protocol as instruments of pressure. In Piacenza, after eleven days the unions decided to lift the strike and to sign an agreement with the company at the plant-level, on March 27th. On the other hand, Amazon local management understood that a compromise was necessary. Management's self-latitude was very limited in terms of industrial relations. The choices to negotiate was probably taken at the central level, in Luxembourg or in Seattle. A hint of that is the fact that on March 25th, two days before than the signature of the agreement in Italy, local management in France had proposed an agreement to the French unions (who rejected the proposal). It is likely that the wave of mobilisations induced central management to give local management the mandate to negotiate with unions in the countries where protests were stronger in order to re-establish peace in the workplace. In Italy, more particularly in Piacenza, negotiations were carried on during the strike and finally both parties decided to accept a compromise. In all other Amazon facilities, management enforced unilaterally the global guidelines elaborated at the corporate level.

Box 19 – The plant-level agreement on anti-covid measures in MXP5 (Italy, 2020)

The agreement was announced on March 27 by a joint public statement of CGIL, CISL, UIL and UGL (the representative unions at the Piacenza plant). The text was signed by union delegates and company's representatives. The parties recognized that the company had started adequately informing the workers,

with communications on the walls, info points and fliers, about the dispositions of public authorities (point 1). At point 2 the company committed to “constant cleaning” of the workspaces and will monitor the cleaning operations with “specific signature sheets”. At point 3 the company communicated that a physical distancing of 2 meters had been established in all the work processes as well as in the common areas and will monitor the situation with daily meeting and report activity. At points 4 and 5 the company decided an increase of 5 minutes of the break time and the staggering of shift schedules in 3 groups in order to avoid gatherings (the list of the new working schedules follows). Points 6-9 mentioned the reorganisation of the common spaces such as the dining hall, the dressing (closed) and the smoking area (closed). Surveillance agents would control the respect of social distancing. Point 10 allowed the carry of personal phones into the work-floor (this implied the suspension of antitheft check points at the entrance of the floor). Point 11 describe the temperature control (first with infrared, later with a thermo-scanner): workers with a temperature higher than 37,5 °C would be controlled twice and, in case of double positive, sent back home. Point 12 referred to the institution of a Committee (Point 13 of the March 14th Protocol) with the function of “application and verification of the rules established by the Protocol itself as well as by this agreement. The Committee is formed by the RLS and RSA and by staff designated by the firm”. The committee would cover functions of control all along the 3 eight-hour-long shifts. At least two RLS or RSA per shift had the right, for the entire duration of the shift, to “collaborate to the management of staff flows entering, exiting, during breaks, in the common areas, on the work process and will verify, together with the staff designated by the company, that all the safety norms are respected in the warehouse. Moreover, the members of the Committee will meet every Monday and Thursday from 14:30 to 15.15, until a date to be determined, to discuss about the activities of control and to produce new measures in case new problems would appear”. The company committed, at point 13, to concede day offs to the workers throughout the whole duration of the pandemic. After some weeks of mask shortages, during which workers were asked to come to work anyway, Amazon was able to provide its employees with masks as well as hygienic gel and other tools of personal protection. Finally, another point was raised but remained unsolved: that of the reduction of activity. In the text of the agreement unions declared their request for a reduction of the operations in order to avoid crowding into the warehouses and to deliver only essential goods. They also reminded the possibility for the company to resort to *Cassa Integrazione* (short time work scheme) to cope with possible redundancies. However, the company “in this moment preferred maintaining the ordinary level of activity with the application of the measures agreed. Parties agreed that this subject would be object of monitoring and discussion”. In this way the company kept the control on the volume of production.

With this agreement, the unions restored their role as a mediator between the workers and the employer. In the perspective of Italian unions, whose representation is not legally enforced and thus never completely certain, this was already an important achievement. The agreement included the formalisation of exceptional procedures for health and safety, but the scope of this measures as well as their substance had already been defined by public authorities’ decrees (national and regional) as well as by the company global plan. The most delicate and controversial point, i.e., the reduction of the operations, remained untouched because of the resistance of the company and the weakness of

the unions. Therefore, some sectors of the union membership harshly criticised the agreement. According to some discontents, the agreement just ratified what was already established by the Protocol and the decrees, without reducing the volume of operations and the number of workers. Additionally, they said, the decision of accepting the agreement was taken quickly and without consulting the membership.

After the strike, which lasted eleven days, comes this agreement. Problem number 1: the agreement was not discussed with any worker. Problem number 2: the strike was terminated on the same day for the same day and the people who had to work at night were not covered by the strike... so they were on strike the day before, the day after “you guys have to come back”. OK? So, we were quite pissed off because, I mean, “Ask us first if we want to come out of the strike against an agreement, OK?”. So, there was really a lack of communication with the workers in that respect.

Fieldwork Quote 142 – Anonymous Amazon worker and union delegate, MXP5, January 2021.

Union officials defended the agreement for several reasons. First, the strike and the agreement were important because they forced local management to apply the decrees and the protocol, translating the prescriptions of these texts in specific measures. Furthermore, they stressed that, compared to the national Protocol, the Amazon agreement was a step forward, because it instituted a plant-level joint committee, in charge of monitoring the concrete application of safety measures.

[...] I think that agreement was a good agreement because it managed to improve the protocol shared at national level, in the sense that if you take for example the paragraph... one thing I think is very important that we were able to implement, but obviously also here by forcing on the size of the company, is the agreement about the committee. I mean that the committees, as they are defined in that protocol, often in large companies with many sites have been developed only on a national scale, so they are certainly effective in the dialogue with the company, etc., but sometimes the risk is that we are far from the single workplace reality. At Amazon, we managed to implement the committee giving to it a workplace relevance so we managed to write that the committee was obviously composed of RSA and RLS [union delegates and union delegates for safety issues] but that the same were always present, so they were not simply people far from the workplace to which the single worker could report. The union-appointed committee-members were actually expected to be always present in the warehouse, at least two people on each shift. This is very important because every Amazon worker knows that at any time inside the warehouse there are two union representatives and two safety representatives whom they can address if there are problems relating to compliance with the protocol.

Fieldwork Quote 143 – Elisa Barbieri, head of the local commerce branch of CGIL, Piacenza, Interview, March 2021

In practice, the task of the committee, as stated in the agreement, were one of simple “control” and “proposition” on the application of the measures mentioned in the text. Furthermore, the most

significant issues, namely the number of workers in the warehouse and the volume of operations, were not solved in the agreement. Consequently, the everyday functioning of the committee was doomed to be a point of friction in the following months.

8.2.5. *Management's response to union action: the displacement of the joint safety committee*

Even if the constitution of the protocol closed the acute phase of conflict, frictions and controversies arose immediately after the agreement.

The main controversy concerned the role and prerogatives of the members of the committee. Local management tried to frame the activity of committee members under its own control. According to local management in Piacenza, as reported by workers, union-appointed members of the committee had to respect a working schedule established unilaterally by management. For instance, controlling some areas during the shift, monitoring person flows at the exit to avoid gathering etc. In other words, management was trying not only to disarm the committee, but also to use it to perform functions of monitoring of workers behaviour. Some delegates resisted and defended the independence of the committee from managerialisation. They reiterated that their function of control was *above* and not under the supervision of management. This convention started to be challenged soon by management. Few days after the agreement, workers received an SMS from the company's HR office:

Hi, as a form of recognition for the hard work of all of you, we will increase overtime pay to 100% of your hourly pay for all hours worked in excess of 40 hours on a weekly basis in the CCNL. This temporary increase will last until 30 June 2020. Please feel free to contact us for any further information. Have a nice day!

Fieldwork Written Document 24 – SMS sent by Amazon's HR office to all employees, MXP5, March 2020

This decision of encouraging workers to work overtime was received with annoyance and disconcert by the unions. While authorities were discouraging gathering in the workplace, Amazon itself was pushing workers to remain at work overtime. Management said that the decision had been taken at the corporate level, so independently from plant-level management. In any case, even the simple transmission of this message to the workers was read by the unions as a provocation, and an explicit dismissal of the spirit of the agreement.

These episodes suggest that the agreement did not rest on full cooperation from management. Some union delegates opposed this process of emptying the agreement, but, once the strike ended, the balance of power moved in favour of the company. Additionally, unions and delegates were not unanimously opposed to the strategy of the company and there was not cohesiveness on the role of the committee, as reported by this union delegate in Piacenza:

Worker: Basically, the company has used the system... to its purposes. We were not really able to impose ourselves from the beginning. We were a bit displaced about the real use the Committee, right? The company also created a sort of parallel committee of its own, composed only by supervisors who did in essence what we had to do [...]

Author: What do you mean by autonomy of the Committee?

Worker: Well, in fact there was more of an internal confusion on how to interpret the committee, that is the roles of the committee, to be precise... the role of the committee even among us delegates. There were those who interpreted it in one way and those who interpreted it in another way, in fact, first of all, the union was also a bit... how to say... not expert on this thing... they have not given great guidance on the work of the committee and have created a bit of disagreement between us. Then there was the part also obviously from management that made a bit of... how to say... did not recognise it completely, because obviously it was not so... it was counterproductive for them.

Fieldwork Quote 144 – Amazon worker and union delegate for CGIL man, Italian, 30 years-old, 7-years seniority, June 2019

Devoid of the power of deciding over the quantity of commodity processed or over the actual number of workers in in the shopfloor, union delegates were left with the mere prerogative of monitoring whether workers (and managers) wore masks and respected the two-metres social distance.

This functioning of the committee became immediately a matter of controversy not only between local management and union delegates but also among union delegates. Some delegates, especially those belonging to CGIL, refused this form of subaltern cooperation with management and maintained a clear separation between their conception of their role – the supervision over the safety of the labour process as a whole – and the company’s way of framing it – monitoring on individual workers’ behaviour rather than on the whole organisation of production. Other delegates, especially those from CISL, accepted the cooperation with management, a choice leading straight to their subaltern co-optation into the managerial apparatus. Co-opted delegates found themselves with the power of controlling and sanctioning their colleagues for their individual behaviours, but they had renounced to influence the organisation of workflows.

This contradiction soon became a source of conflict between delegates and workers. Co-opted delegates started signalling colleagues who did not respect individual anti-Covid measures, blaming them for neglecting health and safety. It was the detournement of one of the fundamental claims of workers and unions, which considered the employer as the ultimate responsible. Signalled workers, conversely, accused their representatives of abusing their authority and being aligned with the firm’s interests. Interviewed about the role of the committee, the local UIL and CISL union officials confirmed these frictions. The UIL official tried to minimise the conflict:

Author: What is the point of view of your delegates concerning the functioning of the committee?

UIL official: Look, we're entering a minefield here. In the sense that our delegates are obviously part of the union apparatus. There are some workers who don't like the fact that someone in the committee, perhaps a union delegate, points out that they have their mask down or that they're too close to another person... but these are things that happen also in our streets among the citizens. The person being controlled is always upset. When the controlled person for some reason doesn't observe the rule, maybe not because of malice, but in that moment maybe he is a little bit distracted and a little bit careless and the controller points out that he is going out of the rule, that's when the controller becomes a little bit unpleasant.

Author: So, isn't this a slightly uncomfortable position for the union to find itself in as a controller?

UIL official: Bravo! You have seized the point! It's an uncomfortable position for the union, but then at the end we discuss with all workers and the vast majority obviously understands that it must be so ... then if one does not want to understand, he does not understand. But unfortunately, the anti-Covid control committee must also be formed by union representatives. After all, it's the law that obliges us to set up anti-Covid committees!

Fieldwork Quote 145 – Vincenzo Guerriero, head of the local commerce branch of UIL, MXP5, Interview, January 2021

The CISL official, instead, was sharper in defending the point of view of his union delegates. From his standpoint, it was the task of the union to enforce the rules beyond workers' "particularistic" interests:

[...] so, these situations also happened. It is unpleasant, but I believe that collective welfare must prevail over the individual position of a single worker who does not want to comply with the rules. Sometimes what a trade union organisation says can be a bit unpopular. I believe that coherence and the principle of safeguarding the health of all workers should prevail, not the individual who throws a tantrum and does not want to wear a mask.

Fieldwork Quote 146 – Marco Alquati, head of the local commerce branch of CISL, MXP5, Interview, February 2021

CISL and UIL union officials' discourse makes sense. They claim for the respect of the rules that were decided together by management and workers' representatives. In this respect, they defend a typical micro-corporatist position, where the union that signs an agreement commits itself to ensuring that members (and workers) comply with the pact. However, this point of view neglects the actual power relations in which the pact was enforced. All the main requests of unions, namely reducing volumes and reducing rhythms, had been dismissed by management. Not only the employer kept control over the organisation of work, but it could leverage on new rules in order to discipline the workforce. In this way, most members of the joint committee were neutralised or co-opted and this had consequences on those unions who aligned too dangerously on the management's interpretation of the agreement.

The process of union co-optation did not provide unions with more power in the determination of managerial policies. On the contrary, unions were separated from their constituency and remained isolated in front of management's unilateral policies. Tensions would last throughout the months following the pandemic outbreak and weakened the legitimacy of unions delegates. Many workers in MXP5 demanded that delegates were not anymore appointed by the unions (the RSA system), but instead elected by the employees on union lists (the RSU system).

Union elections took place in May 2021 and the results were a serious blow for CISL (12 %, 1 delegate), who until 2019 had been the first union in terms of members, and UIL (7%, 1 delegate). Voters favoured CGIL, who became the first union in terms of votes (46% and 6 delegates), and UGL (33% and 4 delegates) who became the second. About 800 out of the circa 1.600 direct employees of the plant turned out. The replacement of RSA with elected RSU was welcome by the union delegates, especially within CGIL. The results punished those union delegates, especially those of CISL, that had de facto aligned with management in exerting control over the workers.

The appointment of delegates by worker election operated as a mechanism of control of the workers on their representatives. However, the potential of mobilisation of this instrument was eventually frustrated. In the rest of Amazon facilities, which between 2017 and 2021 had multiplied, RSA remained the only form of worker representation. Furthermore, the elected RSU in MXP5, especially those of CGIL, disapproved the lack of coordination with the RSA of other sites. While CISL, UIL and UGL had never seriously considered the possibility of creating an ad-hoc structure of coordination across all Amazon subsidiaries, CGIL had done so. Since 2018 a structure for exchanging information between sites has been in place, similarly to those established by VERDI in Germany (Goldmann 2023) in the forms of conferences of union delegates and chat groups.

However, some CGIL union delegates, those who were more active in the strategic debate, expressed disappointment with the quality of the discussion and the lack of cohesiveness. On the one hand, because delegates from other sites were not particularly determined to take common action. After all, they were not able to mobilise workers during the pandemic outbreak. On the other hand, because the union officials from the various federations involved – commerce (covering the MXP5 FC), transport (covering all the other FCs, the SCs, the delivery stations and the last-mile drivers) and communication (covering the customer service call centre) – struggled to cooperate.

8.2.6. The nation-wide strike of March 2021 and the reproduction of the failed unions' neo-corporatist strategy at the group level

These problems had already emerged a few weeks before the elections, during an important mobilisation promoted by confederal unions. In March 2021, unions called a nation-wide across the

entire supply chain, from FCs to outsourced last-mile drivers (Massimo 2021a). The strike was called on March 10th for the 22nd, after the sudden breaking off of negotiations between Amazon Italia Logistics and the transport-sector branches of CGIL, CISL, and UIL. During two meetings back in January, unions had expressed satisfaction that a discussion was underway. Yet, the company had made no concrete commitments regarding their specific demands, namely the negotiation of a company-level collective agreement on working conditions, health and safety, work intensity, schedules, bonuses, and meal vouchers. Instead, consistent with its classic strategy, Amazon worked to buy time rather than respond to union demands.

The negotiations blew up two weeks ago at a meeting where the company refused to recognize its social responsibility toward subcontracted drivers. Amazon's spokespersons issued a statement insisting that "for deliveries to customers, Amazon Logistics uses third-party suppliers. Therefore, we believe that the correct interlocutors are the suppliers of delivery services, as well as the business associations that represent them." Unions' optimism that they could negotiate conventional industrial relations in the firm was frustrated. The three unions blamed the company for the collapsed negotiations and declared a national strike³³¹.

The announce of the strike was widely covered in the media, both nationally and internationally. Unions deployed their organizational machine: assemblies were organised in every Amazon workplace where unions have a delegate and in every shift. Furthermore, unions aimed at giving a large media impact to their action. In the media, the strike was presented as the first "general" strike in Amazon's history even if it was confined to a single country. In a circular released to all local structures the transport federations of CGIL, CISL and UIL gave instructions for the organisation of the strike. The communication emphasised [1] the need to diffuse information through all the channels of communication of the unions (from assemblies to chats); [2] the importance of media coverage at all levels; [3] the form of the strike, a mere abstention from work; [4] the importance of increasing the media visibility of the mobilisation; [5] concertation with authorities, from regional and local administration to prefects:

³³¹ The same day of the strike declaration another major event for the logistic sector occurred. In Piacenza, upon order of the public prosecutor's office, the police arrested two SI-COBAS union leaders and executed precautionary measures against two dozen activists and workers. Unionists were charged with several offences (such as aggravated resistance to a public official, violence and occupation of public land) for organising a strike and blockade of a TNT facility in Piacenza, that the company planned to close within a global process of restructuring of the firm after its acquisition by FEDEX. The restructuring also implied the passage of the outsourcing model from subcontracted cooperatives to temporary work agencies, that we discussed above in this chapter and in chapter 3. The arrest would be eventually annulled by a third judge in Bologna, two weeks later. However, the Prosecutor office would continue its investigation on the SI-COBAS leaders. On July 2022, another arrest warrant would be issued for "criminal conspiracy", de facto assimilating union activity to a racket (*Il Post* 2022; Violante and Massimo 2022). However, despite the wider political valence of this criminal theory, confederal unions avoided to take a clear stance on the issue because of the bitter rivalry between them and the SI-COBAS in the logistics sector.

[1] It would be desirable to devote the current week to the capillary dissemination of information, trying to convey, in the various possible ways, awareness to workers and seeking maximum adherence (chat, video messages, social media, online assemblies, in-person assemblies, in compliance with current regulations, etc.).

[2] The media aspect of the dispute must also be carefully cultivated, given the attention it has attracted in the media, the support shown by important institutional levels, and the solidarity expressed by workers, employees and citizens. It is therefore undoubtedly useful to relaunch the strike's key words in all local media and on social media.

[3] Participation to the strike will take the form of abstention from work, for the entire shift that was scheduled to begin on Monday 22 March, regardless of the time of the end of the shift itself.

[4] During the day of Monday 22 March, where possible and in full compliance with the regulations in place for the prevention of the pandemic, it will be necessary to give great visibility to the day of struggle, including garrisons with flags and banners, preferably near Amazon warehouses or at pick-up points. Also, in this case always useful is the relationship with the local media to relaunch the images and reports as well as the production of videos or images to spread via social networks.

[5] It would be useful to request, where possible, meetings with the Prefectures and/or institutions in the area (regions and municipalities) to disseminate the reasons for the strike and ask for support.

Fieldwork Written Document 25 – FILT-CGIL, FIT-CISL, UIL-Trasporti, joint circular, “Comunicazione alle strutture” [excerpt]. Rome, March 15th, 2021

When the strike was announced, I moved to Piacenza to observe the mobilisation on the ground. During the ten days elapsing between the call and the strike, unions organised themselves in order to mobilise as much workers as possible across the entire supply chain, a very ambitious goal. However, this also gave the company a comfortable margin of time for taking countermeasures, especially re-dispatching logistics flows in order to minimise the impact of workers withdrawal, thus reducing workers' structural power. Management also intervened in the shop-floor to discourage workers from strike, although not as much aggressively as they did it in the strike of 2017.

The day of the strike, the parking lot in front of the MXP5 site was the meeting point of 150-200 unionists and workers. Union presence was not massive, but very well visible. Strikers and unionists from the local structures gathered in cluster of dozens, dressing coloured vests and displaying union flags. There was a red cluster for CGIL, a green for CISL, and two distinct blue groups for UGL and UIL. There were also many journalists from local newspapers and national TV networks. Activists from small Trotskyists groupuscules also joined the gathering. The presence of external actors gave an impression of a massive mobilisation. It was true for what concerned the union apparatus, but it was not much the case for Amazon workers. Walking through the crowd, it was evident that the coloured clusters were composed more by unionists than by workers.

As in the strike of 2017 or in that of 2020, no data on the participation rate of workers was released neither collected, as far as I heard in the fieldwork. Even if I could not count the number of

strikers, I noticed that among certain delegates there was deception and frustration. Dylan, one of the veteran workers and former delegate, was disappointed for the low participation of his colleagues, but he also blamed the unions for not mobilising enough. Stefania, instead blamed her co-workers:

People don't want to lose a day of pay; you don't go to strike if you need to pay the golden faucets you installed at home... most colleagues are just opportunists...

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 42 – Amazon nation-wide strike in Italy, MXP5, March 22nd, 2021

Another veteran worker whom I knew had decided not to strike. Yet, he had been one of the first workers to unionise and he had participated to the first strike in 2017. At the same time, he had also been the promoter of the rank-and-file petition against the company-level collective agreement on work shifts (see par. 8.2.3). Since then, he had distanced himself from the union. Therefore, the day of the strike he went to work and did his shift. When he went out to go home, I met him and we had a chat:

In my shift [he was in the marshal team, the workers in charge of directing truck traffics out of the truck bays, one of the few jobs not subject to taylorisation and constant monitoring] nobody wanted to go on strike... I could not be the only one to strike. I am fine. I don't want to have troubles... I have already been slapped too much from the unions... the unions want us to believe that they have changed our life, but I am disappointed, I feel stabbed.

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 43 – Fieldwork observation, Amazon nation-wide strike in Italy, MXP5, March 22nd, 2021

Whatever the reasons that non-strikers mentioned to justify their decision, it is noticeable that some of them were workers that in the beginning the unions had been able to mobilise.

Observing the mobilisation out of the FCs, the limits of union's strategy were evident. First, as recommended in the circular (Fieldwork Written Document 25), the greatest importance was given to media activity rather than to concrete action. Despite the strike had been called for the entire day, the gathering was kept only between 11.30am to 2pm. Unionists started wrapping up their flags already at 1pm. Differently from the repertoire of action of the COBAS in the logistics sector, no picket-line was planned to restrict logistics flows, not to mention blockades. As a result, trucks circulated normally. That was also a sign that operations inside were going quite as usual, therefore that many workers, if not the majority, were not striking. No distribution of leaflets was planned at the turnstile, because unions did not want to incite any conflict between striker and non-strikers. Given the high media coverage, any accidents would have been broadcasted on real time and waste unions' narrative of a massive and peaceful protest. In front of the turnstile, the situation was calm.

Protesters were on the other side of the parking lot, hidden by a corner, and one could barely hear the noise of the gatherings and some chants. In the parking lot there were some workers sitting in their car, indifferent, waiting for the beginning of their shift or having their lunch (anti-covid rules were still in force and the access to the canteen was restricted). A small group of delegates tried to take the initiative and reach the turnstiles, but they very promptly halted by union officials. One of them went on anyway and I followed him. He stopped in front of the turnstiles and started talking with some non-strikers' colleagues, as they were friends. One of them mocked him:

Look, D., three quarters of the people are inside... what does the C-G-I-L [spelling each letter, lampooning] think they can do?

Fieldwork Journal Excerpt 44 – Fieldwork observation, Amazon nation-wide strike in Italy, MXP5, March 22nd, 2021

Meanwhile, an Amazon security officer stood in front of the turnstile with a megaphone. Her role was to enforce social distancing. So, she spoke loudly through her megaphone, ordering us to keep the two-metres distance. Pissed off, we came back to the zone of the gathering and another worker told us sceptically: “The union claim a 70% rate of participation... here?”.

Second, the unions worked to coordinate the strike across Amazon supply chain but did not make much effort to involve the rest of the e-commerce and courier logistics, although unions were aware that Amazon could re-rout some flows through third-party logistics providers such as UPS or FedEx. Only among UPS drivers in Milan, which form a cohesive and numerous groups of rank-and-file CGIL unionists announced to go on strike in solidarity with Amazon workers, but they did so independently from their unions structure. This lack of coordination was all the more critical as a general strike in the logistics sector had been scheduled for March 26th, less than a week later. The strike had been called to support unions' demands during the round of negotiation for the renewal of the CCNL, in a moment where many large firms, especially FedEx, were restructuring their operations (Bottalico, Massimo, and Violante 2021). Thus, the two mobilisations remained disconnected, to the disconcert of certain union delegates at Amazon.

Eventually, the strike recorded an important media success, with the national press and TV networks covering it widely. The political impact was also significative in the short-term. Political parties from centre-left to far left supported it. The Minister of Labour of the recent-appointed Draghi Government – supported by a wide majority from the social-democratic PD to the far-right Lega – also praised the union for their firm and peaceful protest, and for the will expressed constantly by union official to keep the dialogue with Amazon.

Amazon, on the other hand, tried to underplay the participation, declaring that 20% of outsourced drivers had participated to the strike and just 10% through the entire supply chain. Unions, instead, reported a 70% participation rate in the whole Amazon workforce. In fact, even if we lack reliable data, evidence from fieldwork suggested that participation had been very important among drivers, while unions had struggled to mobilise warehouse workers. With their capacity to disrupt customer deliveries, last-mile sub-contracted drivers emerged as segment capable to hurt Amazon's planned flows. This was not the case for FC workers, whose structural power was inferior. The attempt of confederal unions to compensate the uneven structural power through associational power and intermediation, namely, the coordination of these two distinct segments, was arguably not very effective on the field. One of the reasons is the lack of coordination between CGIL's transport and commerce branches.

The outcome of the strikes was ambivalent. In the industrial relations arena, the mobilisation, combined with the pressures of the Italian government, pushed Amazon to re-open negotiations. Several meetings took place from April to September 2021, between Amazon and confederal unions.

On September 15th an agreement between the parties established a "Protocol" (*Protocollo per la definizione di un sistema condiviso di relazioni industriali*), "to outline a system of industrial relations in line with changing social and market dynamics", whereby "the parties agree on the appropriateness of adopting a participatory method characterised by systematic analysis, discussion and verification of issues of common interest". "With this relational system, functional to the settlement of any collective disputes, it is reaffirmed, in the distinction of roles, that industrial relations are *a value in themselves*" [author's emphasis], and therefore the parties "undertake to respect the rules of the CCNL Logistics, Freight Transport and Forwarding Agreement and their consistent application".

The agreement did not provide specific measures but a set of procedural rules aiming at regulating industrial relations in the firm. Interestingly, only the Transport/Logistics CCNL was mentioned as a reference, and not the commerce sector, thus reproducing a fracture within confederal unions. Like in 2018 with the plant-level agreement at MXP5, unions celebrated that "for the first time Amazon accepts confrontation according to existing contractual disciplines, recognises collective representation and the role of trade unions". Amazon considered the agreement "a proof of our commitment to establishing a constructive and responsible dialogue". In fact, the company was careful on avoiding any concrete commitment in term of working conditions and remuneration policy.

Some improvements were registered out of the perimeter of the protocol, in October, when Amazon slightly increased wages for FC workers – getting 8% higher than the CCNL grids – but did do unilaterally without any agreement with the unions. The only substantial agreement would be

signed in February 2022 concerning last-mile subcontracted driver. The accord did not involve Amazon but only the business associations representing sub-contracted delivery partners (AssoEspressi). The agreement introduced a progressive reduction of working-time (from 44 hours per week to 42 hours in June 2023), an yearly collective performance bonus (up to gross €1.100), a special daily bonus (between €10 to €19) for each day worked, the guarantee of a minimum daily pay in case of unexpected reduction of activities, voluntary work on holidays, but also more hiring flexibility for the employer (up to 75% fixed-term contracts for sub-contractors). However, no agreement was signed in the FCs, confirming the unbalance of power between these two segments of the logistics chain, and unions' failure in extending the provisions of the 2018 deal, though limited they could be, to the rest of the FC network.

8.3. *Conclusion of Part III*

In front of an employer hostile to unions and which did not seek the cooperation of worker representatives, nor a specific involvement of the workforce in the labour process (given the high level of technical and economic coercion), French and Italian unions reacted differently, according to their respective power resources and to the strategies developed by their leadership. In front of the same employer, of a difficult resort to structural power, unions mobilised associational power, either in the form of institutional resources, or through intermediation and framing. Different strategies resulted in different patterns of mobilisation and different outcomes.

Chapter 7 focused on the development of union politics and labour relations during the start-up labour regime in France and Italy. These two labour regimes follow different temporalities (2000-2011 in France; 2011-2015 in Italy). In France, the stronger institutionalisation of industrial relations forces the company to adapt. On the other hand, the organisational weakness of unions makes easier for management to coopt and domesticate unions. In Italy, instead the lack of legally binding rules made it easier for management to just ignore the unions which are also organisational weak during this phase and unable to mobilise the workers.

In Chapter 8, I examined the impact of the unravelling of the start-up labour regime on industrial relations and the reconfiguration of the internal state in the two case studies. During the phase of algorithmic bureaucracy, where Amazon concludes its transition to an industrialised organisational paradigm, also industrial relations become more established.

In this new labour regime, Amazon's technical and economic coercion jeopardised workers' structural power in its twofold dimension of workplace and marketplace bargaining power (Part II). Thanks to this power, Amazon was also able to curb the different external institutional pressures of the French and the Italian systems of industrial relations. Indeed, the main difference between France

and Italy, was the level of institutionalisation of industrial relations, i.e the level of formalisation of rules on which unions could leverage, so as to counteract managerial unilateralism.

Comparing management's strategies

First, these differences affected the way how Amazon navigated the institutions of labour regulations in France and Italy. In France, the state-led neoliberal reforms of industrial relations had followed a “micro-corporatist” design (Howell 1992; 2009; Baccaro and Howell 2017), aiming at favouring concertation at the firm-level in order to restore firms’ competitiveness. Since union presence in the workplace was dwindling, the reforms introduced mandatory forms of collective bargaining, including union presence and annual negotiations, which were supposed to legitimise concessionary bargaining.

During the start-up labour regime phase, this micro-corporatist design worked quite well, with management obtaining increased worktime flexibility through negotiations with unions. However, as we saw, the condition of this firm-level political exchange was the lack of independence of unions in the workplace. However, in the second labour regime, unions won a certain independence and retrieved an adversarial attitude. Union pluralism and inter-union competition made the achievement of compromises more difficult. Amazon’s anti-union stance also narrowed the margins of social dialogue. The conditions were in place for the demise of the micro-corporatist structure and the establishment of an adversarial pattern of industrial relations. This did not inhibit the signature of agreements, in which, differently from the start-up labour regimes, unions managed to obtain slight but significant improvements. At the same time, management confirmed its ability to navigate the institutional environment by adopting tactics of demobilisation adapted to the context, ranging from the opportunistic use of inter-union competition to the displacement of unions.

In Italy, the neoliberal trend of industrial relations was also linked, at least for the 1990s decade, to a micro-corporatist pattern. The difference from France was that micro-corporatism was less pushed by state-led reforms than firm-level and sector-level coordination (Regini and Sabel 1989; Locke 1990; Regini 1995), eventually “extended” to tripartite pacts (Baccaro 1999; 2002b). The consequence of this genesis is that micro-corporatism was more consensual and union structures more easily embedded into this process. As a result, compared to their French counterpart Italian unions departed more swiftly from their adversarial tradition. This explains also the emergence of small alternative unions such as the various COBAS, first in factories, railway, schools and hospitals (Carrieri and Tatarelli 1997; Pauvert 2012), then also in the logistics (Benvegnù and Cuppini 2018; Bologna and Curi 2019; Massimo 2020c; Cini and Goldmann 2021; Cioce 2021). The legacy of the micro-corporatist period infused the everyday practices of Italian union officials, as we saw in the

case of Amazon. The other consequence was also that the reconfiguration of industrial relations underwent a weakly institutionalised path. As a result, firm-level industrial relations depended more on the concrete power relations in the workplace than on legal regulations. Thus, in Italy Amazon faced looser constraints, and its tactics were less sophisticated but anyway effective: buying time, thus eroding the capacity of unions to mobilise.

In sum, Amazon showed a remarkable capacity of formal adaptation and formal compliance to the institutional context. A company founded in the US in a context of low institutionalisation of industrial relations and with a strong anti-union ideology, managed to tolerate union presence in the workplace without major impact on the control of the labour process. In France, the company, thanks to the mediation of local management even anticipated the establishment of unions by orchestrating itself labour relations. When unions became independent and confrontational actors, the company managed to prevent unions' capacity to affect its power on the labour process. Even in the rare cases when this power was seriously challenged, such as in the dispute over working conditions during the pandemic crisis, the company resorted to a substantial lock-out rather than giving in. In Italy, the company operated in a similar way, even if the lower level of institutionalisation allowed Amazon to operate with greater self-latitude and more easily erode unions' power to mobilise the worker.

Comparing union strategies in front of structural weakness: pursuing varieties of associational power

In front of Amazon's capacity to offset workers workplace and labour market power, French and Italian unions relied on associational power. However, depending on the context and on unions' strategic choices, different forms of associational power were activated, with different outcomes.

French unions leveraged on institutional resources, but they were less able to build on intermediation. In France I found a pattern of endemic and routinised mobilisation. Here, unions compensate the weak structural power leveraging on institutional resources. Collective bargaining is mandatory every year on wages, work time and equality policy, as well as professional elections and, de facto, union presence. Unions have also important information right and more institutionalised arenas of representation (the CE and the CHSCT, later, in 2017, merged into the CSE). Strikes do not mobilise a massive number of workers but are constantly declared during negotiations as a mean of pressure that certain unions, especially the CGT exert on management. Other unions call less frequently for strikes but develop an important activity of monitoring over health and safety on the ground. Unions are also able to resort to judicial forms of pressure (*Droit de Retrait*) to constrain managerial power. Finally, despite worker active participation to the strike is not particularly high, unions propose to the workers forms of individual strike that allow employees to resist individually.

These multiple forms of mobilisation, which are not massive but constant, help unions keep pressure high on management and to obtain, occasional wage increases, improvements in working conditions and, during the pandemic crisis, important constraints over managerial power on the labour process.

Union politics developed through distinct sub-phases. An initial resurgence of labour conflict, nurtured also by transnational connections, was followed by a second phase of relative stagnation, where strikes become more local and channelled through the institutions of firm-level collective bargaining. A third phase of experimentation where the main unions adopt alternative tactics, especially a “judicialisation” (Pélisse 2009) of their repertoire of action, culminated during the covid crisis. In all, unions have followed a contentious approach – a strategy that nonetheless implies negotiations – by resorting to institutional resources. This is a quite typical feature of French unionism especially in large firms. Here, despite the deregulation driven by neo-liberal reforms, union presence remains quite solid thanks to the large number of workers and to important organisational resources still provided by labour regulation (B. Giraud, Pélisse, and Penissat 2014; B. Giraud and Signoretto 2023).

A key element for understanding industrial relations at Amazon France is that the strong institutionalisation of firm-level industrial relations, especially the mechanisms of mandatory bargaining and mandatory union presence, separates the opening of bargaining from the will of the actors. Unions benefit from this separation since it reduces the reliance of unions on the will of the employer to negotiate. As a result, unions can devote the political capital accumulated through mobilisation – and leverage their institutional instruments – to keep pressure high on management. Mobilisation becomes a fundamental ingredient of negotiation, and not an alternative as it is the case in the practice of Italian confederal unionists. Conflict becomes almost “endemic” and routinised, a condition of “cold strike” (Morel 1994; Pélisse 2009). Pélisse has recently revisited this notion, forged by Morel, emphasising the current unbalance of power between employers and unions. Differently from the post-68 years, the hostility between unions and employers continues but in a configuration of industrial relations where employers are structurally dominant. This reading of French industrial relations, however, appears more nuanced if compared to the Italian context. Despite being significantly weakened, French unions proved able to put Amazon’s management under sufficient pressure to obtain concessions that in Italy are not achieved. During the pandemic crisis, this pattern of union politics seriously challenged the company’s control over the labour process.

In Italy, instead, after an upsurge in 2017, labour collective mobilisation entered a spiral of decline. This is the result of the weak institutionalisation of industrial relations and the unions’ “micro-corporatist” strategy. However, lacking comparable institutional resources, Italian unions were also more able to mobilise intermediation than their French counterpart.

The micro-corporatist strategy of Italian unions combined with a vision of collective action as alternative to negotiations and not imbricated to it, with a decoupling of the union officialdom from union delegates and with a conception of workplace industrial relations based on individual arrangements rather than collective problems. However, such a strategy has produced meagre results. The lower institutionalisation of firm-level industrial relations in Italy weakens unions position in front of an employer who avoids negotiations. Unions are forced to spend all their political capital just for opening negotiations with the company and obtaining, unsuccessfully, full recognition. Amazon – given its anti-union ideology but also the nature of its labour process that does not require a special involvement of workers but simply the absence of interference of external power – is not interested in fully recognising the unions and establishing collective bargaining. Strikes are sacrificed to this goal even at cost of losing the capacity of mobilisation without getting any concrete result from negotiation. At the same time the weakness of unions and the decoupling of the officialdom from the base leads to a very limited agreement unpopular among large parts of the base. Thus, unions' political capital gets increasingly eroded, and the company can easily violate the agreement without running into sanctions. In other words, loses its capacity to aggregate consent and to mobilise the workers. During the pandemic crisis, the distance from the French pattern will emerge clearly, as Italian unions struggled to impose enough pressure on management so as to challenge its control on the labour process. On top of that, union delegates found themselves largely co-opted by management. This opened a crisis of representation between most unions, especially CISL and UIL, and their membership.

Yet, in front of these problems, Italian unions, especially CGIL, show also a certain strategic capacity to countervail workers' low structural power. In France, the relative abundance of institutional resources presents a side effect. Institutional resources are fragmented within the formal boundaries of the firm. In this case, Amazon France Logistique, the subsidiary in charge of running the FCs. Amazon France Transport running the SCs and the delivery stations is formally separated, with its own weak union representation. Dependent on firm-level institutionalisation, French unions find extremely difficult to intermediate between the various segments of Amazon distribution chain. In Italy, the corporate structure is similar – Amazon Italia Logistica running the FCs and Amazon Italia Transport running SCs and delivery stations – but the lack of institutionalisation of collective bargaining at the firm-level induce the unions to increase their efforts of intermediation, in the hope of reinforcing their associational power. At present-day, Italy is the only country where unions were able to organise a strike in the entire Amazon's national network, although, even at this level, the lack of binding rules on negotiation makes it easier for the company to avoid negotiations and frustrate unions' organising efforts.

Table 29 – Unions’ power resources and patterns of mobilisation under algorithmic bureaucracy

	France	Italy
Period of the labour regime	2010-2020	2016-2020
Degree of structural power	Low	Low
Alternative power resources mobilised	Associational-Institutional	Associational-Intermediation
Relation between negotiation and strike (Union’s strategy)	Strike interlocked with negotiations (Confrontational strategy)	Strike subordinated to negotiations (Micro-corporatist strategy)
Workplace union intervention	Contentious and general	Consensual and limited to individual cases
Bargained outcomes	Wage increases, work-time reduction, small changes in the organisation of work	Work shift negotiation

These different patterns have their own outcomes, with French unions able to slightly, but significantly, improve economic and working conditions, while Italian unions fail in substantially raising them. For example, the French case shows that continued union pressure led to work-time reduction schemes (the weekend and holiday shifts), increase of bargained company-level wages and small improvement in working conditions. Italian unions instead obtained only to negotiate worktime shifts and few modest individual improvements of working conditions.

This divergence becomes particularly evident in the case of the pandemic, when French unions presented a significantly higher capacity to protect worker health and economic conditions. Also in ordinary times, French unions are capable to exert enough pressure on management to obtain economic and organisational concessions, while Italian unions, despite their consensual approach failed in pursuing most of their agenda. The pandemic crisis however, also showed that Amazon was able to protect its fundamental prerogatives, namely the power to decide on the organisation of work and on internal labour market. In both countries, the level of single mobilisations does not have the necessary scope and continuity to seriously challenge the structures of managerial power in the labour process. This is evident also when looking at the internal labour market, whose segmentation between temporary and permanent workers effectively disarms collective mobilisation.

That being said, evidence shows also that in both cases, the employer was able to ward off unions’ control on the organisation of work. The improvements that unions elicited in the labour

process remained relatively marginal. To this day, unions have not been able to exert substantial control on the core of work organisation, namely on algorithms and on the setting of key performance goals. The examination of the pandemic crisis confirms these findings. Both French and Italian unions demanded the reduction of operations, precisely when the company was trying to multiply it in order to keep the pace of soaring e-commerce demand. In front of unions pressures, management resisted relatively easily to Italian unions, while in France, management was ready to afford the costs of a *de facto* lock-out to prevent unions to dispute control on the labour process. In this respect, despite the important mobilisations, which were unique in the whole transnational landscape of Amazon, the employer's rule on the organisation work remained largely unchallenged.

General Conclusions

In the thirty years between its foundation and today, the start-up Amazon has become a giant platform, behind which we can recognise one of the digital monopolies that dominate contemporary transatlantic capitalism (Khan 2016; C. Durand 2020; 2022; C. Durand and Baud 2023; Coveri, Cozza, and Guarascio 2022; Rikap 2022; 2023). Much attention has been given to Amazon's ability, as a platform, to centralise control over data as a basis for its economic and political domination. However, and this is the first contribution of this thesis, I have tried to show that work remains central to Amazon's monopoly strategy.

In the first part of this thesis, we saw how Amazon built its digital (and commercial) monopoly thanks to its powerful vertically integrated logistics infrastructure and a business model based on different but complementary business lines. In the beginning, the choice of vertical integration of logistics was not self-evident, at least if Amazon were to have aligned itself with the dominant ideological coordinates, which advocated outsourcing at all costs in the name of shareholder value, but also if we had to follow the analyses announcing the vanishing of the American corporation, revolving around mass production and distribution and based on layers of employees (G. F. Davis 2016).

A questions could be asked at this point. Can we really talk about vertical integration at Amazon? After all, we are talking about a platform, which means a type of company that intermediates its business between separate legal and organisational units. In addition, even if we only look at its warehouses, this thesis has shown the crucial role played by temporary agency workers, not to mention the importance of outsourced last-mile delivery.

With regard to the type of company, the objection is partly true. Amazon does not vertically integrate its third-party sellers, otherwise they would be its employees. It exercises market power over them. However, this market power is possible precisely because Amazon has built an unrivalled logistics network, this one vertically integrated, which makes Amazon practically inescapable as a sales and distribution platform.

Regarding the employment status of temp workers, it is true that they are not Amazon's direct employees, but they work in its warehouses under strict control, even stricter than that to which Amazon direct employees are subject. A special case are the drivers in charge of customer deliveries. Some of them are employees of large courier companies, to which Amazon outsources last mile delivery; some are employees of very small subcontracted companies; some are micro-entrepreneurs. Those belonging to the last two groups could be considered as atypical employees. However, these

workers operate under the direct control of Amazon's algorithms – although we must not overlook the role played by personal control, exercised by the small bosses and managers. In addition, subcontracted micro-businesses are also subject to Amazon's commercial stranglehold. So, despite the various legal employment status that may cut across the workforce of Amazon's distribution network, it is still possible to consider it as vertically integrated. Indeed, we can not *just* talk about vertical integration, precisely because it is at the root of other dynamics, namely the complementarity between different business lines, logistics, e-commerce, online and digital services.

The question of work

While vertical integration has enabled Amazon to grow like no other platform or internet company, it has also created new problems. The combination of the platform model, epitomised by the growing share of third-party sales, with vertical integration, thanks to which Amazon sells shipment services to independent sellers, is driving Amazon's logistics costs upwards. By 2023, logistics costs' share of total revenue rose to 32% (Source: Annual reports). In this context, the control of work-related expenditures is crucial to keep Amazon's profit strategy sustainable.

Since the beginning, the organisation of production has been a critical issue for Amazon. First, regarding how to organise operations so as to make them consistent with the profit strategy. Second, concerning how to manage a workforce that until 2022 has never ceased to grow, first in the USA, the company's centre of gravity, and then on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in Europe. The case of Amazon shows that, under capitalism, these are constant questions, beyond the supposed discontinuities regardless the modes of regulation and the regimes of accumulation. Rather than discontinuities, this research has sought to highlight hybridisations. The most important of these hybridisations is the hybridisation between the organisational model of the platform and that of the vertically integrated Fordist company. Hence the idea of the plat-fordist model, a prerequisite for Amazon's digital monopoly.

The backbone of this enterprise is a form of work that we have seen become increasingly taylorised and bureaucratised. Workers are deskilled, and they become more disposable and obsolescent, while control on production is centralised. In the words of Braverman:

A necessary consequence of the separation of conception and execution is that the labour process is now divided between separate sites and separate bodies of workers [...] The physical processes of production are now carried out more or less blindly, not only by the workers who perform them, but often by the lower ranks of supervisory employees as well. The production units operate like a hand, watched, corrected, and controlled by a distant brain. (Braverman 1974, 124–25)

However, this “degradation” of work, to use Braverman’s terms, has occurred on new foundations: digital devices, algorithms, robots and artificial intelligence. The organisation of logistics work was no longer the outcome of a regular process, but the result of failures and successes. Initially, Amazon relied on a “Walmartian” model based on automation, but this model proved inadequate. Then, Amazon’s new organisers found a fairer solution: instead of rushing into automation, they built a system where human labour could be guided through the details of micro-tasks by algorithms. It was the return of scientific management, but unlike the fordist chain, Amazon had developed an “invisible” one. With its shift toward taylorism and mass production and distribution, Amazon is increasingly moved by an “industrial” regime (1999). It is a major transition from an initial start-up and social movement-like logic to a more bureaucratised one.

Is this normalisation leading to the kind of industrial relations typical of classic fordism? The answer is negative for two reasons. One, as we have already discussed in the thesis, it is misleading to consider classic fordism as the emanation on the macro-level of a firm-level compromise (see par. 1.2.). The second, related reason is that Amazon’s scattered infrastructure across dozens of countries and jurisdictions has been so far a factor of avoidance of national institutions of regulation rather than a driver of institutional integration.

* * *

In the context of the normalisation of Amazon employment relations, the classic problem of class relations in the workplace, recognised by Marxist and non-Marxist theorists alike, arose: how can management secure employee effort in the work process? And how to prevent collective resistance capable of challenging employer authority over the organisation of production?

In the US, Amazon is facing some of the structural problems encountered by Henry Ford’s firm, such as dramatic rates of turnover and the need to increase wages in order to attract more workforce to consume. However, union power is so weak in this moment that mobilisations like those of the 1930s and 1940s – which marked the transition to fordism (intended as a mode of regulation) and which are sometimes evoked as imminent horizons for Amazon too (Moody 2020) – are still far from taking place. In Europe, thanks to the residual strength of unions, mobilisations have taken place in Amazon’s subsidiaries in all major European countries, even if union presence is solid only in Germany, Poland, Spain, France and Italy, and, as we saw, ordinary collective bargaining exists only in the two latter countries.

In Part II, I have illustrated how Amazon dealt with the problem of worker effort in Europe, in particular in two countries, France and Italy. Although not among the largest in terms of Amazon’s

market size, these country-cases had some interesting features, notably the presence of trade union movements with a tradition of conflict and a still significant presence in society and institutions. The proof was that only in these two countries a company marked anti-union ideology and practices such as Amazon had to compromise with the unions.

So, firstly, we saw how Amazon set up business in these two countries: what types of socio-economic constraints; what opportunities, it found on the ground; how it launched its operations. We have seen that the same phases in the development of the work process that we reconstructed on a global level were deployed on a local scale.

However, the temporality and variety of these phases depended on the local context. In France and in Italy, two varieties of the same labour regimes succeeded one another. In both cases, in the start-up regime, commercial and organisational uncertainty demanded a type of worker effort based on mobilisation and commitment of employees, following Friedman's model of responsible autonomy. Then, in both countries, the success of Amazon's monopolistic growth led to a shift in the work process from responsible autonomy to technical and economic coercion. Yet, it is important to state that the Taylorisation of the work process was not the unavoidable outcome of technological innovation, but the result of managerial choices who were turning points in the history of Amazon's labour process.

The growth of the workforce and the segmentation of the labour market, typical of the European context, where the labour market is particularly dualised, undermined the conditions of the previous regime, where employee commitment was also based on the personal relationship between managers and employees. Differently from the United States, where union power is too limited to impose forms of organisation and collective representation on management (with rare exceptions), in Europe, and particularly in the French and the Italian cases, the unions have managed to seize the opportunity of the crisis in the warehouse regime to impose themselves (France) and carve out a space (Italy) as interlocutors with management.

However, the unions' entry into the arena of political production is not in itself capable of shifting power in the work process. In this new context, (1) employee effort is no longer secured primarily by employee commitment, but by the constraint of the work process itself (technical coercion) and by their low position in the external internet labour market (economic coercion); (2) from that time on, the priority for management is to prevent discontent from coalescing into collective employee mobilisation, whereby employees form a group possessing their own interests and needs, separate from the employer, and who intend to challenge the employer's power over the organisation of production. In sum, there was a shift from a system of labour management based on mobilisation

to another, as the company became more standardised and bureaucratised, based on the demobilisation of collective action.

Thus, Part III of the thesis analyses the demobilisation methods adopted by management and their interaction with trade union strategies in France and Italy. I do not dwell on the details of the comparison, as they have already been set out in the conclusions to Part III. What is important to stress here is the interest of analysing union power in the mirror of employer counter-power, and thus of reversing the perspective. The categories of power-resource theory thus find their avatar in the two types of coercion we analysed in Part II. Technical and economic coercion are revealed as the flip side of structural power, and union busting managerial strategies as a counterweight to associational power.

This is not just a matter of words, but a way of shifting the focus. An attempt to show that employers' strategies must be taken into account in their rationality and in their interdependence with the context and with the strategies of other players, particularly the trade unions (Fantasia and Stepan-Norris 2004; Penissat 2013). This is why I have insisted on the problem for the company and management of mobilising effort and at the same time demobilising resistance. The concept of mobilisation allows us to escape from conceptual and practical aporias, namely the debate on whether or not employees consent to their exploitation. In this research, I assumed that all wage relationships are ultimately based on coercion. Theorisations of the wage relations as consensual seem to be based – although this is not explicitly admitted – on the legal form, which, from the “fordist” era onwards, became highly codified and institutionalised. However, this vision suffers from a fundamental eurocentrism, according to which the specific form of the “fordist” wage relationship was the only one to imply the consent of the weaker party to its exploitation.

A separate matter is question of the “obscuring” of exploitation, in Burawoy's terms. The evidence gathered in my fieldwork confirms that the reality of exploitation is much more transparent to employees than what is assumed by Burawoy's (or Bourdieu's) theory of domination. Employees are aware of the balance of power. They strategically calculate their chances and follow a variegated repertoire of action, spanning from collective mobilisations to petitions and sabotage (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; for a general theorisation, see J. C. Scott 1985; 1990). This does not mean to frame social action according to the paradigm of *homo oeconomicus*. On the contrary, my argument develops in the wake of bounded-rationality and power-resource approaches, according to which the rationality is constrained by the distribution of power in a given social setting. For example, what we have seen in the fieldwork is a great deal of opacity, which is not “natural” but to some extent cultivated by management. This opacity about algorithms, hiring rules, etc. makes the calculation of

actors more complicated and constrains workers' behaviour³³². However, this opacity does not obscure the reality of exploitation and subordination. Workers are aware of the relation of exploitation and domination that connect them to their managers and employer.

That said, as the various approaches to labour economics and sociology of work emphasise (see Introduction to Part II), the problem of mobilising effort and ensuring that tasks are carried out correctly remains for the employer. The balance of power may vary, as suggested by the power resource approach, and this also implies a variation in the way in which the employer and/or management try to secure this effort.

The critique of Burawoy's approach and his structural functionalism also concerns the dimension of industrial relations. While Burawoy correctly sees the role played by the collective bargaining system and the union structure in the incorporation of the working class into US monopoly capitalism, he overlooks the contingent nature of this pact. He did so later, in the 1980s, when the capitalist side decided to get out of the compromise and, additionally, to do so by using the institutional remnants of the fordist compromise at work (i.e. collective bargaining) as a springboard to regain margins of flexibility (Burawoy 1983; 1985).

Yet, it is not just a question of cycles and modes of regulation – here we are dealing with Burawoy determinism – but also of resources and strategies. On paper, Amazon should have started a war with the unions in France and Italy, as it did it in the US or in Germany for example. In fact, in the start-up phase Amazon was surprisingly able to navigate rather than oppose the institutional constraints. Thus, Amazon co-opted (France) or ignored the unions (Italy), as a result of unions' weakness but also of Amazon's ability to mobilise employees on its side.

In the second phase, things changed. While Amazon's ability to nurture workers' loyalty and commitment was shrinking dramatically, and, consequently, the scope for the unions to develop an independent strategy was widening, a divergence opened up. In France, the unions stop functioning as a simple vehicle for worker incorporation and started challenging managerial power, including the trade union that are supposed to be more accommodating, such as the CFDT. In Italy, we observed a transition from exclusion of trade unions to their subaltern co-optation. Two different outcomes from two supposedly twin unionisms.

This variation can only be explained by looking at the major changes that have occurred in industrial relations systems in the last decades. This is what we have done, by showing the two trajectories of neo-liberal restructuring, but also the transformations of the trade union panorama in the two countries. The caveat is that this relationship between the system and the company level

³³²It is worth to notice that unions can also play the opacity card – for example, by not revealing the exact figures for their members – as can employees, who often try to hide their misbehaviour from managerial direct control.

cannot be as framed as a mechanical transmission from the macro to the micro. There are meso factors – such as the company’s size, its profit strategy, its work organisation, its ideology – which refract, amplify or reduce the effect of macro-structures.

In France, the neoliberal labour reforms aimed to build corporatism at company level from the top down, by means of legislative reforms, but this micro-corporatism lacked robust foundations, in particular an agreement between fragmented and polarised social parties. In Italy, too, micro-corporatism (micro-concertation) emerged as a vehicle for the neoliberal restructuring. This micro-concertation arose from grassroots compromises at local level, particularly in certain areas of central and northern Italy and in declining sectors such as textiles and chemicals (Regini 1995), and eventually expanded to the macro level, only to become more fragile and unstable in the last two decades (Baccaro and Howell 2017). However, it is precisely its embedding in social micro-regulation that left more lasting traces, particularly on confederal trade unions’ commitment to social dialogue with employers, even when it comes to hostile employers such as Amazon.

In Amazon’s French and Italian subsidiaries, both these varieties of micro-corporatism, already weakened at the macro-level by the further neoliberalisation of industrial relations, break down. The most likely reason for this is that Amazon is not interested in playing the game of collective bargaining unless it has to comply with statutory obligation. Amazon’s corporate policy is to refuse to recognise the legitimacy of “third party” players such as trade unions, and to downplay their capability to participate in the management of production. Except that in France, the legal constraints force collective bargaining. The unions still have enough resources to resist the unilateralism of management and to develop a variegated repertoire of action. On top of that, Amazon’s hostility to the unions prevents it from using institutional instruments in the way it did before, when the unions were able to pursue an autonomous strategy. In Italy, instead, collective bargaining depends on the employer’s will and on unions’ power, too weak to obtain a serious commitment of the company to bargain. Here, the neoliberal restructuring is amplified not only by the company but also by the adoption, by the unions, of a strategy of compromise at cost of cutting links with the rank-and-file in order to sign agreements with management.

This divergence neither confirms nor denies the validity of the neoliberalisation thesis (Baccaro and Howell 2017). Rather, it completes it, by showing that every level counts in the struggle for power over labour and production.

Looking ahead: limitations and space for further research

The choice to focus the analysis on France and Italy was based on theoretical considerations, as these two countries were the only ones where Amazon had been “forced” to sign agreements with

the trade unions, in spite of his fierce anti-union record. Secondly, the choice of limiting the comparison to two case studies was also made for practical reasons, as this type of “slow” and multi-level comparison requires a considerable investment from the researchers involved.

The inevitable result was that other important countries have been left out of my research, notably the United States and larger European countries than France and Italy in terms of market share and workforce, such as Germany, Poland, or the United Kingdom. The state and evolution of labour relations in Amazon’s subsidiaries in these countries have been mentioned occasionally in the context of the transnational projection of the French and Italian fields and cases, sometimes based on materials and interviews conducted by myself, and at other times thanks to secondary sources. However, research on Amazon would benefit from a systematic comparison of the French and Italian cases not only with North Atlantic countries like the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Poland, but also with Brazil, Mexico, India, and several countries in the Middle East.

Findings on the French and Italian case suggests that in the most densely institutionalised host-country system Amazon, as it usually occurs to US-based TNCs, is forced to adapt. However, the German case puts such an assumption under question. Here, Amazon has fiercely resisted union presence – to the point that local management organised “pro-Amazon” squads of employees as a response to the first strikes in 2013 (Boewe and Schulten 2019; Goldmann 2023), a counter-mobilisation strategy that in France nor in Italy was adopted – and successfully avoided a firm-level collective bargaining requested by unions. The scope of this research does not include a systematic analysis of the German case, so the puzzle can not be addressed. However, a hypothesis is that there are different kinds of institutionalisation. In the German case, where (like in Italy) statutory provisions do not impose collective bargaining, Amazon is able to circumvent it. In doing so, the company took advantage of the erosions of labour relations centralisation, especially in the periphery of the economy (Doellgast and Greer 2007; Baccaro and Howell 2017; Kinderman 2017; Benassi and Dorigatti 2018)³³³.

From the point of view of unions’ transnational mobilisations, the limits of the French high institutionalisation, rigidly based on firm-level work representation is that most of the activity of union delegates and worker representative is dedicated to plan-level or firm-level issues. In addition, the recent reform of workplace representations, with the net reduction of time-off for unionists, intensifies this problem. Institutional resources allow unionists to monitor the workplace, working conditions etc, but very few delegates are interested in coordinating with unionists in other French

³³³ Furthermore, it is also possible that the size of the French market, much inferior to the German ones, reduced the stakes and thus encouraged management to compromise with unions. However, this does not seem to be the case in Italy, where the size of the market is equivalent to the French one, but the outcome is similar to Germany in terms of refusal of bargaining.

subsidiaries (in sortation centres or in delivery stations) and even more with unionists in other countries. Italian unions, instead, are much more active in the transnational arena, namely in the UNI network (no Italian unions participate to the AWI coalition).

This confirms that the lack of institutional resources pushes Italian unions to enhance their associational resources. First, through the supply chain, as we saw during the nation-wide 2021 strike. Second, through transnational organising (Goldmann 2023). However, it is also true that active participation of Italian unions to these international meetings is usually limited to union officialdom, while delegates rarely take an active role. The result is that from the workplace level the transnational arena is perceived as far and somewhat irrelevant not only by workers but also by most shop stewards.

Nonetheless transnational research needs to be enhanced and comparative research is not an obstacle in this respect. Quite the contrary, a nation-based comparative analysis of transnational mobilisations at Amazon could help to improve our knowledge of the limits and opportunities for transnational organising. Similarly, this thesis focused on the union and workplace side of mobilisation, without considering systematically the role played by external actors which operated as enabler of mobilisations, especially at the international level. Further research could shed light on this aspect.

Expanding from the notion of mobilisation

The use of the concepts of mobilisation and demobilisation opens to further cross-fertilisation between labour process theory with political sociology and the sociology of social movements. At the macro-level, recent reflections on the “demobilised class society” (Dörre 2021; Westheuser and della Porta 2022; in France, see Baby-Collin, Clerval, and Talpin 2021; Depoorter et al. 2022). A focus on the labour process would contribute to explain the dynamics of demobilisation detected at the macro-level. This research agenda would in fact build on one of the implicit assumptions of Burawoy’s work that, drawing on Gramsci, aimed at researching the foundation of class hegemony in the everyday politics of the workplace.

At the micro- and meso-level, the study of mobilisation and demobilisation at Amazon would move forward in the wake of the pioneering works of Zald (1970; Zald and Berger 1978) – an early supporter of the idea that organisations ought to be conceived as political entities and that social movement could explain both change within organisations and markets. For the last two decades, organisational sociologists have been looking for micro-level and political explanations for organisational and market change (G. F. Davis et al. 2005; 2008; Edelman, Leachman, and McAdam 2010; Bereni and Dubuisson-Quellier 2020). The original aspect of this approach consists in the idea analyse firms and organisations as social movements, putting at the centre of the analysis the need

for firms to politically mobilise their “members” in order to secure the economic viability and the political order of the organisation. In this respect, such orientation echoes and reinforces Burawoy’s framework of production politics and labour regimes. Amazon is an object of study particularly pertinent for a social movement approach. Not only Amazon, like all capitalist firms, needs to elicit the effort of its workers in the labour process. It does so, especially during the start-up regime, by resorting to a repertoire of discourses and practices that is very close to a social movement. We saw in this thesis how Amazon emerged and imposed itself in the e-commerce market as an “outsider”, challenging established actors such as competitors, regulators, and labour unions, in the name of a “cause”: “customer obsession”. Amazon was pursuing a goal: to provide consumers with a unprecedentedly large catalogue, low prices, and fast delivery. Any opposition in the pursuit of this goal was considered an attack to customers. The “outsider” approach of Amazon extended also to the relation with Wall Street and investors, with Bezos insisting on a “retain-and-reinvest” strategy rather than the dominant “shareholder value” practices of redistributing any profits to shareholders³³⁴.

Comparing the entanglement between profit strategies and labour process at Amazon with other e-commerce players is another important line of research. Emulating Amazon’s successful experience, other players emerged in the e-commerce sector. Some of them, such as Chinese Alibaba and Argentinian Mercadolibre, have become dominant actors in their own country, preventing Amazon from establish its foothold. Research comparing the labour process, industrial relations still in their infancy (T. L. Lee, Tapia, and Atzeni 2023; Atzeni and Massimo 2024), while no research at all has been carried out to compare the various profit strategies of these firms.

The analysis on logistics has so far focused only on the distribution segment of Amazon, from the FCs to customer delivery. However little evidence and analysis have been produced regarding the way how products arrive in the FCs: the agreements with suppliers, the cross-border transportation from manufacturers, many of which are located in Asia, to FCs. In sum, while it has been done extensively on a company like Walmart (R. Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2006; Bonacich and Wilson 2006; 2008; Brunn 2006; Lichtenstein 2006a), which is a forerunner of Amazon under many respects, the whole Amazon’s value chain is yet to be reconstituted.

This would also provide insights for those branches of geo-economics and international political economy that focus on the role of cross-border infrastructures, especially private-owned ones, in the making and unmaking of regional and global order (Gjesvik 2023; Abels 2024; Abels and Bieling 2024). At the European level in particular, it would be necessary to grasp the role of a company such as Amazon in the process of economic and infrastructural integration, including

³³⁴ This element is emphasized by Lazonick (2018), see footnote 320.

industrial relations and labour policy (Meardi 2002; Marginson, Sisson, and Arrowsmith 2004; Erne et al. 2024)

Relatedly, the influence of Amazon's infrastructure raises the question of economic and democratic planning. By accumulating and processing data on purchases and site traffic in real time, Amazon's algorithms optimise logistics flows at an aggregate level, drastically reducing the need for storage and thus the risk of misallocation. This reveals high potential for the management of financial, informational and commodity fluxes from the perspective of democratic planning. A debate has been growing on these scenarios, demanding further research on the planning capacity developed by actors such as Amazon, especially for what concerns the ecologic transition (Morozov 2015; Kane 2016; C. Durand and Keucheyan 2019; 2024; Phillips and Rozworski 2019).

All these elements show how the relationship between European economic governance and industrial relations is still an open field of investigation. Hopefully, this dissertation will be just the beginning of a fruitful research agenda in the years to come.

Social and political implications for labour

Despite being inspired by a tradition of committed and reflexive social research (R. Linhart 1978; 1981; Hatzfeld 2009; 2015; Pugliese 2009; Alquati 2022), this research remains an academic one, with all the advantages and shortcomings of the separation between object and subject. Nevertheless, this thesis has also social and political implications, contributing to the critical reflection on Amazon's managerial practices but also on the trade unions strategies in front of a firm that has never employed so many workers in so many countries at the same time.

In this thesis I have argued that French and Italian unions have been (unevenly) able to constrain Amazon managerial practices and sometimes, like in the French case during the pandemic, to seriously challenge its control on the organisation of production. However, I have also showed that eventually, even in the French case, Amazon's has been able to protect its prerogatives on the labour process across its entire logistics network.

For what concerns Italian unions, I have showed how they seek to supplement their weak institutional power with a strategy of extending coordination across plants and across the distribution chain until the last mile drivers. At the same time, confederal trade unions' associational power has been undermined by the lack of coordination with the various COBAS unions well-established in the courier segment, on which Amazon rely to deliver a great deal of its customer delivery (Bottalico, Massimo, and Violante 2021; Massimo 2021b; 2021a). Failure to coordinate these two segments of e-commerce logistics is a result of harsh ideological and strategic divergencies and competition between confederal and COBAS unions (Piro and Sacchetto 2020). However, it is also true that the

penetration and consolidation of COBAS unions in this sector since the 2010s has been the result of innovative strike tactics and the capacity to deal with an immigrant and racialised workforce that had been neglected until then by confederal unions. In this respect, critical approaches to industrial relations inspired by intersectionality help understand this process of union polarisation and provide analytical and reflexive tools to actors in pursuit of union coordination (T. L. Lee and Tapia 2021; 2023).

The French case shows the importance of institutional factors in containing Amazon's anti-unionism. Institutions establishing mandatory elements supporting negotiations and wage-setting protecting unions' rights (even if less and less, given the recent wave of reforms). At the same time these institutional resources are relevant if they enable a clear contentious strategy toward managerial unilateralism. During acute crisis, French unions, despite their competitive pluralism, have been able to constrain corporate power. At the same time, although Amazon has also been able to protect its prerogatives on the organization of production at cost of imposing a lockout to its main French logistics subsidiary. In this respect, the institutions of industrial relations are typically limited by their "bourgeois" nature. They can represent a constraint to employers, but they ultimately secure the sovereignty of private property in of the means of production in the workplace.

Relatedly, the other limit of reliance on institutional resource is that in the French case the institution of worker representation operates within the narrow boundaries of the firm's formal perimeter. Not only formally "external workers" (outsourced, sub-contracted, agency workers etc.) remain out of the representation, but also workers operating in the same group but in different juridical units. At Amazon it is particularly evident how this juridical separation hampers associational power. In the extreme case of Germany, Amazon establish each FC as a separate firm, thus impeding a unique and cohesive union representation of its workers. In France (and in Italy) the fragmentation is more moderate: there are two subsidiaries covering respectively all the FCs and all the SCs and DSs.

However, this forecloses a unique representation of these workers. However, since French unions still enjoy considerable institutional resources at the single firm-level, they make little effort to go beyond these formal boundaries. French scholarship on industrial relations has emphasised these shortcomings (Bérout 2009; Péglise 2019). Italian unions (or better, the main Italian union, CGIL), lacking strong institutional resources at the firm-level, seek to coordinate their members across the formal boundaries of the various subsidiaries. As illustrated in the thesis, however, this strategy of increasing associational power by enhancing coordination across Amazon's distribution chain is somehow offset by the way how Italian union leaderships frame their relationship with Amazon, i.e. seeking primarily negotiation and social partnership, and also the incapacity to extend this

coordination to the whole logistics system of courier distribution, which includes those segments where COBAS union are the predominant actor.

On the one hand, this confirms that institutional resources are a necessary ingredient for constraining the “disruptive” power of Amazon, although the reach of these institutional tools should be extended, for example, to the way how management sets up the algorithms that organise the production. This would reduce opacity on the labour process and therefore technical coercion exerted on workers. Relatedly, stricter regulation on the massive use of agency work could be introduced so as to diminish economic coercion on workers. These regulations would help workers increase their structural power in the workplace and the labour market. In this respect, these regulations should be extended geographically at least to the European level, since the macro-regional level is the scale at which Amazon organise logistics flows. In this respect the introduction of some forms of statutory minimum wage at the Amazon level has been debated within Amazon’s transnational coalitions (AWI) but is still far from turning into a coherent proposal.

On the other hand, the effective use of these resources must be enabled by adequate strategic reflection on the labour side. So far, this reflection has been not pushed forward enough to enhance coordination both within and across national borders. For example, for what concerns the control on algorithms, potential regulation exists at the national level in France – see the intervention of the CNIL during the pandemic (Chapter 8) and the most recent (December 2023) considering excessive the control of workers individual performances by means of digital devices (Commission Nationale de l’Informatique et des Libertés 2023) – and also in Italy – see the so-called “Transparency Decree” (D.Lgs 104/2022), introducing the obligation for the employers to provide, upon request, public authorities and trade unions with detailed information on the use of automated systems of monitoring in the workplace. However, in both countries unions have been unable so far to seize these opportunities to challenge managerial control on the core of the labour process.

This pessimist take on unions’ power should not lead one to a “defeatist” perspective, where there is no role for labour’s agency within the framework of Amazon’s local and transnational industrial relations. In the last ten years, Amazon has undergone a process of slow normalization of industrial relations. However, this process is still uneven and far from being accomplished. In Europe, important advances have been made, for example at the international level the constitution of a European Works Council (Goldmann 2023). Even if this institution is low-equipped with effectively constraining power on Amazon, its routinisation could enable further accumulation of union resources and further inter-union cross-border cooperation (Meardi 2004). Strikes and mobilization have taken place in all major European subsidiaries, including the countries with difficult environment for union action. Unions have been established, except for the UK where GMB’s organizing effort have led to

a ballot that could see Amazon recognise a trade union in the UK for the first time. In the rest of the world, however, from the US to India, unions are still far from establishing a solid presence, even if struggles have been taking place increasingly after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. It might well be the case that more will follow in the future.

Appendix 1. Fieldwork methodology and data sources

In the introduction, I have already described the rationale of international and transnational comparison, as well as the relevance of France and Italy as case studies of Amazon's production politics. I have already discussed the "extended-case" approach (Burawoy 1998), by which the detailed analysis of social processes at the micro-level is linked to structural transformations "in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the "micro" to the "macro," and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on pre-existing theory" (Burawoy 1998, 5). This appendix aims at describing and critically examining the making of my fieldwork research, the obstacles, the strategic choices and the political, ethical and methodological implications of this approach.

1. *First corpus. Participant observation of labour politics*

The first main corpus of sources is made up of material collected through participant observation of labour politics. Participant observations involved first of all the workplace, in France and Italy. Another part of participant observation, however, was carried on in the transnational arena, taking part and observing the meeting and the public initiatives of transnational union coalitions.

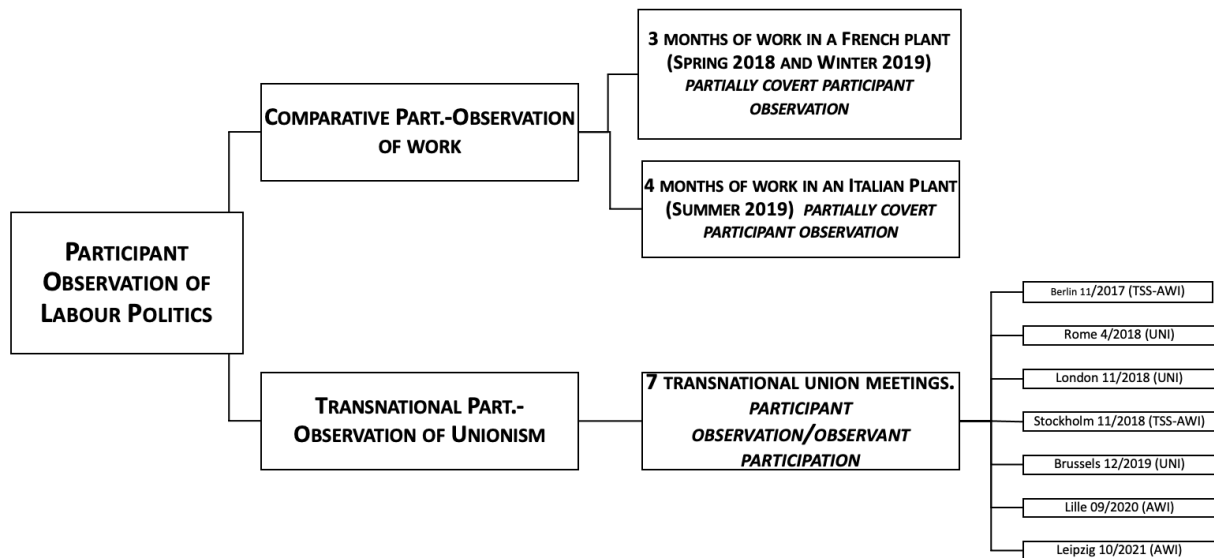


Figure 62 – Participant observation of labour politics at Amazon

1.1. Comparative participant observation of the workplace

The comparison is built on comparative participant observation of work in two plants, one per country. The two main plants in each country were chosen: ORY1 (Orleans, France) and MXP5 (Piacenza, Italy).

I spent six months in these warehouses: approximately two months in ORY1 (July 3rd-August 3rd in 2018 and October 1st-November 10th in 2019) and four in MXP5 (May 13th-August 30th, 2019). In both plants I was hired as a temporary worker. I was employed by temporary staff agencies and “rented out” to Amazon. During my tenure at Amazon, I was assigned to two of the three main tasks: pick and stow. The choice of relying on participant observation experience raise some deontological and methodological problems that I will discuss in this section.

Decisions about how to access the research site can have major implications for the perspectives and information available to the researcher during the course of the research. Covert research has been in many classic sociological studies, from James Patrick’s study on gangs in Glasgow, to Laud Humphreys’ research on impersonal sex in public toilets, from William F. Whyte’s research on an Italian-American neighbourhood to Erving Goffman’s study on mental institutions. Through the decades, this method has been used especially in the field of organisational and work sociology (e.g. Roy 1952b; Burawoy 1972; Pfeffer 1979; R. Linhart 1978; 1981; Cavendish 1982; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Juravich 1985; Graham 1995; Ehrenreich 2001; Jounin 2008; Chauvin 2010; Pachirat 2013). These studies share a strategy of gaining access to a workplace without notifying employers and fellow employees (at least initially) of the research intention motivating the employment. In many cases, the researchers understand covert employment to be the only means of entry to the workplace; disclosure of the research intention would have barred the researcher from access.

As the sociologist Michael Burawoy writes, “to penetrate the shields of the powerful the social scientist has to be lucky and/or devious” (Burawoy 2009, 22). Methodological and deontological reflexions (Homan 1980; Burawoy 2000; Fassin and Bensa 2008; Balsiger and Lambelet 2014; Lay 2014; Roulet et al. 2017; Arborio and Fournier 2021). Partisans of covert research stress the necessity of this method when the researcher has good reason to think that an external presence would not be accepted in the social setting to study. Detractors of this method stresses the ethical issues at stake and professional institutions of sociology usually recommend adopting forms of “informed consent”. No other practice of inquiry that is so controversial, but nevertheless covert observation remains tolerated and recognised as a legitimate method of research.

During my fieldwork research, on the one hand I faced the same dilemma, on the other hand I was forced to transcend this polarisation.

The necessity of undercover participant observation

For what concern the first problem, undercover research was a necessity to understand the problem of work mobilisation and demobilisation at Amazon. First, after carrying the first interviews with unionists and with workers, I realised that I would have not been capable to reconstruct the labour process, its evolution and the production politics around it without observing the practice of work directly.

The problem was that such observation could not take place with the permission of management. Given the importance of reputation for a company like Amazon, corporate management had decided to organise periodical guided tours in Amazon's facilities. I was aware that these tours could provide little material for answering my research question. Tours were organised and controlled by management and, as it is understandable, they were conceived as a tool for improving Amazon's reputation rather favouring independent social research. At that time, some journalists had already done undercover research on Amazon facilities, for instance France (Malet 2013a) and the UK (Bloodworth 2018). These pioneering reportages from inside the workplace were the first to shed some light on the everyday life of work in Amazon's logistics. However, also these works did not answer my questions on the genesis of this labour process and on the political mechanisms of mobilisation and demobilisation. They were based on very short presence in the workplace and, subject to the forces of the publishing market, they privileged sensational and anecdotal, sometimes miserabilist elements. Managerial control on the workers appeared "panoptical", the reconstruction of the organisation of work flat, without contradictions, and workers were presented as mere victims or incapable of resisting managerial pressure.

The goal of my undercover research was, therefore, to spend a considerable lapse of time into the workplace in order to have a thick understanding of social relations in the workplace, for example explaining how managerial control was exerted and contrasted, how Amazon's profit strategy deployed in the everyday life of the workplace, what were the trajectories of Amazon workers, for example how they decided to unionise or, on the contrary not to participate to collective mobilisations and to multiply their effort at work. This required a long-term presence in the field. Going undercover was the only possibility to have a long-term and relative latitude to observe work at Amazon.

Asymmetrical undercover research

For what concern the second problem, i.e. the transcending of the polarisation between supporters and detractors of undercover research, it is important to notice that my workplace participant observation was *asymmetrically undercover*. By this formulation I mean that the deontological and methodological questions about my covert condition were not the same for my relationship with management and my relationship with workers. In my plan recruiters and managers

were not aware of the goal of my presence and this was a necessary condition to carry on a deep inquiry into Amazon labour process. Maintaining secrecy was not a hard mission indeed. During the recruitment process I was asked to present my CV (together with other document such as court records). I discussed with other colleagues that had conducted undercover workplace ethnography and I decided, like them, to compose a realistic CV i.e., a CV that omitted elements that could raise suspicions (for example, I replaced my CV in political science with a supposedly more neutral curriculum in psychology; my master diploma was also omitted and replaced with working experiences). The spirit was to make my CV consistent to my situation and to adapt both to what I expected the “ideal” Amazon warehouse worker to appear.

In this regard, only once I put my foot in the shop-floor, I realised how much I was mistaken. First, I soon figured out that first recruiters did not pay much attention to my CV. Recruitment session were crowded, agency recruiters too busy in the search for new temps for Amazon season. Secondly, once at work, I also found out that there was not such an “ideal” Amazon worker. Better, I realised that the ideal Amazon workers was not necessarily someone with a previous experience in logistics. Thus, there were teenagers doing their summer work or that had dropped out of school or university, more than 50-years-old unemployed trying not to lose their pensions, migrant and local workers, either stranger or citizens, youngsters at their first job as well as people with remarkable experiences and skills. The taylorisation of tasks had made most of the jobs so de-skilled that what management required were minimum physical and cognitive capacity and commitment to work and obey. In sum, my profile concealed in the variety of people working every day at Amazon.

Workers had their specific reasons and trajectories leading them to apply for a job at Amazon, but the common reason was the quest of an income, of course, and this was a deep divide between me and my colleagues. At the same time, my precarious employment conditions as a junior researcher put me in a social position that intersected with that of many agency workers.

Not all my co-workers knew about my “real” identity as a researcher. Workers that I had met before starting the job, of course, knew about me and my project. Most of them were union members that I had met before deciding to carry on participant observations. People I came to know on the job for the first time were not always aware of the reasons of my presence there. The obvious reason for selecting the co-workers to which reveal the purpose of my stay at Amazon was to avoid that information about my research went out of control and reached management. The risk was for my cover to be blown and possibly to be fired and blacklisted. I therefore took some liberties with the rule of “informed consent”, convinced enough that there was no other practical way of continuing along this path, but not enough to eliminate any unease. Nevertheless, as stressed by Jounin, “non-compliance with informed consent is not specific to covert participant observation. Any investigative

relationship, whether by questionnaire, interview or observation, is a relatively unusual social relationship in which misunderstandings are more or less fostered by the investigator” (Jounin 2008, 261–62, my translation).

Another reason for coming out only with a few co-workers came to my mind weeks after the beginning of my job. During the first weeks I had got acquainted with some workers. For example, we used to spend breaks or to carpool together. This proximity urged me to reveal my undercover condition, in the name of a principle of loyalty that I felt necessary to respect. At the same time, I was worried about making them unintentional “accomplices” of my undercover research. All workers I met during my participant observation were not given the choice of whether to participate in the research. Thus, I made an arbitrary choice, and I decided to reveal the situation only to those among them that seemed to me more likely to understand the reasons of my research. Among those I excluded there were not only those I was afraid to disturb with my revelation, but also those I expected to react with indifference (Ehrenreich 2001; Chauvin and Jounin 2012). Therefore, only a couple of co-workers in each fieldwork was informed and discussed with me the reasons of my research (apart from those who already knew). I know that this choice was rather discretionary. Anyway, it was the best compromise I could find in that moment, conscious that this choice opened ethical questions and entailed methodological consequences.

What were these methodological consequences? Most of them were discussed in detail at the beginning of each chapter and part. Here I will present some general considerations. Going undercover allowed me to enter the black box of Amazon labour process, or at least this was the rationale. However, there was another unexpected discovery: there was no such a black box. Certainly, working for months in an organisation allowed me to have a concrete image of daily life inside Amazon warehouses. At the same time this image remained biased by the division of labour, namely the specific perspective I had “chosen”: that of a low skilled temporary worker, the last wheel of the wagon. Entering Amazon as a temporary worker entailed being socialised as such and accepting the role assigned by the rules of this social setting, which did not allow me to behave with the entitlement and the relative freedom of a researcher (Fournier 1996; Arborio and Fournier 2021). I had to obey to the hierarchical constraints of the workplace, and I could make questions that only could be expected by someone from my rank. This is an objective limit of participant observation, especially when partially covered, as there is not even the possibility to negotiate the privileges accorded to the authorised observer.

At the same time, it is also a proof of my socialisation to the workplace and my inclusion into the group of warehouse workers whether they knew or not my covert condition. Sometimes this was even made explicit by my colleagues as I reported in my fieldwork journal: During my stay at Orléans,

I was, as usually at the bar “Calumet”: “J. [one of my gate keepers and key informants] is there together with other *habitués* of the bar, and we discuss about politics. The discussion shifts on working on Amazon and J. says that he appreciates that I am trying to understand how things go on in reality, ‘inside’ the workplace. It was somehow relieving for me who always felt to remain an outsider and a sort of impostor”. This is something that the naïf ethnographer, especially the participant observant, yearns for: the explicit recognition of being “one of them”. The degree of inclusion and socialisation depends by the specific social setting in which the ethnographer acts, but an authentic inclusion can never be achieved. Even when the observer reaches an integration in the group, that will always be ambiguous, and the status and class barriers never overcome.

Limits of participant observation at work

Contrarily to what common sense, including eminent ethnographers³³⁵ suggests, undercover ethnography does not resolve the problem of authenticity, precisely because it excludes the possibility of conscious inclusion of the ethnographer within the group observed. Perhaps the observer will be able to analyse social relation with a naturalistic approach, but he will lack the conscious account of people about their condition.

The other side of the coin is that participants become locked into a single role and a single point of view. In many respects, the participant develops an attitude and objectives that run counter to those of the observer: the former looks for a comfortable place to fit in, people he can trust and stable (and therefore selective) relationships; the latter tends to multiply perspectives, takes an interest in diverse situations, looks for data that contradicts what he has already collected, and draws meaning from the compilation of discourse and practices (rather than claiming to select ‘authentic’ speech or conduct). Finally, the investigator is not always able to participate in the activities of the environment studied. Thus, participatory observations of work are generally carried out from subordinate positions, while positions requiring technically advanced knowledge and know-how are left aside. [...] While “masked” or “incognito” observation (for example, by being hired by a company using the usual procedures) may remove some of the difficulties associated with observation in the open, it creates others. Firstly, it risks confining the interviewer to the role of “participant” (Chauvin and Jounin 2012, 147–48, author’s translation).

As Damien Cartron notes about his research in a McDonald’s in the Paris region, “masked participant observation involves a very strong commitment to action, because the observer has to be recognised as ‘good’ in the place where he is observing, without being able to get out of the game, and at the same time carry out his study by taking care to observe and record as much information as possible.

³³⁵ For instance, referring to Roy’s participant observation in the workplace, Fournier states: “[...] To be direct, Roy’s observation needs to be fully participative” (Fournier 1996, 82, my translation).

Secondly, it makes it more difficult to unveil the enquiry, which would make it possible to establish with the players ‘situations of speech’ other than those arising from the fixed roles. Finally, from a personal point of view, by forcing the observer to a certain reserve, or even to lie, it subjects him even more strongly to the desire noted by Raymond Gold either to express his ‘true’ self, which is suffocating in the role adopted, or to ‘go native’ and ‘incorporate the role into his conceptions of self’ (Cartron 2003, 210, author’s translation)³³⁶. During my participant observation, for instance, I could not interview workers to which I had not revealed my situation, and I could not ask open questions to managers and team leaders. Similarly, as I was assigned to a specific job in Amazon’s rigid division of labour, my visibility was limited to the prescribed tasks. During my assignments, I tried to rotate on other tasks as much as possible, but this was an arbitrary decision of area managers, and few opportunities were given to workers to be trained on multiple jobs (see Part II). In sum participant observation does not mean total transparency on the social setting under study.

Open ethnography, on the contrary, and differently from conventional wisdom, allows a fully conscious, though always ambiguous, inclusion into the group. This happened when I could have long conversation with workers that knew I was conducting research about work in Amazon. At the same time, this inclusion comes at the price of rules that constrain, at different degrees, the researcher’s scope of manoeuvre. Telling Amazon that I was conducting research into their warehouses would have prevented me from inquiring on the labour process. Management would have in all likelihood refused to open the fieldwork to me or tried to put so many constraints that the fieldwork would have turned out to be poor of data.

The result was a mixed ethnography, both covert and uncovered. Moreover, I would add, the fact that management did not know about my research contributed to the construction of a relation of trust with those workers that knew about it.

Data collection in the workplace participant observation

Once obtained access to the fieldwork, the first problem of ethnographers, especially those in participant observation, is the collection of data while being part of the social setting under study. This problem becomes even more significative once the researcher goes undercover in a setting, like the workplace and especially a hyper-monitored and crowded workplace like Amazon.

Ethnographers are usually trained to bring with them paper and pencils and to find a safe space, usually the restroom, where they can draw their fieldwork notes as soon as possible, in order to not let them vanish from memory. In Amazon there are toilet in the workplace and access to them is free.

³³⁶ See also Fournier’s discussion on the limits and advantages of Roy’s undercover research compared to Burawoy’s uncovered approach in the same plant (Fournier 1996, 82–83).

The problem is that a worker cannot afford to go to the toilet more than twice every three, four hours. Moreover, during the break or at the end of the shift workers must pass through metal detector in order to get out the floor and reach the hall, the canteen or the dressing rooms. The metal detector can ring, and the workers is invited to stop and let security guards search him. It happened several times time to me to be stopped at the “check point”, sometimes because I had a metal belt buckle, sometimes I do not know why. In any case I did not want to be caught with a pencil and paper written with some bizarre notes about what happens at work. Moreover, bringing pencil on the floor was also illegal: the only personal item we were allowed to carry with us were our clothes and a transparent bottle of water. Any other object had good chances to be sold on Amazon catalogue and stored in the shelves, so we could be suspected of theft if caught with it. The recommendation was to avoid bringing the non-essential with us. I could take notes during the break, but it only lasted half an hour and I preferred spending it with colleagues rather than closed in a toilet writing down notes. After the late shift, especially in Italy, I used to go to drink something at the village with some co-workers. So, as soon as I got home, I used to take some time for writing down my journal, trying to put on paper any significant moment, from the speech gave by our manager at the briefing to the chats after work. My fieldwork notes do not simply account about work in Amazon warehouses, but also the everyday experiences lived after and before work. For instance, my notes include dozens of moments spent with workers outside the workplace.

At the same time my fieldwork data include the entire process of recruitment and training or the search for an accommodation. The goal of this part of ethnography was to give an account of the labour process in a broad sense, to include a large spectre of factors that shape the experience of Amazon workers. The result was around 200 pages of fieldwork notes that I coded and categorised on Zotero through tags denoting the argument of the notes.

1.2. Participant observation of transnational unionism

Another body of data is built on the study and participation in transnational union organising. As I discussed in the introduction and in Part III, the transnational struggles were not analysed as a separate level of industrial relations. Instead, it was examined through the prism of workplace and subsidiary-level industrial relations. Nevertheless, transnational fieldwork has been a pillar of my research and, although I did not grasp it separately, it shaped my understanding of industrial relations and union politics at the local level. Therefore, I am going to described and critically examine my approach.

Between November 2017 and October 2021, I took part to seven international meetings of the two main coalition of Amazon workers and unions: UNI and AWI. According to the difference

between their respective organisational structures and ideologies these two networks were approached differently. UNI network was composed and led mainly by national and international union officials. The meetings were quite formalised with a precise schedule and a certain division of work and roles. Relying on important economic resources, UNI could afford professional translators, and all the equipment necessary to help discussions and exchanges (headphones for translations, microphones, large spaces for meeting provided by hosting national and international unions, catering etc.). AWI meetings are much more informal and with a horizontal division of work among members. Meetings were attended by activist-workers and worker delegates, differently from UNI meetings.

I took part for the first time to a UNI meeting in Rome, in April 2018. Getting access and invitation was not difficult, as UNI policy was to make the meetings open. AWI meetings were less open, despite being more informal, and I was allowed to participate to them thanks to the invitation of French workers and officials of SUD union. From November 2017 to November 2021, I participated to seven meetings. Three were 3 meetings organised by UNI network and 4 by the AWI network (at the beginning within the broader Transnational Social Strike, TSS platform, and then separately). How many notes: around 50 pages of fieldwork notes.

I must add a last important methodological point. During my presence in the fieldwork, I was progressively integrated and started cooperating with both networks, especially AWI. At the beginning this was a form of exchange between researcher and actors which is quite typical of ethnographic research. It happened once that I took notes and wrote reports on UNI meetings and then I share it with UNI officials. However, at the end of the fieldwork this relationship evolved in explicit cooperation especially with the AWI network. I participated to the meetings first as a translator, then intervening and sharing some thoughts about organising strategies. At the same time, maintaining a certain separation between the participant's and the observer's roles was not a hard task. In this regard, AWI network is composed by Amazon workers who constitute the core of the organisation, and other activists and researchers like me are "supporters" but do not take the decisions. This allowed me to maintain a minimum distance also when, in this final part of the fieldwork, the boundary between the role of the scholar and that of the activist started blurring. Saying with a formula I shifted from participant observation to observant participation.

2. *Second corpus: interviews and key informants*

Interviews (N. 116, see Table 30) were conducted with different kinds of actors: unionised and non-unionised workers, union officers, public administrations officials and political officials; non-Amazon business representatives; Amazon managers or former managers. All interviews were recorded and lasted from 20 to 180 minutes. Many interviewees were met several times. Interviews

were semi-directive, i.e. the grids were prepared in advance, but they were flexible enough to adapt to the specific development of the interview (Beaud 1996). Interviews happened face-to-face, but some for practical reasons had to be carried on over the phone, and, especially during the pandemic, over Zoom. I transcribed the interviews and analysed the content using open and focused coding techniques to identify common themes that I expected to find in advance or emerged spontaneously during the interviews. I conducted as many interviews needed until I achieved theoretical saturation (i.e., no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerge during the analysis; see Corbin and Strauss 2008). Following an abductive approach (O’Mahoney and Vincent 2014; see also Burawoy 1998), data collection and interpretation rest on a continuous iteration between conceptual categories elaborated theoretically and the realities observed in the fieldwork.

Table 30 – List of interviews

INTERVIEWS	FRANCE	ITALY	INTERNATIONAL
NON-UNION MEMBER WORKERS	3	7	/
UNION MEMBER WORKERS	23	21	/
UNION OFFICIALS	13	14	12
CIVIL SERVANTS	2	2	/
POLITICIANS AND ADMINISTRATORS	2	4	/
BUSINESS ORGANISATION REPRESENTATIVES	2	2	/
MANAGEMENT/REPRESENTATIVES OF PARTNERS/COMPETITOR FIRMS	0	1	/
AMAZON MANAGEMENT/REPRESENTATIVES	3	5	2
TOTAL	48	53	15

To this corpus of interviews, I added a series of repeated informal conversations with 11 key informants (see Table 31), that provided me with detailed information and documents useful to reconstruct Amazon labour politics and industrial relations at different levels, from the workplace to the transnational level of corporate management and union coalitions.

Table 31 – Position of key informants in the different fieldwork levels

KEY INFORMANTS	France	Italy	International
Workers	X	X	X
Workers/Union Members	X	X	X
Union Officers	X	X	X
Business Organizations Representatives		X	
Partners/Competitor Firms and Management/Representatives		X	

Interviews with workers, unionised and non-unionised, focused on five main topics. First the organisation of work (typical day, jobs and tasks, instruments used, standards, hours worked, contacts with the hierarchy), second their employment and professional background (professional trajectory and before and inside Amazon, contract, wage). Third, workers reliance, relationship, and perception of unions (if members, if participation to union or other collective activities, appreciation of union activity). Fourth, workers relations with management (degree of consent to managerial ideology, participation to managerial cultural activities). Fifth, workers relations with their co-workers. In case of workers who were union delegates, I focused with special attention to their everyday work as delegates, their degree of involvement in the union, inside and outside Amazon, and discussed with them the strengths and shortcomings of union strategies, their relationship with workers, members and management. Workers were reached through personal contacts and snowball effect. Most of them have been interviewed after my participant observation and they were always informed about the goals and methods of my research.

Regarding interviews with unions, all the representative unions in Amazon France and Amazon Italy have been contacted and at least one representative per union has been interviewed. Local and National Union Officials were interviewed especially as *trait-d’union* between the workplace union section and the external union structure. I focused on the place that Amazon has in their total daily work planning, the involvement in the daily activity of unions in the workplace, the way they link the different levels of union organising at Amazon: workplace, firm-level, industry-level and transnational organising.

I also included in my interview list public administration officers, namely local labour inspectors and local elected politicians (namely mayors and local administrators). The goal of these interviews was to triangulate workers’ and unions’ sources with administrative sources. The goal was

also to understand how not only unions, but also local and public administration could intervene on Amazon economic strategies, labour process and industrial relations.

The transnational stage of union organising was also inquired through complementary interviews with key figures of the two main transnational networks: the UNI/Amazon Alliance (UNI) and Amazon Workers International (AWI). As we will see, these two networks had different morphologies, different forms of leadership, decisional processes, and repertoires of action. This also influenced the position of key figures inside the network. In the case of UNI key figures were union officials that came from national or international unions (such as the ITF or the ETUC) but were especially recruited into the UNI structures to accomplish the task of coordination of national unions members of the network. UNI had the organisational ideology and resources to work in this way. In the case of AWI, “rank-and-file” ideology and practice prevailed, so that there was not a centralised leadership and coordination was enforced directly by the union activists of the respective national unions. This means that AWI’s key figures coincide with local unionists, while in the case of UNI union officials operated exclusively at the international level. The interviews were semi-directive and focused on the background of the interviewee; role and task inside the transnational organising; organisational development; Ideological representation and strategical planning.

Accessing managerial sources at Amazon

There are few example of participant observation involving not only the workplace but also participant observation of managerial activities (e.g. Benquet 2015). The politics of my fieldwork did not allowed such a multi-sited participant observation. For example, it was not viable for me to apply for an HR position in a firm like Amazon. However, I tried to include managerial point of view in my research not only through the analysis of written documents, press and database (see below) but also through interviews. Once I finished my second round of undercover participant observation I tried to get in touch with the management of French and Italian’s subsidiaries in order to get permission to access to Amazon’s plant and interview operation management. For obvious reason I would not mention my previous participant observation. The main reason for soliciting official channels only after my undercover participant observation was that the direct and relatively unconstrained observation of work would then provide me the necessary knowledge of Amazon’s labour process to raise appropriate and relevant questions and better assess interviewees’ responses.

So, in November 2019 I finished my ethnography in ORY1, and I was ready to look for possible contacts and get in touch with French and Italian headquarter. I moved parallelly in both countries. In Italy, I first dug into my contacts among business associations people who promised to help me but never delivered. Their homologues in France were even less able or willing to bridge me and

Amazon representatives. As soon as I started to look for my way to management, the pandemic burst. The pandemic and labour unrest disrupted ordinary work processes. French warehouses were shutdown from mid-April to mid-May. Both Italian and French remained closed to public for months and the tensions took a long time to temperate. In Autumn the second pandemic wave came along, and I had to wait more before establishing contacts. At the beginning of 2021 I decided to get back on track and I searched for French and Italian top managers on LinkedIn. Diego Piacentini, a former right-hand man of Bezos answered to my message and put me in touch with European management, namely Stefano Perego, Vice President EU Customer Fulfillment and former General Manager of MXP5 site in Italy. However, this track never succeeded. I finally wrote an email to Alessandro Belleri, Director of Employee Relations Europe. I did not have its email address, but I tried with different combination of its name and surname initials. I never received a direct reply but during February 2021 I was reached by an Amazon France PR officer. She told me that she had received my request from Luxemburg, and she offered to organize a tour of the French Fulfillment Center LYS1 (located next to Châlons-sur-Saône, Burgundy). We agreed a date and the terms of the visit, and she asked me to write a formal letter explaining my research questions. So did I and sent the letter in which I was trying to be as vague as possible and stated I was ready to sign any confidentiality chart. Probably it was not enough. After sending the letter I lost contact with the PR officer. After ten days of silence, I wrote her again wondering whether there was any problem. She replied that after studying my case, management had decided to cancel my visit, “as the subjects of your questions are confidential”. I tried to insist but I received no more reply. In Italy fieldwork on management never opened because contacts suggested by Mr. Perego, namely the head of public relations at Amazon Italia, never replied to my request.

If management refused to actively contribute to my individual research, I was nevertheless able to partially fill the gap of their absence. Through snowball contacts I was able to interview a manager of an Italian FC and a manager assistant of HR in France. Another important source, given the mediatic, economic and political importance of Amazon was Amazon public discourse. There were good chances that managers interviewed by me reproduced Amazon public discourse, so what Amazon spokespersons said in public, either managers or PR officer, was probably what I would have heard in an interview. I think then that, in absence of more direct materials, I could use the abundance of declarations made by Amazon managers, spokespersons, whether they be interviews, speeches, reports and letters, or declaration in front of judges of parliamentary commissions. To have a broad perspective on the sector dynamics I also interviewed business actors in the e-commerce and logistics sector both at the local and the national level, both in Italy and France. One of them was a key informant with which I had several interviews. This did not allow to fill the gap of more

systematic interviews with Amazon managers but, triangulated with the whole set of sources, provides the research with a solid empirical base.

It was only when I considered my fieldwork closed that a new chance of expanding my observation on Amazon's labour process emerged, as I had the chance to participate as investigator to a couple of research projects on automation and algorithmic management. The research projects were promoted by the European Commission and involved several important Italian universities. Thanks to this institutional "capital" the request to access Amazon's plants was accepted. Thus, I visited two robotic FCs in Italy, one in February 2022 and one in January 2023. As expected, the visits were rigidly constrained by management, as well as the few interviews we, the research team, were able to carry on with workers. However, the material collected allowed the draft of reports (Cirillo et al. 2022; Uma, Pesole, and González Vázquez 2024) and papers (Cirillo et al. 2023), some of which are currently under review. Part of these materials have also contributed to "extend" observation of the labour (see Introduction) from the single workplace to the whole Amazon network.

3. *Third corpus: written sources*

Written sources cover a large variety of documents. Their specific use and rationality is detailed at the beginning of each chapter and section. Here I provide a general overview of the sources. It is important to notice here that the "multiplication" of sources concerning my case studies, including the interviews and written sources, follows the extensive logic of Burawoy's approach. For example, as stressed by Fournier, while Roy, following an *avant la lettre* grounded-theory approach: "[...] provides only one mention of the business press to describe Geer, Burawoy makes business information his main source for the whole of his third chapter entitled 'From Geer Company to Allied Corporation', devoted to characterising the two companies. This is supplemented by interviews with trade unions, management and information gathered from the personnel department" (Fournier 1996, 83). Likewise, I relied extensively on written sources to contextualise my ethnography first, in the wider economic model of the firm, and, second, in the historical trajectory of the plants.

Press sources and databases

One of the advantages of studying work in a firm such as Amazon is the abundance of written sources, especially press articles. At the same time the enormous mole of material is also a challenge, as it needs to be collected, selected, categorised and analysed. During my research I collected and coded around 2.150 documents in Zotero. Around three quarters are constituted by press articles concerning Amazon. Press articles have been collected in three different modalities. The first one is keyword search on Factiva press database, focusing especially on the main generic newspapers, both

international (*the New York Times, Financial Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Guardian, Le Monde Diplomatique, El País, FAZ, Tageszeitung, die Zeit*) and national (*Le Monde, Les Echos, Libération* and *Le Figaro* in France; *la Repubblica, Corriere della sera, Il Fatto Quotidiano* and *il Sole-24Ore* in Italy).

A second thrust of sources were the press contents spread by unions' Facebook (see below). A third body of materials came from "google alerts" an automatic news digest on Amazon that I received weekly in my inbox. Finally, combining written sources with search on Orbis and Statista databases I built a quantitative database on Amazon, its financial, labour and logistics structure.

Fieldwork written sources

The remaining written sources classified in Zotero are directly linked to my fieldwork activity.

A first body of written sources is composed by company-level collective agreements signed in Amazon's French AFL subsidiary since 2002 (for details, see par. 3.3.1). For what concerns Italy, I could access the text of the CCIA daft and the final signed version of the 2018 agreement, plus the agreement signed during the pandemic crisis.

Another important body of written sources is made up of internal documents and reports.

In France this body was far richer than in Italy, showing the larger application of union information rights. In fact, these reports are mainly elaborated by consultancy firms appointed by unions and by the works councils. The goal of the reports is to provide an analysis of the company's economic performance but also on employment, working and safety conditions. Here is a list:

Amazon.fr Logistique. *Situation économique et financière et politique sociale*, 2017, 160pp.

Amazon Montelimar MRS1. *Rapport d'expertise pour le CHSCT concernant les risques psychosociaux*, 2018, 217pp.

Amazon France Logistique ORY1-BVA1. *Analyse du projet de changement de convention collective*, 2019, 111pp.

Amazon France Logistique. *Examen de la politique sociale, les conditions de travail et l'emploi (2019)*, 2021, 170pp.

Amazon France Logistique. *Examen des orientations stratégiques*, 2021, 105pp.

Amazon France Logistique. *Examen de la politique sociale, les conditions de travail et l'emploi 2020*, 2021, 98pp.

Amazon France Logistique. *Examen des orientations stratégiques 2021-2024 et leurs conséquences*, 2022, 126pp.

Amazon France Logistique. *Examen de la situation économique et financière 2021 et perspectives*, 2022, 206pp.

These reports are elaborated by independent contractors, following specific methodologies and they are reliable. The main problem they have, as signalled in a notice in most of these reports, is the lack of full cooperation of management in providing consultants with all the data required.

Another important source of data for studying large firms in France is the annual Social Report (*Bilan Social*). In France, the *bilan social* is a tool set created by Law 77-769 of 12 July 1977, to provide a quantified view of the employment situation specific to a company or establishment. The

social balance sheet summarises information on employment, remuneration, working conditions, in particular health and safety, training, industrial relations, the number of posted workers and employees' living conditions. A unionist gave me access to the 2018 edition, but I could not collect any more. Similarly, I could access only a couple of minutes of CE/CHSCT meetings, which were not particularly useful.

In Italy, I could not benefit from such abundance of company-level internal written sources, for the simple reasons that they do not exist. Unions' information rights are not enough enforced, nor unions are particularly eager to share the few information they collect. As a result, I could only refer to a few data on the number of agency workers. Another anonymous source gave me access to a demographic survey of logistics workforce in the area of Castel San Giovanni (see par. 6.2.2.).

Social network sources

Another part of my data corpus is constituted by Facebook posts of unions, especially the French. All 5.610 posts of unions established in Amazon in France and Italy published between June 10th, 2014 and January 27th, 2021, have been collected and coded by date, by union, and by text content.

Since summer 2014 French unions at Amazon France Logistique (AFL) started opening Facebook accounts. First the CGT (June 2014), then the CAT (July 2015), the UNSA (December 2016), the CFDT (April 2017), and SUD (June 2017). Also, site-level pages were opened in parallel of the firm level pages. Concerning Italy, unions did not invest into social network communication. Only the union sections of CGIL and UIL in the site of FCO1 recently opened their respective Facebook pages to communicate with their members and the public (UIL in December 2019, CGIL in January 2020). Out 5.610 posts, only 249 are published by Italian Unions (177 for UIL, 73 for CGIL), and only from one site. Again, while comparing across different contexts and groups, in this case across national forms of unionisms, the morphology of the contexts can determine strong variations in the visible forms of union activities. French unions' written sources include much more collective agreements, social network activity, data about Amazon. The Italian unions show much less traces of their activity but grasping less evident forms of union activities is one of the challenges that ethnography can undertake. For example I could compensate the lack of written evidence with more direct observations.

Table 32 – List of written sources

<i>WRITTEN SOURCES</i>	<i>FRANCE</i>	<i>ITALY</i>	<i>INTERNATIONAL</i>	<i>DETAILS</i>
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Press	X	X	X	Articles (searched on FACTIVA and other sources)
Workers Personal Archives	X	X	X	Varia (contracts, leaflets, email, other documents)
Electronic Resources Database	X	X	X	Searches on ORBIS, XERFI, STATISTA
Firm Level or Site Level Collective Agreements	X (15)	X (3)		
Unions' Social Network Archive	X (4911)	X (249)		Unions Facebook Post (N=5160)
Public Administration Archives	X (5)	X (7)	X (1)	Public reports on market analysis, platform capitalism, logistics Sector (N=13)
Amazon Archives	X	X	X	Public Company data; Internal data (<i>Bilans sociaux</i> , Expertise Reports). Sources: Orbis database, unions archives, amazon website

Appendix 2. Results of professional elections at Amazon France

Logistique

Here are presented the complete results of professional elections in Amazon's French FCs (for a list of locations, see Table 14). Company-level professional elections in France take place every four years. All direct employees of a workplace have the right to vote. Voters are separated in different colleges, according to their socio-professional category: *ouvriers* (blue-collar workers), *employés* (white-collar employees)³³⁷, *agents de maîtrise* (foremen, team leaders), *ingénieurs* (engineers), *cadres* (managers). Each college has a given number of seats at the works council, according to the proportion of employees.

1. Professional elections, 2011

ORY1

College Ouvriers-Employés ORY1					
Registered	Voters	Valid	List	Votes score	Ratio
480	237	185	CGT-FO	96	52%
Date	Turnout		CFDT	89	48%
2011.06.29	49,38%				
College Agents de maîtrise [team leaders] ORY1					
Registered	Voters	Valid	List	Votes score	Ratio
19	10	6	NS	6	100%
Date	Turnover				
2011.07.12	52,63%				
College Ingénieurs-Cadres [managers] ORY1					
Registered	Voters	Valid	List	Votes score	Ratio
40	14	12	NS	12	100%
Date	Turnover				
2011.07.12	35,00%				

MRS1

College Employés-Techniciens MRS1
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³³⁷ The composition of each college is established at the workplace-level. In this regard, the vast majority of Amazon workers belong to the *ouvriers* and *employés* categories, although according to the workplace they can be assigned to one category, to another or the two merged. A similar discourse for mid- and high-skilled jobs which can be merged or separated across the *ingénieurs*, *agents de maîtrise*, and *cadres* colleges.

Registered	Voters	Valid	List	Votes score	Ratio
281	186	171	CGT	49	29%
Date	Participation		Autres	122	71%
2011.09.27	66,19%				
College Agents de maîtrise-Ingenieurs-Cadres MRS1					
Registered	Voters	Valid	List	Votes score	Ratio
29	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
2011.09.27					

College C SIEGE [Headquarter]					
Registered	Voters	Valid	List	Votes score	Ratio
192	63	63	NS	63	100%
Date	Turnout				
2011.10.12	32,81%				

2. *Professional elections, 2015*

ORY1

ORY1 (2015.09.08)						
	Registered	Voters	Turnout	List	Vote score	Ratio
Ouvriers et Employés	897	492	55%	SUD	174	35%
				CFDT	142	29%
				CGT	100	20%
				CGT-FO	54	11%
Agents de Maitrise	74	40	54%	CFDT	15	38%
				CGT-FO	14	35%

MRS1

MRS1 (2015.09.14)						
	Registered	Voters	Turnout	List	Vote score	Share
Ouvriers et Employés	311	211	68%	CFDT	125	59%
				CAT	51	24%
				CGT	24	11%

Agents de Maitrise	26	21	81%	CAT	16	76%
				CGT	3	14%
Ingenieurs et Cadres	42	34	81%	CFE-CGC	15	44%
				CAT	15	44%
				CGT	3	9%

LYSI

LYS1 (2015.11.10)						
	Registered	Voters	Turnout	List	Vote score	Share
Employés	273	186	68%	CGT	95	69%
				CFDT	42	31%
Ouvriers et Employés	254	201	79%	CGT	83	43%
				CFDT	64	33%
				CAT	45	23%
Agents de Maitrise	22	22	100%	CFE-CGC	21	95%
Ingenieurs et Cadres	30	23	77%	CFE-CGC	21	91%
				CFDT	2	9%

LILI

LIL1 (2015.10.16)						
	Registered	Voters	Turnout	List	Vote score	Share
Ouvriers et Employés	513	397	77%	CFDT	224	56%
				CGT	131	33%
				CGT	100	20%
Agents de Maitrise	37	27	73%	CFDT	23	85%

3. *Professional elections, 2019*

ORY1

College O-E ORY1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
1655	697	SOLIDAIRES	207	31%
Date	Turnout	CFDT	116	17%
2019.10.01	42,11%	UNSA	115	17%
		CAT	113	17%
		CGT	56	8%

	CFTC	50	8%
	CGT-FO	9	1%
	Exprimés	666	

College T-AM ORY1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
117	53	SOLIDAIRES	25	56%
Date	Turnout	CFE-CGC	15	33%
2019.10.01	45%	UNSA	5	11%
		Exprimés	45	

MRSI

College O-E MRS1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
671	379	CFDT	89	29%
Date	Turnout	CGT	102	34%
2019.10.01	56,48%	CAT	75	25%
		CFTC	32	11%
		CGT-FO	5	2%
		Exprimés	303	

College T-AM MRS1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
51	36	CAT	25	71%
Date	Turnout	CFDT	7	20%
2019.10.01	71%	CFTC	3	9%
		Exprimés	35	

College Cadres MRS1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share

32	24	CFE-CGC	15	75%
Date	Turnout	CFTC	5	25%
2019.10.01	75%	Exprimés	20	

LYS1

College O-E LYS1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
445	241	CGT	114	52%
Date	Turnout	CAT	54	25%
2019.10.01	54%	CFDT	52	24%
		Exprimés	220	

College T-AM LYS1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
47	35	CFE-CGC	22	69%
Date	Turnout	CGT	10	31%
2019.10.01	74%	Exprimés	32	

College Cadres LYS1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
32	26	CFE-CGC	26	100%
Date	Turnout	Exprimés	26	
2019.10.01	81%			

LIL1

College O-E LIL1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
1746	988	SOLIDAIRES	357	38%
Date	Turnout	USID	210	22%
2020.03.10	56,59%	CFDT	163	17%
		CGT	111	12%
		CGT-FO	91	10%
		CAT	9	1%

	Exprimés	941	
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College T-AM LIL1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
120	67	SOLIDAIRES	27	47%
Date	Turnout	CFE-CGC	20	34%
2020.03.10	56%	CFDT	5	9%
		CGT-FO	5	9%
		CGT	1	2%
		Exprimés	58	

BVA1

College O-E BVA1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
370	173	CFDT	86	57%
Date	Turnout	CGT	66	43%
2019.10.01	47%	Exprimés	152	

College T-AM BVA1				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
43	32	CFE-CGC	29	94%
Date	Turnout	CGT	2	6%
2019.10.01	74%	Exprimés	31	

ORY4

College O-E ORY4				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
773	343	UNSA	109	33%
Date	Turnout	CGT	103	31%
2020.11.03	44,37%	CAT	52	16%
		SOLIDAIRES	27	8%
		CFTC	31	9%
		CFDT	6	2%

		Exprimés	328	
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College AM ORY4				
Registered	Voters	List	Score	Share
160	58	UNSA	28	51%
Date	Turnout	CAT	18	33%
2020.11.03	36%	CFTC	9	16%
		Exprimés	55	

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Mobiliser le travail et démobiliser les travailleurs dans le capitalisme monopoliste contemporain

*Une étude comparative du procès de travail et des relations
professionnelles dans le réseau logistique d'Amazon*

Résumé

Cette thèse contribue à l'étude d'une des plus grandes entreprises contemporaines et peut-être la plus représentative du capitalisme contemporain : Amazon. L'objectif général de cette thèse est de placer le travail au cœur de l'analyse, en montrant sa centralité dans la production de la valeur, même dans ces corporations géantes que sont les « monopoles digitaux » (Pagano 2014; Durand 2020; 2022; Durand and Milberg 2020; Coveri, Cozza, and Guarascio 2022; Rikap 2022; 2023).

Avec son vaste réseau logistique et ses millions de salariés, Amazon est un cas d'étude privilégié pour comprendre (1) pourquoi ces monopoles, malgré leur caractère « digital », reposent sur des infrastructures physiques massives et comment ces infrastructures dépendent du travail, dans le cas d'Amazon du travail salarié, de millions de travailleuses et travailleurs, notamment dans les entrepôts logistiques ; (2) comment Amazon gère cette main d'œuvre pour faire en sorte de mobiliser l'effort de ses salariés et en même temps de démobiliser leurs résistances, mais surtout comment ces stratégies changent en parallèle avec l'évolution de sa stratégie de profit (3) comment le caractère « disruptif » des monopoles digitaux se déploie dans des contextes historiques et institutionnels différents des États-Unis, notamment pour ce qui concerne les modes de régulations du travail et leur impact sur les conditions de travail chez Amazon.

Travail et capital monopolistique : du consentement à la (de)mobilisation

S'il a été mis à l'écart dans la plupart du débat en économie politique et en sociologie, le problème de l'extraction de la valeur du travail n'est pas nouveau dans les analyses du capitalisme. La tentative la plus influente s'exprime dans les travaux de Michael Burawoy, sociologue neo-marxiste étasunien inspiré par les travaux d'Harry Braverman d'un côté et d'Antonio Gramsci de l'autre côté.

Michael Burawoy a écrit dans la seconde moitié des années 70s, dans une période de débats féconds mais aussi de forte contestation du système capitaliste à l'échelle nationale et internationale. Alors que la majorité des chercheurs et des intellectuels –libéraux, conservateurs ou de gauche – se posaient la question de la crise du capitalisme, Burawoy est allé contrecourant. Il a vu la stabilité du capitalisme précisément là où on pouvait s'attendre l'origine de sa crise : dans le procès de travail.

Le problème de la résistance ouvrière au commandement capitaliste était une des questions sur lesquelles les experts s'étaient penchés au moins depuis Taylor, le théoricien du *scientific management*, et ensuite à partir des années 1930, quand les premiers psychologues et sociologues du travail s'interrogeaient sur pourquoi les travailleurs ne travaillaient pas assez. À partir d'un point de vue différent, les penseurs révolutionnaires convergeaient, en théorisant la progressive prolétarianisation des masses et l'inéluctable renversement des rapports de classe au travail.

Burawoy a renversé la question. En observant le travail quotidien et les relations sociales dans une usine faisant partie d'une grande entreprise monopoliste, Burawoy a souligné la stabilité du capitalisme. En participant aux jeux de production, en participant à des compétitions dans le marché du travail interne à l'entreprises et en adhérant à un syndicat institutionnalisé, les ouvriers devenaient "complice" de leur propre exploitation dans le cadre d'un "régime politique de production". Dans ce régime, le capital était "hégémonique", un terme repris des Cahiers de prison de Gramsci, c'est-à-dire capable d'assurer le "consentement" des salariés à leur exploitation, sans recourir en première instance à la coercition. Le régime hégémonique dépassait le régime "despotique", celui-ci basé sur la coercition et qui avait dominé le capitalisme compétitif jusqu'aux années 30. Le couple conceptuel de consentement-coercition a gardé une grande influence dans les travaux postérieurs de la sociologie du travail, notamment la *labour process theory*, aux USA, mais aussi en Europe et dans le Sud Global. En arrière-fond la même question retentit : est-ce que les salariés consentent à leur exploitation ? Où est-ce qu'ils y sont plutôt forcés ?

Depuis la sortie de son livre, *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), le capitalisme américain et mondial s'est transformé en profondeur. Burawoy reconnaît d'ailleurs que son emphase sur la stabilité du capitalisme monopoliste a rapidement été démenti par la restructuration globale qui a eu lieu depuis les années 1970s.

Déjà au milieu des années 1980s, Burawoy théorisait un nouveau "despotisme hégémonique", un régime de production qui gardait la carcasse institutionnelle de compromis de classe fordiste – les syndicats, le *collective bargaining*, et tous les mécanismes de construction et reproduction du consentement – mais dans un contexte où les bases politico-matérielles du compromis social avaient été sapées par les néo-libéralisme : libre circulation des capitaux, retrait de l'État du gouvernement de l'économie, libre échange et compétition internationale, avec la réduction conséquente de la protection sociale.

Cependant, si le constat était correct, la réponse théorique de Burawoy, qui a consisté à élaborer des nouvelles typologies pour rendre compte des transformations du capitalisme et du procès de travail, n'a pas résolu le problème. Au contraire, elle a alimenté une inflation conceptuelle dans la sociologie du travail et dans la *labour process theory*, avec l'élaboration de « nouvelles » formes de contrôle : « despotic hegemony » (Sallaz 2004), « hegemonic relational control » (Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova 2022), « flexible despotism » (Wood 2020), « hegemonic flexibility » (Dörflinger, Pulignano, and Vallas 2021). Cette explosion conceptuelle fragmente le débat et rend finalement inaudible les apports empiriquement précieux de ces recherches. Il est aussi intéressant de remarquer que cette tendance s'est accentuée dans les cinq dernières années et qu'elle concerne souvent des secteurs tels que la logistique, y compris Amazon, ou plus généralement l'économie des services. Il

est aussi important de remarquer que la plupart des travaux sur les formes de contrôle et les régimes politiques tendent à insister plus qu'avant sur l'importance de la coercition et sur le déclin du consentement dans les rapports de classe au travail.

La question que ces travaux posent reste celle des conditions de la reproduction de l'exploitation. Et pourtant, en restant prisonnier dans la dichotomie consentement-coercition, deux notions très abstraites, ils sont ainsi obligés de les adapter à la réalité sociale, avec le résultat de produire des descriptions singulières du procès de travail.

Le travail de recherche ici présenté cherche à sortir de l'impasse en dépassant le couple conceptuel consentement-coercition comme matrice à partir de laquelle analyser les rapports de classe au travail. D'abord parce que la recherche sur les rapports domination, notamment les travaux de James Scott, ont montré l'ambiguïté des notions de consentement et d'hégémonie. Il montre que l'absence de conflit ouvert ne peut pas être réduite à une preuve du consentement des dominés aux rapports de domination. D'autre part, dans les travaux de Michael Burawoy, la même idée de coercition et de despotisme semble se réduire à l'usage de la force et à la contrainte physique. C'est pour cela qu'ils restent confinés dans des configurations « autres », telles que le capitalisme compétitif du XIX siècle, les formes de salarié bridé ou les sweat-shops contemporains. Ces configurations seraient en quelque sorte sous-développées, par rapport à la modernité fordiste avec ses mécanismes formalisés de régulation. En fait, les recherches de Scott ont montré l'existence de systèmes sophistiqués de domination aussi dans des contextes « en retard », alors que la sociologie du travail plus récente montre une réémergence des mécanismes de coercition précisément dans le capitalisme avancé.

Cette thèse cherche à prolonger cette réflexion. Pour avancer, je propose de remplacer le couple conceptuel de coercition et de consentement par celui de mobilisation et de démobilisation. Ce couple permet d'expliquer pourquoi dans les rapports de classe au travail – qui sont intrinsèquement conflictuels selon l'économie politique et la sociologie du travail –, peuvent coexister une conflictualité de fond avec une absence de conflit apparente.

D'un côté, les capitalistes ont un besoin permanent d'assurer l'extraction de la valeur ou, selon les économistes de différentes traditions, d'obtenir l'effort des travailleurs. En d'autres termes, ils cherchent à *mobiliser* le travail et pour faire cela ils recourent à des formes de contrôle, qui pourtant constituent toutes des formes de coercition. Précisément parce que le rapport salarial dans un mode de production capitaliste est inhéremment un rapport de subordination où la coercition joue en dernière instance un rôle décisif (see, Braverman 1974, 57; but also, Burawoy 1978, 259–60).

En même temps, les travailleurs résistent, parce que le travail n'est pas une marchandise comme les autres, mais qu'il doit être mobilisé. Ces résistances prennent des formes différentes qui dépendent

des différents contextes historiques et institutionnels. Elles peuvent être organisées collectivement dans (ou en dehors) des syndicats, ou « atomisés » et individuelles comme l'absentéisme ou le vol. Dans les termes de James Scott, elles font partie du *hidden transcript*, i.e. des stratégies de résistance que les dominés et les dominants, pour des raisons différentes, ont l'intérêt à faire passer inaperçues.

Face à ces turbulences constantes, le capital se donne une autre priorité, c'est-à-dire réprimer mais aussi prévenir ou inhiber des formes ouvertes de résistance qui puissent menacer son contrôle sur les processus de production. En d'autres termes, le capital se pose l'objectif, non pas d'organiser le consentement, qui est quelque chose d'insaisissable en termes théoriques, discutable du point de vue normatif et instable du point de vue social, mais plutôt de démobiliser la résistance, notamment celle plus structurée et collective. En résumant, d'un côté *mobiliser le travail* mais de l'autre *démobiliser les travailleurs*. Cela est un impératif du capital dans toutes les configurations. Cela nous permet d'éviter les contradictions et les réductionnismes qui feraient du despotisme un régime fondé sur la force, alors que dans la pratique chaque régime montre en fait des éléments de consentement ; et de l'hégémonie un régime fondé sur le consentement sauf ensuite devoir admettre que cette hégémonie repose en fait sur une structure de coercition.

La mobilisation et la démobilisation sont au contraire des éléments qui coexistent en théorie comme en pratique et qui n'essentialisent pas les régimes de production comme étant fondés soit sur l'un soit sur l'autre.

Amazon et le paradigme plat-fordiste

La crise du capitalisme d'après-guerre a marqué des changements profonds à l'échelle du système politique international, à celle des modèles nationaux de capitalisme et celle du procès de travail. Par conséquent, le débat autour du travail s'est aussi déplacé.

Les nouveaux paradigmes post-fordistes, que les sociologues Luc Boltanski et Ève Chiapello ont analysé critiquement et synthétisé sous la notion de « nouvel esprit du capitalisme », ont essayé de dépasser les résistances – ces auteurs parlent plutôt de « critiques » – en partie en les incorporant (notamment la « critique artiste », revendiquant la liberté, l'autonomie et l'authenticité contre les éléments bureaucratiques du capitalisme d'après-guerre) et en partie en les déplaçant (notamment la « critique sociale » fondée sur la solidarité, la sécurité et l'égalité).

Le nouveau « régime de justification » du capitalisme des années 1980s et 1990s inspirait les nouveaux paradigmes productifs du *lean management* et en même temps renvoyait les institutions de régulation collective du travail, en particulier les syndicats, à une époque révolue. Au fur et à mesure que le communisme s'effondrait, le capital se redéployait dans des chaînes globales de la valeur et les syndicats s'affaiblissaient, le travail s'est effacé dans le débat publique. La crise de 2008 et la

grande récession ont estompé cet enthousiasme mais le nouvel esprit du capitalisme a prolongé sa trajectoire avec le surgissement du capitalisme de plateforme et les *big techs*.

Amazon est un révélateur de ces transformations. Fondé en 1994 par un ancien cadre de *Wall Street* reconverti à l'économie digitale, Amazon est imbibée de la culture politique et économique du capitalisme américain des années 1990s et constitue le modèle de plateforme le plus abouti. En même temps, Amazon est porteuse d'un modèle économique et de relations salariales qui ne sont pas nécessairement inédites. Au contraire, le succès du modèle de business d'Amazon repose sur la revitalisation de certains éléments clés du « fordisme » : en premier lieu le monopole. Amazon est une entreprise qui, à travers son modèle de plateforme (*two-sided market*), internalise le marché dans l'organisation, créant ainsi un monopole. En second lieu, Amazon est un monopole digital, mais elle est aussi un monopole fondé sur un immense réseau logistique intégré verticalement, du site web jusqu'à la distribution. L'adoption de technologies digitales et d'algorithmes permet non seulement d'assurer une planification des flux (grâce aux énormes volumes traités, les aléas sont réduits et le *just-in time* peut être géré de manière planifiée) mais aussi de diriger aussi ces anneaux de la chaîne de distribution qui sont toujours formellement externalisés (le *last mile*). En troisième lieu, le fonctionnement du réseau logistique d'Amazon est assuré par des millions de salariés, la plupart desquelles travaillent dans une organisation de la production qui est devenue toujours taylorisée et fordisée, avec une forte standardisation et fragmentation des tâches, assuré par l'introduction de technologies digitales et plus récemment de l'automatisation.

Dans ce contexte d'hybridation du modèle plateforme et fordiste, que je désigne par le terme de « plat-fordisme », le problème qui se pose à Amazon est celui de mobiliser ses salariés tout en démobilisant l'action collective, alors que le procès de travail devient de plus en plus taylorisé (en parallèle avec la consolidation du monopole).

Comparer et faire jouer les échelles : protocole de recherche

Ce problème devient de plus en plus urgent quand Amazon se développe considérablement en Europe. Alors qu'aux USA, Amazon a réussi à croître et passer à la production de masse sans devoir faire face à l'organisation collective des travailleurs (seulement récemment des salariés ont réussi à s'organiser collectivement, d'abord dans un petit entrepôt à Chicago et ensuite dans un grand centre de distribution (FC) à New York), en Europe Amazon a dû faire face à une présence et à une pression syndicale plus forte, à des grèves et surtout à des institutions de régulation du travail plus contraignantes au premier abord. Cela montre l'impact que ces institutions peuvent avoir sur le mode de mobilisation et de démobilisation de la main d'œuvre.

En France et en Italie, en particulier, malgré sa politique antisyndicale radicale, Amazon a dû reconnaître le fait syndical et l'organisation de la représentation collective des salariés, jusqu'à signer des accords collectifs au niveau d'entreprises ou même de groupes. Aujourd'hui, ces sont les seuls pays où Amazon a signé des accords collectifs. Cela a été possible grâce aux institutions de régulation du travail et aux stratégies des syndicats qui leur ont permis d'agir dans des conditions plus favorables et plus protectrices pour les salariés. Face à cela, Amazon est contrainte de déroger à son antisyndicalisme constitutif et de s'adapter.

J'ai donc décidé d'étudier la politique du travail (*production politics*) chez Amazon dans ces deux pays. Il ne s'agit pas des plus grands marchés européens du e-commerce, qui sont l'Allemagne et le Royaume-Uni, mais Amazon y a investi beaucoup et il en est devenu l'acteur central.

En même temps, ces institutions de régulation du travail ne sont pas statiques (Streeck and Thelen 2005; Baccaro and Howell 2017). En premier lieu, elles varient d'un pays à l'autre. En deuxième lieu, elles varient dans le temps sous la pression des dynamiques économiques transnationales (Meardi 2012; 2018). C'est ainsi que la France et l'Italie ont suivi des trajectoires de libéralisation et d'érosion progressive de la régulation héritée du Fordisme et une augmentation des marges de manœuvre et de discrétion des employeurs (Baccaro and Howell 2017). En même temps, ces trajectoires communes ne conduisent pas à une homogénéisation.

Dans ce contexte de transformation, les marges de manœuvre pour Amazon sont aussi plus grandes que ce que la forme des institutions ne laisserait pas entrevoir. Les réformes qui se sont suivies en France et en Italie depuis les années 80 laissent de marges confortables à Amazon, en tant qu'employeur à même de garder le contrôle sur l'organisation du travail.

Amazon fait preuve d'une certaine capacité d'adaptation et de navigation face aux institutions, afin d'imposer son modèle au-dessus des régulations institutionnelles. Comme le montre la littérature sur les transferts des pratiques managériales des multinationales (Almond and Ferner 2006; Ferner, Quintanilla, and Sánchez-Runde 2006), notamment celles étasuniennes, ces entreprises sont capables de façonner leur environnement et d'exporter certaines de leurs pratiques clé dans des pays autres que ceux d'origines.

Nous verrons donc, face au défi des contraintes locales, quelles stratégies ad hoc Amazon adopte pour garder la cohérence de son modèle et imposer ses pratiques. Notamment, nous verrons quelles variations des stratégies Amazon adopte pour mobiliser l'effort de salariés et démobiliser l'action collective.

Pour ce faire, j'ai adopté une approche de recherche qui est à la fois comparative et multiniveau. L'étude de cas comparé permet de mettre un lumière les traits saillant d'un cas en le mettant en miroir avec les autres. C'est une méthode qui permet de monter en généralité et elles particulièrement

adaptée, en sociologie du travail et en économie politique, à comprendre les manifestations historiques et particulières des dynamiques plus générales du capitalisme et du changement institutionnel (e.g. Burawoy 1976; Locke and Thelen 1995).

La comparaison, bien entendu, n'est pas la seule manière de monter en généralité. *Manufacturing Consent* de Michael Burawoy, par exemple, est une simple étude de cas, même si l'intégration réussie entre le terrain et la théorie marxiste permet de généraliser les résultats, à la différence d'autres méthodes ethnographiques telles que la *grounded theory*. En même temps, l'étude de cas singulier de Michael Burawoy présente des angles morts. Par exemple, il est très difficile d'élargir certains résultats, notamment sur le rôle des syndicats et des relations professionnelles, du contexte américain à d'autres comme le contexte européen. C'est pour cela que Michael Burawoy a ensuite poursuivi ses recherches avec une approche plus comparative (Burawoy 1976; 1985; Burawoy and Lukács 1992).

Plus récemment encore, Michael Burawoy a développé sa réflexion méthodologique, avec la méthode de l'étude de cas élargie (Burawoy 1998; 2009). Il propose de consolider le mariage entre marxisme et ethnographie. À partir d'une ethnographie, il est possible de monter en généralité et de connecter le niveau micro au niveau macro : (1) en incluant l'observateur dans les participants ; (2) en prolongeant l'observation dans l'espace et dans le temps ; (3) en ouvrant l'analyse des situations aux forces externes structurelles.

J'utilise cette méthode pour étudier la mobilisation et la démobilisation dans le platfordisme. Ma recherche est basée sur une ethnographie comparée de la politique de production chez Amazon à partir d'une comparaison France-Italie.

Cette ethnographie se compose de quatre volets principaux (pour les détails voir Annexe 1):

- (4) Une observation participante du procès de travail dans les principaux entrepôts Amazon respectivement en France et en Italie. L'observation participante a une longue tradition en sciences sociales, et aussi en sociologie du travail, même si aujourd'hui elle n'est pas du tout la méthode la plus utilisée. Dans le secteur de la logistique, elle a pourtant connu une renaissance notamment en France avec des ethnographies de plusieurs mois dans des entrepôts logistiques (Gaborieau 2012; 2016; Benvegnù 2018; 2023; Tranchant 2018; 2019). Certains travaux ont aussi inclus une dimension comparative internationale, notamment ceux de Benvegnù. Pour ce qui concerne Amazon, l'enquête incognito a été mobilisée en premier lieu par des journalistes à partir des années 2010s (Malet 2013; Bloodworth 2018). Ensuite, face à la difficulté d'accès au terrain et l'intérêt d'observer le travail en pratique, l'observation participante a été reprise par les sociologues, en Allemagne (Vgontzas 2020; Goldmann 2023), aux USA (Cox 2022; Lotz 2022) et pour ce qui concerne la France et l'Italie par moi-

même (Massimo 2020a; 2020b). Il s'agit d'observation participantes et non pas de simples reportages journalistiques, donc elles ont un apport théoriquement et empiriquement fondé et elles sont basées sur des présences de plusieurs mois sur le lieu de travail. À l'heure actuelle, ma recherche est la seule à avoir une dimension comparative internationale. Elle comprend une observation participante en tant qu'intérimaire dans l'entrepôt de Orleans/ORY1 (juillet-août 2018 et octobre 2019) et dans l'entrepôt de Piacenza/MXP5 (mai-août 2019). Cette comparaison permet donc une première montée en généralité.

- (5) L'observation directe de la politique syndicale. Cette observation a été principalement conduite à travers des entretiens avec des salariés, des représentants des salariés (délégués), des permanents syndicaux et des experts associés aux syndicats. Ensuite des observations de réunions syndicales au niveau local, national et transnational ont complété les interviews. Cependant une partie de cette observation a été aussi participante, dans la mesure où j'ai supporté l'action de certains délégués à l'échelle locale et transnationale.
- (6) Enfin, l'action syndicale a été suivie aussi à travers de sources en lignes. Tous les syndicats en France et une partie de syndicats en Italie (pas les sections de MXP5 mais dans les autres sites) publient régulièrement sur des blogs ou sur des réseaux sociaux (Facebook notamment). Ces posts ont été utilisés comme source de matériaux écrits (tracts, accords syndicaux, rapports etc.) et comme complément aux interviews pour reconstituer les stratégies syndicales
- (7) Côté management, ces matériaux ont été complétés à travers des interviews avec des managers en poste ou des anciens managers en France, en Italie et au niveau européen.

J'ai aussi procédé aux élargissements théorisés par Michael Burawoy, pour compléter l'ethnographie.

- (1) En premier lieu, j'ai élargi l'étude dans l'espace et dans le temps. À travers l'analyse des entretiens avec des salariés et des managers plus anciens, j'ai pu reconstituer l'évolution du procès de travail et de la politique de production chez Amazon en France et en Italie à partir de l'ouverture de ses activités, respectivement en 2000 et en 2011. Cela a permis de repérer des moments de transition et des tournants dans le développement du procès de travail et ses conséquences sur la politique de production et les régimes de mobilisation et démobilitation de la main d'œuvre.

J'ai aussi élargi dans l'espace grâce à des interviews avec des salariés, syndicalistes et managers d'autres sites et à la consultation de sources écrites, notamment des rapports internes. Ainsi, j'ai pu reconstruire un cadre plus vaste qui va au-delà du simple entrepôt mais qui le situe dans une trajectoire plus vaste de l'entreprise dans chaque pays.

- (2) En deuxième lieu, j'ai élargi l'analyse au-delà de lieu de travail pour inclure d'abord la dynamique économique de l'entreprise et les transformations de son modèle de business (ou

stratégie de profit), à partir de sources secondaires, l'analyse des bilans publics de la chef-groupe Amazon.com Inc. et de l'exploitation des bases de données spécialisées, notamment Orbis. La trajectoire de développement d'Amazon se déploie sur 30 ans, pendant lesquels son modèle de business se construit et se transforme au cours de plusieurs phases. C'est la séquence de ces phases qui permet d'expliquer l'évolution du procès de travail et ses conséquences sur la politique de production, la mobilisation et la démobilisation. D'autre part, le modèle d'Amazon est confronté aux spécificités des modes de régulation qui varient à l'échelle locale et nationale, comme le montre l'analyse comparative. J'ai donc inclus la dimension plus vaste du mode de régulation et de l'économie politique en France et en Italie.

(3) Enfin, cette démarche se révèle féconde car la dimension comparative comprend aussi la nature transnationale d'Amazon, mais aussi des formes de l'action collective des salariés et des syndicats. En pratique, cela signifie pour ma recherche de toujours prendre en compte cet élément de deux manières : en premier lieu en étudiant le rapport entre management « corporate » et management « subsidiary », notamment quand l'entreprise doit adapter ses modèles organisationnels « américains » en Europe ; en deuxième lieu en montrant comment les syndicats et les salariés arrivent, ou non, à développer des connections entre leurs stratégies. Cela exige de regarder l'action locale au miroir des possibilités de connexions transnationales.

Plan de la thèse

Cette thèse est divisée en trois parties, qui composent chacune une articulation de mon argument, et qui correspondent aux trois questions évoquées au début de cette introduction

La première partie est consacrée au rapport entre les monopoles digitaux et les procès de travail, à partir du cas d'Amazon.

Dans le chapitre 1, je présente une histoire globale d'Amazon et de sa stratégie de profit. Si des ouvrages journalistiques importantes sont déjà parues au cours des deux dernières décennies (Stone 2013; 2021), elles sont restées sur un plan anecdotique et des fois célébratoire. En même temps, la recherche en sciences sociales, et aussi la littérature désormais assez importante sur Amazon, n'a pour le moment abordé l'histoire d'Amazon et de son modèle économique de manière exhaustive (pour une exception, à paraître, Thelen 2025). Ainsi, le chapitre situe la naissance et le développement du modèle Amazon dans le contexte post-fordiste caractérisée par l'émergence de nouveaux paradigmes finalisés à relancer l'accumulation capitaliste et sa légitimation. Amazon participe à ce contexte de façon originale. D'un côté, elle en hybridant les éléments clés de l'entreprise fordiste avec les nouveaux paradigmes de l'économie d'internet, du capitalisme de plateforme et des monopoles

digitaux, d'un point de vue plus organisationnels avec la *lean production*. Cependant, cette hybridation singulière révèle les continuités plus générales entre les paradigmes organisationnels « fordistes » et « post-fordistes ». D'ici l'introduction du terme plat-fordisme pour décrire le modèle Amazon mais aussi les continuités et les constantes à la base des différents cycles économiques.

Le chapitre 2, restreint la focal sur un aspect clé de la stratégie de profit Amazon : le procès de travail logistique. Dans une économie qui valorise de plus en plus le moment de la circulation la logistique est centrale. C'est aussi le cas d'Amazon qui a su imposer sa domination économiques grâce à une modèle logistique adapté à la vente en ligne. Mais ce modèle n'a pas été conçu comme un ensemble cohérent dès le début. Il a été le résultat d'essai et d'échec, ainsi que de conflits au sein de la direction de l'entreprise, qui a dû choisir en première lieu si avoir une infrastructure logistique propre ou l'externaliser comme il été préconisé par les chantres de la « shareholder value » ou les consultants (Lazonick 2008). Ensuite, si adopter un modèle analogue celui dominant de Walmart ou chercher d'autres possibilités. Cependant une fois trouvé une organisation adaptée, le modèle logistique Amazon a permis à l'entreprise de s'imposer dans le marché et dans l'ensemble de la chaîne de la valeur, en amorçant des mécanismes de complémentarité entre les différents segments de business d'Amazon, qui se sont renforcés réciproquement. A la base de ce succès cependant il y a aussi une organisation du travail qui a évolué rapidement. Une première phase où l'organisation du travail était incertaine et laissait une certaine marge d'autonomie aux salariés, a été suivie par une phase centrale caractérisée par une digitalisation et une taylorisation poussée du procès de travail, avec par conséquent une déqualification des métiers et une centralisation des savoirs et du commandement. Ensuite une troisième phase, plus récente a prolongé cette trajectoire avec un tournant marqué vers une automatisation qui loin de remplacer le travail l'a rendu encore plus intense. Ces deux premiers chapitres ont montré comment le travail, notamment le travail logistique a soutenu le développement monopolistique d'Amazon. Cependant restent ouvertes les deux autres questions ? Comment est-ce qu'on mobilise l'effort de salariés à l'intérieur de ce procès de travail ?

La partie II de cette thèse répond à cette question à partir de l'analyse ethnographique du travail et de l'observation participante au sein de deux entrepôts Amazon, en France et en Italie. Elle est introduite par une discussion des notions de régime de travail, du couple conceptuel de consentement/hégémonie et de ses limites et de la pertinence de la notion de mobilisation et démobilisation pour expliquer la *production politics* dans el capitalisme contemporain.

L'analyse ethnographique et historique du travail et des relations sociales qui se développent autour montre une discontinuité entre deux régies de mobilisation de la main d'œuvre dans, dans les deux pays. Les chapitres 2 et 4 se concentrent sur le premier régime, les chapitres 5 et 6 sur le deuxième, respectivement en France et en Italie.

Les chapitres 3 et 4 identifient un premier régime de travail « start-up » dans les deux pays même si avec des temporalités différentes. Plus ancienne en France, plus tardive mais avec un développement plus rapide en Italie. Dans ces régimes, l'organisation du travail est encore instable, les activités viennent de démarrer et elles doivent encore être testées. Les marchés nationaux sont encore précoces. Par conséquent les salariés sont peu nombreux, la division du travail relativement souple et les relations entre salariés et managers directes et fondées sur le lien personnel. L'effort des salariés est obtenu à travers la mobilisation active des travailleurs, assimilable au modèle de l'autonomie responsable défini par le sociologue Andrew Friedman. La comparaison entre le cas français et italien montre donc des fortes similarités, même si aussi des variations qui deviendront encore plus évidentes dans la phase successive.

Les chapitres 5 et 6 se concentrent sur le régime de travail suivant, défini comme « bureaucratie algorithmique ». Encore une fois, les temporalités sont différentes, et montrent une diversification de la croissance des marchés et son impact sur l'organisation du travail. Cependant ces deux phases sont issues des mêmes mécanismes dans les deux pays. La croissance du marché et le développement de la stratégie monopoliste d'Amazon changent le processus de travail, qui devient complètement taylorisé avec l'aide des nouvelles technologies digitales et, plus tard, de l'automatisation. Dans ce nouveau contexte, le régime politique de production n'est plus viable. L'autonomie des salariés est significativement réduite, le nombre des travailleurs augmente et le marché du travail interne devient segmenté entre permanent et intérimaires saisonniers. Les relations personnelles entre salariés et managers ne sont plus possibles. Le nouveau régime se base donc principalement non plus sur la mobilisation active (*responsible autonomy*) des salariés mais sur leur coercition à la fois technique, dans le processus de travail, et économique, dans le marché du travail interne et externe. C'est à partir de cette coercition que l'effort des salariés est obtenu. Pourtant ces formes de coercition sont aussi vouées à produire des frictions et des conflits. L'observation participante montre des formes de résistances dans les deux cas. Cependant les réactions managériales sont différentes, plus violentes en France plus tolérantes en Italie. Loin de considérer ces formes de répression comme un signe de force, j'interprète la plus forte répression managériale en France par une plus forte coercition technique et économique dans le cas italien, qui conforte l'autorité managériale et rend la pression de l'encadrement moins nécessaire. Cependant, cette divergence entre France et Italie évoque aussi la question des syndicats et des relations professionnelles, une question qui est prise en compte dans la partie suivante.

La partie III se compose de deux chapitres, le 7 et le 8 et répond à la question numéro trois, évoquée en tête de cette introduction : comment une entreprise transnationale et considérée comme parmi les plus « disruptives » du point de vue de la régulation sociale de l'économie interagit avec

les contextes institutionnels des pays où elle transplante ses opérations. Les évidences accumulées dans la partie précédente montrent des variations et semblent suggérer qu'Amazon n'agit pas comme un rouleau compresseur. Le cas des relations professionnelles et, plus en général de la régulation du travail sont particulièrement intéressantes. Le chapitre 7 et 8 comparent les relations professionnelles respectivement dans les deux phases, en se focalisant sur les modalités d'implantation d'Amazon en France en Italie mais aussi en se focalisant sur les stratégies syndicales. A travers l'approche des « ressources de pouvoir » l'analyse répond à la question : comment une entreprise antisyndicale comme Amazon fait face à des contextes institutionnels beaucoup plus contraignant, au moins sur papier, qu'aux États-Unis ? Comment les syndicats réagissent à l'arrivée de cette entreprise ? Si dans la première phase, Amazon arrive à garder les syndicats à distance, elle le fait en adoptant des stratégies différentes en fonctions des différentes ressources de pouvoir, qui sont plus favorables aux syndicats français qu'italiens : cooptation en France, exclusion en Italie. Pareillement, dans la phase de la bureaucratie algorithmique, la présence de syndicats indépendants ne peut plus être évitée : la mobilisation de l'effort de salariés ne dépend plus de leur engagement et de l'autonomie responsable, mais de la coercition et la priorité pour le management devient celle de démobiliser l'action collective que les syndicats, avec des ressources et de stratégies différentes, arrivent à construire. Le chapitre 8, prête donc une grande attention aux dispositifs et stratégies de démobilisation managériale, qui sont clé pour faire face à des crises aigues dans la *production politics*, notamment celle de la pandémie. En conclusion, Amazon émerge comme un acteur qui n'es pas du tout indifférent aux institutions. Au contraire il s'agit d'un acteur qui rencontre des résistances et des contraintes et qui, grâce à la dialectique entre son management central et local, fait face et s'adapte. Les syndicats aussi montrent une capacité d'adaptation à l'entreprise et cela produit des variations de production politics qui emergent seulement avec l'analyse comparée. Cependant l'étude montre aussi que ces variances ne mettent pas en question le fondement intrinsiquement coercitif du rapport salarial et qui se manifeste surtout dans la lutte desequilibrè pour le contrôle sur l'organisation du travail.

