

1 Opening the Box

AMAZON'S IMPACT ON WAREHOUSING, WORKERS, AND COMMUNITIES

On a hot September day in 2021, about seventy people gathered together in a public park in San Bernardino, California, for the first People's Council Tribunal on the region's warehouse industry (see figure 1.1). Signs posted around the panel of community speakers read: "Support Amazon Workers" and "End Warehouse Injuries." Three Latina women opened the event by describing the physical dangers they faced while working for low pay at Amazon warehouses. Yesenia Barrera, a former Amazon seasonal employee and organizer for the Warehouse Worker Resource Center (WWRC), described the stress that workers experience every day, forced to work at an unbearable pace to meet the company's high productivity quotas. Unable to keep up with the required work rate, she had been "fired by the algorithm." When she showed up to work the next day, her work badge no longer allowed her to enter the building. Another worker, a machine operator, testified about the difficulty she faced in using the bathroom while working at Amazon. Her machine never stopped, and she had to obtain permission from her supervisor to leave her workstation, but the supervisor wasn't always nearby. In response, she felt compelled to reduce her water intake, putting her at risk of dehydration. The third woman described how working full-time at Amazon left her physically exhausted and in pain, and injured her wrists.



Figure 1.1. People's Council Tribunal, September 7, 2021, San Bernardino, CA. Left to right: Brenda Huerto Soto (PC4EJ and WWRC), Veronica Alvarado (WWRC), Daisy Lopez (WWRC), and Yesenia Barrera (WWRC). Photo by Ellen Reese.

Responding to the workers' powerful testimonies, the mother of a former Amazon warehouse worker also testified, describing her daughter's experience. After her long work shifts, which often lasted ten hours or more, the daughter became frustrated because she was forced to push carts that were too heavy for her. She was only given a thirty-minute training session on her first day and was frequently assigned to new positions without adequate training, which made it difficult for her to work safely. Robert Martinez, a United Parcel Service employee and longtime member of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 63, also responded to the workers' testimonies. He described how he enjoyed better pay, more employee benefits and a better health-care plan, greater workplace safety,

and other rights and protections than the workers employed by Amazon, which he attributed to being covered by a union contract.

The People's Council Tribunal, which gave public voice to growing community concerns about the impacts of Amazon and warehousing in the region, preceded a public march, rally, and press conference that called for the passage of a state bill to better protect warehouse workers' health and safety, ability to use the restroom, and other rights in the context of high work quotas. These events drew together a broad array of local activists, including representatives from unions and other labor organizations; student groups; and immigrant rights, environmental justice (EJ), faith-based, and other community organizations.¹

Brenda Huerta Soto, from the People's Collective for Environmental Justice (PC4EJ), also spoke during the morning event. Her testimony drew attention to the environmental health issues associated with the warehousing and logistics industries in the region, which are engaged in storage, order management and fulfillment, and distribution to customers and retail stores. Calling for an end to the human and community exploitation by these industries, she described how their rapid expansion had worsened the region's very high levels of air pollution, especially in neighborhoods located close to warehouses.² Soto's call to action echoed concerns that have been raised by many other Inland Southern California residents over the years. The air quality in Inland Southern California communities located closest to the region's freeways and warehouse complexes has become so bad that journalists, physicians, and activists alike commonly refer to them as "diesel death zones." As one journalist described it, the air smells like "a lit cigarette dropped into a bottle of orange Fanta."³ Inland Southern California resident Angela Balderas told that same reporter that she had sought hospital care more than five times in 2019 for chest tightness and difficulty breathing: "I feel drained, my chest feels tight, I have difficulty breathing, and everything takes more energy."⁴

These activists' claims reflect long-standing concerns that the effects of warehousing and logistics on workers and communities are unsustainable in Inland Southern California, a region that includes both Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. The increased number of unionized warehousing and logistics jobs and overwhelming presence of warehouses, distribution centers (DCs),⁵ and delivery stations in the region represent

multiple and overlapping threats to workers' rights, labor standards, the public's health, natural landscapes, and social and environmental justice. Demands by community, EJ, and labor activists alike have increased to include curtailing the warehouse industry's further expansion altogether in the region. The WWRC, PC4EJ, and Teamsters are part of a broader coalition of community organizations established in 2019 in opposition to the expansion of the San Bernardino International Airport to accommodate Amazon's newly developed air cargo facility. The San Bernardino Airport Communities (SBAC) and its member organizations have since organized numerous actions in support of their demands for "clean air and good jobs." For example, they have engaged in community picketing that slowed down Amazon deliveries at a major warehouse on Cyber Monday in 2019, urged local policy makers to establish a community benefits agreement for the air cargo facility and to enact a temporary moratorium on new warehouse developments, conducted a lively protest inside a warehouse developer's office, and even filed an environmental lawsuit against the construction of the air cargo facility to say "enough" to unabated warehouse development in the region.⁶

Within a year of SBAC's formation, Inland Southern California had become the national and global epicenter of the growth of Amazon's warehouse and delivery services, and the COVID-19 pandemic had arrived, forcing millions of people to stay at home as much as possible to protect their own and others' health. The popularity of Amazon's electronic shopping platform, already rising rapidly, skyrocketed. By 2022, Amazon claimed to have about 300 million customers worldwide.⁷ The far-reaching impacts on workers and communities motivated labor, environmental, social justice, and community organizations, like those in San Bernardino, to organize and confront Amazon. Among many other demands, they have called upon Amazon to engage in stronger climate action; respect workers' right to organize; and implement better COVID-19 protections for workers, more than 20,000 of whom had tested positive for the disease by the end of 2021.⁸

The impacts of Amazon's rapid growth during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) in Inland Southern California, as elsewhere in the nation and world, were highly unequal. In contrast to the millions of Americans who lost their jobs amid the worst economic crisis

since the Great Depression, Amazon's founder and longtime chief executive officer (CEO), Jeff Bezos, remained among the top two richest men on earth and became even wealthier.⁹ Like other "tech titans," Bezos profited enormously from the pandemic. By August 2020, Bezos's net worth had reached \$202 billion—greater than McDonald's corporation, Exxon Mobil corporation, and Nike Inc. In a single day in July 2020, Bezos earned a record \$13 billion. His ex-wife, Mackenzie Bezos, by then the thirteenth richest person and fourth richest woman in the world, gained \$4.6 billion that same day, a consequence of her 25 percent interest in Amazon stock.¹⁰ At the time, Amazon's stock had increased by 86 percent since the previous January, driving the corporation's value up \$87 billion.¹¹ Bezos's wealth has enabled him to purchase a spectacular series of luxurious homes located across the United States, worth an estimated \$500 million; invest in Blue Origin, his private space travel company; and even travel to the moon and back in 2021.¹² Although Bezos' fortunes later declined, he remained the second richest man on earth, with a net worth of \$135.5 billion in July 2022.¹³

The enormous wealth of Bezos and Amazon's major investors contrasts sharply with the earnings of Amazon warehouse employees. Despite Amazon's relatively high entry-level wage for a warehouse associate in the United States (\$15 per hour on average), the corporation's median annual salary is \$32,000 for a worker employed full-time and year-round.¹⁴ This salary is slightly more than half the median household income in the city of San Bernardino, California, in 2019 (\$48,062), where Amazon's full-time salary would cover the living wage only for a single worker with no children.¹⁵ Although Amazon was among the US companies that temporarily offered workers hazard pay, an extra \$2 per hour, to compensate them for the elevated risk of contracting the virus at work, the corporation retracted this additional pay within months, despite rising COVID-19 cases, as soon as it had met its labor recruitment goals.¹⁶

Median annual household incomes throughout Southern California—ranging from \$45,834 in San Bernardino County to \$95,934 in Orange County—are less than 1 percent of Bezos' \$13.4 million hourly income.¹⁷ These disparities belie his purported loyalty to consumers, represented by an empty "customer's" chair at every Amazon meeting.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, prevailing analyses of Amazon's growth and Bezos's business success

emphasize the entrepreneur's innovative ideas and cunning and ruthlessness toward the company's competitors and workers.¹⁹ This prior research is insightful, yet it neglects the political forces and systemic inequalities that contribute to Bezos's wealth and Amazon's status as the "most valuable" corporation in the world.²⁰

In contrast to such accounts, we argue that the rise of Amazon, and of warehousing more generally, is based on the unsustainable exploitation of, or taking advantage of, workers' labor and communities' resources.²¹ This exploitation generally depends upon systemic inequalities, namely neoliberal global capitalism and multiple, and often intersecting, social, spatial, and workplace inequalities. Throughout this book, we document how Amazon's rapid rise, as well as the concentrated growth of warehousing and logistics more generally in the region, has negatively affected workers, their families and communities, and the natural environment, and how workers and their communities are fighting back against these harms. We build this argument mainly through a community case study of these dynamics in Inland Southern California, but also consider similar trends underway across the United States and in other nations. Inland Southern California is home to one of the world's largest logistics clusters, or geographic concentration of logistics-related companies and activities, where Amazon has become the largest private sector employer.²² We argue that the region therefore provides a particularly compelling example of the socioeconomic and environmental threats associated with the largely unfettered growth of warehousing, as well as the challenges and prospects for grassroots mobilization and coalition building to counteract them.

Although Amazon and Inland Southern California have distinct features, many of the trends we highlight—such as rising levels of wealth and income inequality, increased corporate welfare, e-commerce and workplace automation, the use of subcontracted and temporary labor, the exploitation and hypersurveillance of workers and communities of color, and rising levels of air pollution—are part of national and global trends found in the contemporary economy. Amazon has played a major role in actively promoting many of these trends, combining them with "one-click instant consumerism." Amazon has played such a leading and role in the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world that our era has arguably become one of "Amazon capitalism."²³ As the second US

company to employ more than a million people worldwide, and whose facilities and workforces are continuing to grow and spread, Amazon's impacts on workers and communities have become both increasingly apparent and controversial.²⁴ While many people worldwide continue to idolize Amazon and Bezos, they have also become well-known icons of corporate greed.

This book critically examines the consequences of Amazon's dominance of warehousing from the perspective of warehouse workers and their communities, and why and how workers and other community activists have confronted this corporate giant. While we pay particular attention to Amazon's impacts in Inland Southern California, we do so while maintaining an eye on similar trends in the United States and other nations. How does the growth of Amazon and the warehouse industry and its concentration in certain regions depend upon and help to reproduce social and regional inequalities by constraining employment, educational, and other opportunities for local residents? How has the rise and concentration of warehousing in low-income communities of color contributed to air pollution and related environmental and public health disparities across communities? How do warehouse workers experience their working conditions, and how do their work experiences vary across race, ethnicity, nativity, gender, and age? What role has community and labor organizing played, or could it play, in transforming Amazon and the warehousing industry? Our book responds to these questions by combining information from ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews with Amazon warehouse workers, and other sources.

This chapter introduces our theoretical perspective and the key concepts and ideas that guide our analysis of workplace inequalities in Amazon and the warehouse industry, and why Amazon warehouses have become so concentrated in certain regions, such as Inland Southern California, more than others. We then explain our data and methodology and conclude with an overview of the remainder of the book.

A CRITICAL LENS ON WAREHOUSING AND LOGISTICS

Logistics originated with ancient systems designed to supply the Roman legions. During the Middle Ages, the concept was adapted to characterize

economic supply systems that included roads, warehouses, forts and castles, and storage depots. Developments in transportation and communications to facilitate waging the world wars in the twentieth century catalyzed the creation of modern logistics, which integrate and coordinate purchasing, manufacturing, transportation, warehousing, returns, and other activities to maximize profits across the entire supply chain, including purchasing, operations, resource management, and information workflow as well as logistics.²⁵ These systems include multiple modes of transport—for example, ships, trains, planes, and trucks—warehousing and storage, and distribution. While early research on logistics focused on economic and technological developments and applications, more recent, critical scholarship illuminates the social and political implications of logistics growth.²⁶

Our critical lens challenges conventional reductions of logistics to an apolitical understanding of cargo transport and supply chain management by illuminating the social and embodied consequences of this essentially “spatial and material practice.”²⁷ More specifically, we draw upon two lines of critical theory and analysis—intersectionality and human geography—to explore the social and spatial injustices inherent in Inland Southern California’s warehousing industry and related transportation services. Intersectionality is a concept originally developed by Black feminist scholars to account for the ways that systemic inequalities—including those based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and immigrant status, among others—intersect and interact to generate distinct effects on individuals and groups, as well as resistance.²⁸ Building on these insights, we join critical human geographers who are beginning to theorize and explore how multiple, and often intersecting, social inequalities operate in and through spaces and places to produce location-based inequalities.²⁹

We further review the central ideas informing our analysis of how Amazon and warehousing in Inland Southern California impacts workers and communities. First we explain central themes associated with intersectional feminist scholarship that can help us to understand workplace inequalities in Amazon and the broader warehouse industry. Our intersectional analysis builds upon previous research that describes and explains the dependence of longshore work and supply chains, respectively, on processes of extraction based on race, gender, and sexuality to include differences in individual and social identity—for example, ethnicity, socio-

economic class, and nativity—that are particularly germane to the Inland Southern California logistics cluster.³⁰ Next we explore elements of critical geography and show how they can account for “spatial injustices” related to the uneven spread of warehouses across neighborhoods and regions, especially their concentration in low-income communities of color, a dynamic that is especially evident in Inland Southern California.³¹

Workplace Inequalities at Amazon and throughout the Warehouse Industry

As Susila Gurusami persuasively argues, contemporary capitalism is intersectional because it “exploits race, gender, and other modes of identity to stratify labor and reproduce forms of capital from particular bodies.”³² In regional labor markets, workers are treated and paid unequally by their employers and managers based on their social identities as well as their employment contracts, occupations, industries, and job titles. This situation yields a highly patterned “hyper-exploitation” of multiply marginalized workers, such as immigrant Latinas, who tend to earn less than men, white women, *and* native-born Latinas.³³ Inequalities in educational attainment and work experience contribute to, but do not fully explain, such patterns. Rather, racism, patriarchy, and other inequalities continue to combine in complex ways to shape labor market outcomes through various mechanisms, including unequal capitalist investments across regions and neighborhoods, employer discrimination, residential segregation, unequal access to education and training, occupational and job-level segregation, personal networks, and wage-setting processes.³⁴

Applying an intersectional feminist perspective to the case of Amazon provides clarity on the effects of racial, ethnic, and gender inequality within the corporation. Although women and people of color have been making slight gains at the top of Amazon in recent years, they remain grossly underrepresented. Of the twenty-eight members of Amazon’s top executive “S-team” in 2021, only four were women (14 percent), up from one out of eighteen in 2019 (4 percent).³⁵ The “S-team” is simply the very top of Amazon’s leadership structure. Men made up 77.9 percent of its senior leaders globally and 77.2 percent of senior leaders in the United States in 2020. And among senior leaders in the United States, 70.7 percent were

white, 20 percent were Asian, 3.9 percent were Latino, 3.8 percent were Black, 1.4 percent were multiracial, and 0.2 percent were Native American. Amazon's managers were more diverse than its senior leaders, but most (56.4 percent) were white, while another 19.5 percent were Asian, compared to 10.4 percent who were Black and 9.5 percent who were Latino.

At the bottom of Amazon's workforce, women made up 48.5 percent of tier 1–3 “field and customer support” staff worldwide and 50.5 percent of those workers in the United States in 2020. In the United States, fully 71.5 of these lower-level workers at that time were workers of color: 31.0 percent were Black, 26.4 percent were Latino, 8.7 percent were Asian, 3.7 percent were multiracial, and 1.7 percent were Native American.³⁶ Amazon's most recent report to the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission provides a bit more detail on these lower-level workers, showing that as of 2018, workers of color made up 68 percent of “laborers and helpers,” which include but go beyond blue-collar warehouse workers. Of these, 33 percent were Black and another 22 percent were Latino. In contrast, 71.4 percent of top executives and senior-level employees that year were white.³⁷

In Southern California, including Riverside and San Bernardino Counties as well as Los Angeles and Orange Counties, data from 2017 indicate that about 54 percent of Amazon warehouse workers were Latino, 34 percent were white, 7 percent were Black, 4 percent were Asian American, and 1 percent were of other races. About 84 percent of these line workers lacked college degrees. While about 44 percent of these workers were under the age of 30, another 44 percent were between the ages of 30 and 54, and the remaining 12 percent were age 55 or older. With respect to gender, 59 percent were men, and 41 percent were women.³⁸ The proportion of women employed by Amazon appears to be growing and varies across departments and facilities. According to some Amazon warehouse workers in the region, women appear to make up about half or more of the warehouse workers they observe at work.

The inequalities observed at Amazon, where workers of color are concentrated in the lowest-paid positions, can also be found in warehouses throughout the United States. Nationally, by 2019 most blue-collar and line warehouse workers were men, but women constituted about 28 percent of those employed in traditional warehouses and 44 percent of those