

Work struggles at Amazon in Germany and Beyond.

The role of solidarity groups.

Luciole Sauviat

I. Introduction

2014 was an award year. Many of you will have heard that the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) gave Jeff Bezos the Award of worst boss in the world. And the world bank gave the best ranking to Germany for its logistics performance (World Bank 2014). Two awards that fit very well together, because Jeff Bezos is Amazon boss and Amazon can be considered as a logistic firm. Moreover, Amazons second biggest market after the USA is Germany and there, Amazon workers are leading a long and innovative struggle against the work regime of the Amazon distribution centres.

I am going to tell the story of these “new” industrial workers, who not only organise themselves for better working conditions in Amazon distribution centres, but also to end precarious jobs, and organise beyond national borders. Drawing on the particularities of the field, at the beginning of my journey, I was asking why informal solidarity groups are active in the struggles although the union movement is strongly involved? Do big unions need these informal groups? Do workers need them? Do informal groups and unions act at different levels of leverage?

These questions were assessed through participatory observations at the meetings of the solidarity group and interviews with Amazon workers, who members of the solidarity group, union officers in charge of Amazon and members of the solidarity group.

In this paper I first present some particularities of E-commerce and the so called logistic sector, in order to understand how such firms work and why it is so important to take a look at this sector. I then highlight some particularities of Amazon’s business model and its work practices. A third chapter recapitulates the (union) struggle against these work practices in Germany with a focus on the Brieselang site and sums up the solidarity of Polish workers. At the centre of this paper stays the triangular relationship between workers, the union and the solidarity group and I recount the activities of the Berlin Amazon workers solidarity group.

Finally, I try to explain, why the solidarity group is important for some workers and how far it takes over a role a (corporatist) union can not take and the other way round. Moreover, I will

show how the question of the existence of solidarity groups draws us once again to the issue of union revitalisation and democracy.

II. E-commerce and logistic centres

E-commerce revolutionised the way goods come to the customers since they don't have any more to go to a retailer. From a supply chain management point of view, it had the advantage to remove links of the supply chain, because customers take over some of the services firms used to be in charge of (Lieber; Syverson 2011: 12). For example Amazon, is known as book retailer but it also has a self publishing service. Book reviews are also provided by the customers instead of literature experts. It also happens that E-commerce MNCs take over some of the supply chain links. For instance, in the course of its growth, Amazon opened its own printing and publishing houses. Moreover, with E-commerce the issue of space becomes secondary. The E-commerce firm can make use of drop-shipping (goods are shipped directly from the wholesaler to the customer). The store is then only virtual (Lieber; Syverson 2011: 12). An other example of the use of virtual space: Amazon advertises goods from other retailers on its web space. So it gives the impression that Amazon has for instance all books available on the market and it does not need to pay for the inventory of these goods (Wohlsen 2014).

The distribution centres Amazons, huge storerooms, are sometimes called logistic centres. Amazon itself call them “fulfilment centres”. In this text, I call them distribution factories to emphasise following points: if mass production is the main feature of the factory system, then, similarly, mass distribution is the main feature of “logistic centres”. In both cases, the use of machinery, division of labour and standardization are central features.

There are different ways to understand logistics. In its trivial meaning people understand logistics as the distribution function of goods (Bonacich and Hardie in Allen 2015). The other way is to see it as a method: “the management of the supply chain, including the relations between retailers, their producers/suppliers, and their carrier/transportation providers.” (Bonacich and Hardie in Allen 2015). Nowadays others see that it is not simply a method but rather an industrial sector organising the management of order, warehousing and transportation (Bologna 2014).

However as Bologna argues there are very differing logistic firms. Some rely on E-business and new managements systems other rely more on the over-exploitation of the work force:

“Logistics can never be understood from outside the warehouse, only by coming inside and looking at the techniques employed, the equipment and the organization of work does one understand if we find ourselves faced with something that belongs to the *new economy*, in the real sense of the term, or that resembles the *sweatshops* of Bangladesh”. (Bologna 2014)

While Amazon as corporation is rather an online-retailer, as previously mentioned, the distribution factories of Amazon are often considered as Logistic centres (Leisegang 2014).

The so called logistic revolution which took place in the late 70s of the last century has reorganized the supply chain, marks the ascension of retail giants and some even see the distribution centres as being in the centre of the production and consumption networks of our time (Allen 2015). Cowen, who wrote a corner stone book about the logistic business and its intersection with violence (Cowen 2014a), thinks that “the supply chain supersedes the factory” and “in a sense the vast logistical network is today factory” (Cowen 2014).

In this sense, the logistic sector can be also be understood from an organising point of view. In western Europe and the USA, after the demobilising impacts of changes in the manufacturing sector and the re-localisation of factories in regions where production costs are cheaper, logistic firms are a new space where industrial workers are concentrated. Their working conditions have not been negotiated after decades of struggles as it was the case in the “old” manufacturing sector and it is the space where new work struggles develop (Allen 2015).

Additionally, workers are at the centre of the production and distribution networks and have therefore a tremendous leverage. The supply chain is extremely vulnerable to disruption (Cowen 2014b) and just in time production and delivery add to the power of disruption (Allen 2015). Workers are conscious of the international links of their work activities, since they deal everyday with the international circulation of the merchandises. They also know that, not only new plants can open in other countries to deliver the same markets but also that, a company like Amazon as no big logistical issue to send orders abroad and deliver the good via planes (or drones in the future). So logistic is truly the space where local and international struggles can occur.

The following summary of Amazon’s business model and its work practices will help to understand the current situation in the distribution factories.

III. Amazon business model and work practices.

III.a business model

Amazon is the most successful internet retailer world wide. It's now the most feared competitor of Wall Mart and the like (MWPVL 2015) and does not need to fear the competition of internet giants like eBay since they can not overnight replicate the gigantic high tech (assembly) lines of its distribution factories. Because it is so successful, other firms in the sector might want to follow its lead and organise business and work similarly.

Amazon was founded in 1994 as an online book retailer and is now in his own terms a “ company where people can find and discover anything they want to buy online” from books, over groceries to Automotive & Industrial. Most of its facility locations (corporate office, distribution centres, customers services centres (read call centres)) are in the US. Its primary international locations are situated in China, Costa Rica, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom (Amazon 2015). Currently it operates 151 distribution factories over the world (MWPVL 2015) and has according to the company 97.000 full and part-time employees (Amazon 2015).

One of Jeff Bezos Motto is „get big fast“. Amazon fulfilled this objective through the concentration on growth instead of immediate profits. So Amazon (re)invested in for instance the development of websites and IT for timely strategies in the supply chain before it could pay subsistent shares (Leisegang 2014: 46-47). Amazon follows additionally a cheap(est) price policy in order to be sure to be the book branch leader. Besides the permanent cheap prices, Amazon takes the role of publishers in order to reduce the costs at this level (Leisegang 2014: 76-81). Actually, it got big very fast, and very big: it started with two distribution factories in 1997 in the US and was opening 5 further centres two years later and its first one in Germany. It reached 89 Billion dollars of sale revenues in 2014 and is expected to reach 110 Billions in sales by 2015 (MWPVL 2015). Moreover it achieved over 20 percent year-over-year net sales revenue growth, with peaks of 40 % growth from 2006-2014 (Statistica 2015).

Customers satisfaction is central to Amazon business philosophy. Moreover as a pioneer internet retailer, Amazon understood that it has to compensate the fact that customers can't touch the

product before it is delivered. That is why it introduced a transparent return process¹, where customers can resend goods for free. (Lieber; Syverson 2011)

Permanent innovations are of course an important part for a company that fundamentally changed the retailing world. Besides, the development and patenting of the “one click” shopping (the technique allowing customers to buy goods with a single mouse click in using registered address and credit card number), Amazon developed products like the e-book-reader kindle (Leisegang 2014: 88). It also offers web services, like the Govcloud (web storage) but also companies can pay Amazon to manage their servers (Leisegang 2014: 103, Whohlsen 2014). An other innovation that will have an impact on employment and working conditions is the acquisition of Kiva systems, a firm specialised on automated distribution. Amazon produces now robots which should be able take over the tasks of the so called pickers (workers picking, scanning and putting the goods in totes). (Leisegang 2014: 34).

As already mentioned Amazon is able to reduce costs and to show that it owns the market by hosting the goods of third party providers on its web site. By 2014 it had more than 2 millions third party vendors and charge them for shelve storage and takes a cut on the orders, while they have to organise the shipping in. If a product of a third party makes successful sales, then Amazon will sell it cheaper in its own assortment (Wohlsen 2014).

Lastly, as a good MNC, Amazon makes use of the most favourable conditions of being able to move across borders. In Germany it gets subsidies, when it is implemented in so called poorly structured regions (Leisegang 30-31). The European sit of the corporation is in Luxemburg, because there, up to 80% of the benefits earned with intellectual property are not taken in account for tax calculation (Leisegang 2014: 69).

These are some of the prominent business features of Amazon, showing that it is a leading innovative corporation at the top of capitalist industrial development. It drove “old” companies out of the market in changing the ways goods are sold and brought to the customers and continuously expends through procurement arrangements (e.g. third parties), investments and acquisitions. Its work practices, which are drafted below, are part of its success.

¹ The solidarity groups coalition and ver.di tries to use the for free return process for campaigning aims. It recommends to buy and return parcels with a sticker demanding a collective agreement.

III.b Work practices.

„Work hard, have fun, make history“ (Amazon slogan)

The work organisation at Amazon is nearly the same in all centres because of the high-tech standardised lines for shipping in, storing, picking, packing, sealing and delivering (to other delivery services like GPS and DHL). Working conditions at Amazon are also similar in each of its distribution factories, because of the centralisation policy of the firm. Nevertheless Amazon makes use of the advantageous labour laws of each countries. In Germany this are the “short time and the work agencies laws” or even the fact that the job centres can force unemployed to enrol at Amazon. In Poland (serving at the time mostly the German market), for instance the fact that a workday is of 10 hours. It also chose the company regulations that suits it best: in the US Amazon is registered as transportation firm, in Germany as logistic firm for taxes and wages advantages.

The working conditions at Amazon are notorious for several reasons (although they are probably not the worst in distribution factories). The pay is relatively low, the job is exhausting, high tech workers' surveillance is high and short term contracts are used to make the workforce compliant. In Germany the wages are different from plant to plant, moving around the minimum wage and slightly above. Required performance is exhausting: for instance the so called „pickers“, the workers who pick the goods from the shelves, can walk around 20 km per days and pick 120 to 130 goods an hour. Packers have to pack 200 parcels with a single good per hour and for parcels with several goods, have to pack 100 parcels per hour (Leisegang 2014: 19)

Additionally, workers' surveillance and short term contracts intersect: both allow management to improve performance and get rid of workers. Workers have scanners mounted on their arms, allowing supervisors to monitor all their moves and Amazon implemented a workers performance evaluation system (Conference on the Amazon Model and Union Resistance 2015), assessing not only their performance but also their behaviours. The short term contracts allows to ditch workers with a low performance or those who are organised, without justifications.

Amazon got the Big Brother Award in 2015 in Germany for an other side of its surveillance system: workers get contracts stipulating that they have to give their private data (especially health data) to a central data base in the USA (UNI 2015).

Beside the loss of income, the end of short term employment at Amazon is humiliating: The workers whose contracts are not prolonged are, in the language of the firm „ramped down“ (like

live stock). After having heard that they have to leave, workers are accompanied by security guards to the exit. In the room close by the other workers learn that their contract is prolonged (Workers' presentations: 23.07.2015).

These are some of the reasons why Amazon is the target of labour campaigns and struggles at different levels. UNI the global union in the service sector and International Transport Federation monitor the MNC and coordinate international union cooperation. In Germany, ver.di, the sectoral union for private and public services workers, demands a collective agreement. The workers sweating in the distribution factories organised themselves also at different levels: in the plants, nationally and internationally.

IV. Union struggles in Germany with focus on the Brieselang plant.

„Work hard, have fun, make a collective agreement” (workers slogan)

Amazon has nine distribution factories in Germany and nowadays about 10.000 workers. Seven of these distribution factories started to be built in 2007, the last one, the focus of the study, opened its doors in 2013 close from Berlin. It is in the same year that the first strikes actions were taken in two older distributions factories. It was the very first strike in the 15 years of Amazon existence in Germany (Leisegang 2014: 24). Since then, strikes arose in nearly all factories. During the 2014 Christmas peak, 6 factories and 2.700 workers were on strike. The strikes were supported by ver.di and by solidarity groups formed first at the university of Leipzig. Two of the factories have more than 50 % union membership and beside immediate improvement of the working conditions, the union demands focus on a collective agreement. Since Amazon is not member of the employer association this would be a kind of in house collective agreement oriented at the collective agreement of the retail and online retail sector. Amazon itself argues that it applies (the lower) wages fro the logistic sector. In some plants a collective agreement commission is active, in Brieselang however, due to the lack of ver.di members no such commission exists. There, the focus is on the issues of the limited work contracts, the performance pressure and the pay. Ver.di puts additionally emphasis on membership recruitment arguing that no collective agreement commission is possible without enough members (Interview with union officer: 31.08.2015). This task is complicated by the limited contract practice of Amazon. Just to give an example: at the end of 2014, out of 1000 workers with a limited contract at Brieselang, only 32 got a permanent contract, around 180 got a second temporary contract and

more than 900 workers were sent back to the joys to look for an employment. At the Brieselang site, however, ver.di activities are not so developed; According to the secretary in charge of the plant, ver.di will focus on plant intern union public relations (Interview with union officer: 31.08.2015).

Nevertheless, under pressure by the workers strikes in other plants and the media, Amazon fulfilled some of the workers demands and implemented them in all plants at different levels: air conditioning in the distribution factories, wage increases and a „special Christmas bonus“. Indeed in 10 years of Amazon in Germany it was the first time that wages were increased and the Christmas bonus was distributed against the tenets of the head of the corporation (Interview with union officer: 10.09.2015). An other victory is related to the presence of active work councils (all German plants have work councils) concerned a “second counting scanner”. Amazon tried to introduce a count down on the hand scanner, counting the seconds until the next pick. Happily this was finally not introduced thank to the protests of the work council in Bad Hersfeld (Leisegang 2014:18-19).

Nevertheless, two of the main demands remain: the end of the precarious contract practices and the recognition of the collective agreement for retail workers.

In order to continue to deliver timely despite the strikes, Amazon opened two new distribution factories in Poland. Instead of being met with distress as it is often the case, this news was met with a new organizing initiative. In the Polish plant of Poznań, close to the German border, workers member of a syndicalist union organised the plant and recruited around 500 hundreds workers in 7 months time. The other plant, organised by Solidarność, ver.di union partner (both in the ITUC), is still in the set up phase (interview with Amazon workers on the 10.09 and 28.08.2015). The solidarity group presented below, helped to coordinate and translate the contacts to Poland. Workers organised several meetings between the German and Polish colleagues, learnt from each others and organised actions such as distributing leaflets at the door of the plants

(Workers' presentation: 23.7.2015).

In June 2015, while several German plants were on strike, Polish workers had to work on hour longer (11 hours!). Workers in Poznań organised during the 11th hour a slow down strike, other asked for holiday in order not to be unwilling strike breakers and sent a solidarity letter to the colleagues in Germany (Nowak 2015b). Polish workers at Amazon have their own demands and the exchanges with the colleges internationally gives them arguments about the possibility to

implement these demands. At a union bi-national meeting, ver.di unionists and work council members also met Solidarność officers. For workers, the culture clash during this meeting was a clash of cultural organisation, since Solidarność sent officials and not workers (workers' presentations: 23.07.2015).

We count the year 2015 and Amazon workers in Germany are still striking. Several plants were on strike during the Easter time at the same time as post workers (RP-Online 2015). Very practically workers imagine the impact a sectoral strike or solidarity actions could have between those in the storerooms and those working for the post-services delivering the goods (workers' presentations: 23.07.2015).

At the international level, ver.di, with UNI organises exchange meetings with unions, where Amazon is implemented in order to set a common position on Amazon and wants to broaden its activities to other sectors linked to Amazon (Interview with union officer: 10.09.2015)

Chronicle of the strikes in Germany (Spring 2013 to Autumn 2015)
14. Mai 2013: First strike day in Bad Hersfeld and in Leipzig. According to ver.di 1.700 strikers. Previously, 97% ver.di members balloted in favour of the strike
17. June 2013: Two days strikes in both plants
19. September 2013: first 3 days strike in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig
25. November 2013: strike during the Christmas peak in Bad Hersfeld und Leipzig
16. December 2013: 6 days strike during the Christmas peak and one day strike in Graben
31. March 2014: After 3 months break, strike in Leipzig
17. April 2014: For eastern strike again in Leipzig and in Bad Hersfeld
22. September 2014: Two day strikes in Leipzig, Bad Hersfeld, Graben and Rheinberg
27. October 2014: New strike wave in 5 plants. The plant in Werne joins the movement
November 2014: Formation of the national solidarity network, followed by the formation of a group in Berlin
8. December 2014: Strike in Bad Hersfeld and in Leipzig
16. Dezember 2014: Strikes in 6 plants! Koblenz joins the struggle. In 4 plants the strikes last until the 24.12. 2.700 workers are rising up. 700 workers take part in inter-plant general assemblies.
17 March: strike in Bad Hersfeld
25 March 2015: strikes in 5 plants
22 June 2015: strikes of several days in 6 distribution factories
To be continued...

Source: Schneider 2015 and own compilation

V. What does the Berlin solidarity group do?

Several solidarity groups supporting Amazon and other workers struggles exist in Germany. It was not always the case. Nowadays, there is a renewed interest in class struggles triggered by an increase in offensive work struggles.

With the strikes, the working conditions and the struggles at Amazon were a hot topic in the last years and solidarity groups, first in student circles close from one of the plants, were formed.

Then the national network of the solidarity groups was formed and finally the Berlin group. In the mean time, the groups attracted more activists than (phd) students, like party officers and workers/employees from other sectors. Organised workers and Union officers were immediately invited (Interviews members of the solidarity group: 26.08.2015)

At its first meeting, the national network announced that it also wants to link and support the strikes in different sectors. (Klasse gegen Klasse: 2014b). This was a decision that actually linked practically Amazon workers with other workers. For the awareness of being a class, a fact that was not without importance.

Members of the Berlin solidarity group made clear that they want to get involved in the struggle in order to support grassroots organising and also to struggle against precarious employment (Interview with members of the solidarity group: 26.08.2015). Furthermore they stipulated the objectives of helping the strikers to strengthen their decision committees as well as their national and international coordination (Klasse gegen Klasse 2015). The group has a basic principle: starting actions only the workers proposed or agreed to (Conversation with founding member January 2015).

As mentioned, one of the first step of the group was to invite the ver.di secretary to take part in the discussions and actions of the group. A relationship which is for both sides beneficial but, as will be explain in the next chapter, not without conflicts. (Interview with members of the solidarity group: 26.08.2015)

The first actions of the solidarity group started during the 2014 Christmas strikes: picketing in front of plants, distributing leaflets on public places to demand customers to take action, organising teach ins at universities (Flakin 2014).

At the end of 2014, several work council members and union members in Brieselang didn't get a contract prolongation. Some of them are now suing the management for the discriminatory practices of Amazon concerning organised workers. They see Amazon's workers' evaluation practice (workers get grades about their behaviour) as not founded and opening door to busting of

organised workers. The workers started the campaign „Wir wollen bleiben²“ „We want to stay“. The financing of the court case is taken in charge by ver.di but there is discontent on how far ver.di is ready to pursue the case (Interview with an Amazon Worker: 28.08.2015). Based on the assessment that laws are political, that judges rule not only along laws but along their own political orientations and political pressure, the solidarity group supports the workers with actions in front of and in the court. It mobilised at several occasions and organised the journey to the court of the next German state. Additionally, the group has different mobilisation channels and media (the different groups the members belong to, poster campaigns, social networks, websites, etc.) and it organises the link to the press.

When new strikes were occurring around Eastern 2015, the group organised a conference “The Amazon Model and Union Resistance”, with workers and the academia. For workers this was also an other occasion for inter-plant meetings. Since then, the group helped to organise, Amazon workers’ presence at demonstrations in and outside Berlin (labour day, “make another Europe”, demonstration against austerity in Frankfurt) and a PR action, where activists disguised in Amazon robots and carrying banners disrupted the “Berlin enterprise marathon” (where workers were running in the name of their employers). Moreover the group and the workers members joined the several strike committees of the time (post, hospital, kindergarten workers).

The next point on the agenda, in which solidarity group member will take part, is an other meeting in Poland for workers without consideration of their union membership: a workers’ meeting (Nowak 2015b). The workers’ organisation ability is such that logistic workers from Italy, France and the US will also be there. For workers and the solidarity group it is clear that they want to work with any workers, regardless of the union majority in the plants outside Germany. They are however cautious about possible tensions between non-partner unions. (Interviews with solidarity group members and Amazon workers: 26.08. and 10.09. 2015)

VI. Who needs who?

VI.a Not an easy relationship

The questions: which roles do the solidarity group and the union fulfil? Who needs who? Do they complete each other? Exist in parallel? Exist for themselves? Fulfil different needs? Can be

² The slogan is inspired by the slogan „Wir bleiben alle!“ (We all stay!) of the Berlin Anti.Gentrification campaigns.

assessed when we look at the relationships of the groups between each other as highlighted through the participatory observations and the interviews.

As mentioned **the relationship between the union and the solidarity group** is a conflictual cooperation. Union officers sometime take part in the solidarity actions but sometimes don't agree with the group involvement. Members of the solidarity group on the other hand, want to include the union officers in their activities but they also want, through their own actions and the demands of the workers, to put them under pressure to act and so revitalise or rather radically transform the union. While some members prefer to focus on workers self organising (Interview with solidarity group members: 26.08.2015). Assumptions circulate on all sides about the aims of the different organisations, both sides saying that the other side has its own agenda which is to control the workers, while both claim to do "only what the workers want them to do" (Interviews with workers, group members and union officers 2015).

Similar conclusions can be made **for the relationships with the Polish syndicalist union ver.di and the solidarity group**. For ver.di, if conflicts arise between the syndicalist union and Solidarność, it could be a diplomatic issue, since they are with Solidarność in the ITUC while the other union is independent. Solidarity group members and workers hope that ver.di will work with this non aligned union but are not confident about that, while ver.di individuals think that the union from Poznań does not want to cooperate with the German union. This assumption is not very plausible since at the last action, the polish workers where wearing ver.di T-shirts to show their solidarity with the German strikers. Nevertheless, this union has a non-hierarchical and offensive mode of action that could lead to conflicts with ver.di.

In this complicate relationship, **workers, who are members of both the solidarity group and the union** have also a conflictual relationship with the union but have a positive relationship with the solidarity group. According to their experience they also think that they should put pressure on the union, in order to democratise it (Interview with Amazon workers 10.9.2015 and 28.08.2015).

Some of the reasons for their involvement with the solidarity group, is that they think that the union is hierarchical, bureaucratic, paternalistic and therefore slow and not conforming to their needs. Active workers for instance regret that, they, according to ver.di, have to wait to take action that more workers are ver.di members:

“The problem here, at ver.di, if you are in a plant and you want to organise something with a union, it is not enough that you go and try hard. They expect from you that you recruit more members, otherwise you get nearly nothing.

(...) they focus on, where it is possible, quick, to recruit more members. These are the important plants for them. The rest, the workers have to do; after you get more finances, a so called project secretary and so forth”. (Interview with an Amazon Worker: 10.09.2015)

When asked about the reasons why he joined the solidarity group one of the interviewee explained:

“One thing is the solidarity as such. We thought that it is good if we have an external structure, because in any case, we need help. We need resources, we need connections to other people like us and also other colleagues, like for instance Zalando, close to Amazon in Brieselang. And the second thing, that we need a kind of politicisation, where we can learn, because our(work) rhythm, our concrete situation, where we work, make it not so easy to find time to discuss about our situation.” (Interview with Amazon Worker on the 10.09.2015).

The conflict which best explains this issue arose around the production of a workers’ newspaper. When the active ver.di workers group decided to start a plant newspaper in Brieselang to inform their fellow workers, they say to have been stopped by ver.di, who thought that it was too early to do so. The Berlin solidarity group, immediately mobilised funding and asked the national network for support to finance the first issue of the workers paper. Additionally, Amazon colleagues from other distribution factories, wrote e-mails to protest to ver.di. The second issue was then financed by the union. Similar conflicts around the court cases occur, the workers wanting to go further than the unions.

Workers also criticise the invitation practice or the form of the union meetings. They for instance would like to be part of the collective agreements meetings of the plant who have such a commission in order to learn more or to include solidarity group members in unions’ meetings. When comparing union meetings and those organised by the workers themselves or the solidarity group, they asses that at workers’ meetings the exchange is deeper, while the comfort of the venues is smaller. The other way round: union workshops have comfort and recreational factors, while talk on strategy are often put to later.

One other important conflicts took place around the possibility to have intersectoral meetings with striking post workers (after a common strike gathering) and with the public reading of a solidarity message from the workers in Poznań. Both of which ver.di officers didn't agree with (Participatory observations at workers' presentations 23.07.2015, Interview with an Amazon Worker 28.08. and 10.09.2015).

All these examples explain the assessment of a worker concerning the solidarity group:

“When I met the people from the soli-group, how engaged, how interested they were, all the ideas they had, all the things they take part in. Additionally, they invited us to a lot of discussions and I was strongly impressed about all they did. (...) And the Soli-group always ask: “how they can support us”. It was always un-bureaucratic and could bloody fast. They have supported us more than ver.di, I would say. Ver.di, the first sentence they say, is always “they need more members” and before it is not really possible to do anything.” (Workers interview on the 28.08.2015)

VI.b On the current complementarity of unions and solidarity groups

Through the conflicts summed up above, it became clear that the union and the solidarity group do not exist in parallel or for themselves. They are, at the moment, complementary and fulfil different needs. On the question of the complementarities of union and solidarity groups, it is quite obvious that the union do not like activities it can not control but also do not want (or cannot?) do without the solidarity groups. Why, is not very clear, because the interviewees have difficulties to say that they need the solidarity groups. Some think that they are good to make the situation at Amazon public other that such a group is more “colourful” and faster than big organisations, while pointing out at the same time the danger of being “too” fast. (Interview with union officers: 31.08.2015 and 10.09.2015). One could assume that the union knows that it has to be open to so called civil society coalitions. Moreover, the existence of a functioning national coordination of the Amazon solidarity groups, with the active participation of workers, leads to the conclusion that these groups fill a vacuum. Union, especially corporatist and business unions have been often criticised for their lack of participatory democracy and for servicing the members without challenging either the state or the employers. One other development has been the organising (understand recruiting) drive after the decade long decline of union density in Europe. Even in Germany, where there is no legal necessity to have a certain percentage of union members to organise a work place, the necessity to gain new members, in order to maintain

associational power³, is high. However, the issue for union power is rather a lack of active members. In a situation where workers are active and organised - up to international relationships - it is clear that these workers will turn to those who have more time resources than themselves and support them without delay. Insofar, more than the union apparatus, these are the active workers themselves who need the solidarity group. Additionally, if some actions are contentious from the point of view of the employer, they cannot be made responsible, since the group from outside leads the actions. Moreover, through support from outside, workers feel part of something bigger than the work place and empowered.

On the other hand, for workers and some members of the Berlin solidarity group, why they need unions is clear. Even if unions lost a good deal of their power since the 70s, they have (rests of) something a solidarity group or coalition don't have: institutional and large financial associational power⁴. Concerning institutional power, as a worker, who otherwise wants to build workers to workers solidarity, was saying: "If I want to strike, I need the union. If I want a collective agreement, I need the union". (Workers' presentations: 23.07.2015). Solidarity group members have the same assessment:

"Solidarity groups do not have the capacities of the big unions."

"The soli-group can't organise a strike, can't pay strike money, can not negotiate a collective agreement."

"To struggle outside of the union can weaken us. Sometimes it makes sense to have a parallel union, like in Poznań, but we the aim should not be to build an other union but to change the union bureaucracy." (Interviews with members of the solidarity group: 26.08.2015)

The conclusion for one of the workers is then to reclaim the union:

„ We have a discussion, between us, Amazon colleagues, that the union it is "us". It is right. But you have this hard apparatus. We have to criticise it very openly and also put them under pressure. They have to move, come to the plants, do something." (Interview with Amazon Worker: 10.09.2015)

³ Associational power is the power which comes from the (financial) resources of the fact of having members. (Gumbrell-McCormick; Hyman 2013).

⁴ According to Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013), institutional power relate to "(...) employer preferences legislative supports, the powers of statutory work councils, the administration of social welfare or a role in formal structures of tripartite peak-level consultation." (Gumbrell-McCormick; Hyman 2013).

VII. Conclusion

As we have seen the struggles in Germany against the work regime in the previously non-organised distribution factories of the Amazon corporation takes an unusual turn. On one hand, at the national level, the union coordinated strikes have brought some improvements, however, the whole point of a collective agreement is still missing. On the other hand the international coordination, driven (faster) by the workers and in parallel at the level of the officers, by the union, shows that both recognise the international feature of a corporation. As mentioned in the Chapter on E-business and the logistic sector, through their sector location, workers have the consciousness to work and therefore organise internationally.

Strikes as threat and tactics are a disruption of the supply chain. As a union officer said: “we know that, when we strike the goods come too late to the customers (Interview with union officer 10.09.2015). However, up to now the whole power of disruption was not used, since beside the slow down strike in Poznań in parallel to the strikes in Germany, no coordinated international action was planned. Additionally, the connection between other links of the supply chain (transports and post services, but also Amazon acquisitions (Kiva systems, softwares etc.) and the production of the central goods like books, CDs, tablets etc.) is still missing in practice.

Unions, like Hyman writes drawing on Offe and Wiesenthal, depend on their members willingness to act (Hyman 2002). What happens, when they want to act, but their union officers judge it is not the right way to act? As we have seen, diverse disappointments, self organising, and the search for other kinds of support. This lead us to the decades old debate on union revitalisation and democratisation, because in the absence of other viable alternatives, it is what the colleagues want: transform the union into an organisation that they can call theirs. At this point, I don't want to make recommendations, but at least it should be clear that the point has been raised for decades and that the changes are still not around the corner.

Interestingly, when starting this study I was assuming that solidarity group and unions would act at different levels: solidarity groups at the local, unions at the local and national, and global unions at the international level. I was proven wrong, since the solidarity groups, the workers and the union act at all three levels. If any conclusions can be drawn from this, it is that the structural location and the resources of those involved, are of course important but it requires also the experience and the consciousness of workers that international action is worth to drive for. Nearly fifteen years ago Waterman and Wills (2001: 6) affirmed that international networking would transform the labour institutions. It seems that union officers still could feel overrun by this

eventuality, when workers organise their own transnational meetings. However, what Amazon workers are building, is not international labour “networking” (a term which they never use) but relationships with a clear agenda: defend themselves and their working class fellows against the work regime of the distribution factories of our time.

Bibliography

- Allen, J. (2015): Studying Logistics. As the economy develops around a sprawling logistics industry, organizing workers in these sectors will be vital.
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/02/logistics-industry-organizing-labor/> (retrieved on the 06.08.2015)
- Amazon (2015): Company facts.
<http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=176060&p=irol-factSheet> (retrieved on the 25.08.2015)
- Bologna, S. (2014): Inside Logistics: Organization, Work, Distinctions.
<https://viewpointmag.com/2014/10/29/inside-logistics-organization-work-distinctions/>
- Cowen, D. (2014a): *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in the Global Trade*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Cowen, D. (2014b): The State of the Supply Chains.
<https://viewpointmag.com/2014/10/29/disrupting-distribution-subversion-the-social-factory-and-the-state-of-supply-chains/> (retrieved on the 06.08.2015)
- Flakin, W. (2015): »Wir versuchen, die Kollegen aus der Ohnmacht aufzuwecken«.
Amazon verbuchte sein »erfolgreichstes« Weihnachtsgeschäft, die Beschäftigten hatten nichts davon. Ein Gespräch mit Johannes L.
<https://www.jungewelt.de/loginFailed.php?ref=/2015/01-19/020.php/> (retrieved on the 10.9.2015)
- Flakin, W. (2014): Streik bis Weihnachten. In Leipzig streiken die Beschäftigten von Amazon - und demonstrieren bis in die Uni hinein. <http://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/956076.streik-bis-weihnachten.html>. (retrieved on the 01.08.2015)
- Gumbrell-McCormick, R.; Hyman, R. (2013): Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times, Hard Choices. <http://column.global-labour-university.org/2013/09/trade-unions-in-western-europe-hard.html> (29.07.2015)
- Hyman, R. (2002): The International Labour Movement on the Threshold of Two Centuries
Agitation, Organisation, Bureaucracy, Diplomacy.
http://www.arbark.se/pdf_wrd/Hyman_int.pdf (retrieved on the 14.09.2015)
- Klasse gegen Klasse (2014a): Auch in Berlin: Solidarität mit dem Streik bei Amazon organisieren!

- <http://www.klassegegenklasse.org/auch-in-berlin-solidaritat-mit-dem-streik-bei-amazon-organisieren/> (retrieved on the 01.08.2015)
- Klasse gegen Klasse (2014b): Streiks bei Amazon gehen weiter.
<http://www.klassegegenklasse.org/streiks-bei-amazon-gehen-weiter/> (retrieved on the 01.08.2015)
- Leisegang, D. (2014): *amazon. Das Buch als Beute*, schmetterling verlag, Stuttgart.
- Lieber, E.; Syverson, C. (2011): Online vs. Offline Competition.
<http://home.uchicago.edu/syverson/onlinevsoffline.pdf> (03.08.2015)
- MWPVL (2015): Amazon Global Fulfilment Centres.
http://www.mwpvl.com/html/amazon_com.html (retrieved on the 26.08.2015)
- Nowak, P. (2015a): Grenzenloser Streik. Auch am Amazon-Standort im polnischen Poznań wurde gestreikt. In: *Analyse & Kritik. Zeitung für linke Debatte und Praxis*, N° 607, p. 19.
- Nowak, P. (2015b): Gegen transnationalen Streikbruch. Auch in Polen beginnen Amazon-Beschäftigte, für einen Tarifvertrag zu kämpfen.
<http://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/978223.gegen-transnationalen-streikbruch.html> (retrieved on the 03.08.2015)
- RP-Online (2015): Post-Zusteller und Amazon-Mitarbeiter legen Arbeit nieder.
<http://www.rp-online.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/deutsche-post-ag-und-amazon-legen-arbeit-nieder-verdi-streik-zu-ostern-aid-1.4986702> (retrieved on the 01.08.2015)
- Statistica (2015): Year-over-year revenue growth of Amazon.com and eBay Inc. from 2006 to 2014.
<http://www.statista.com/statistics/233761/year-on-year-revenue-of-amazon-and-ebay-since-2006/> (retrieved on the 14.09.2015).
- Schneider, S. (2015): Eine neue Stufe des Kampfes. In: *Klasse gegen Klasse*, N° 12, p. 4-5.
<http://www.klassegegenklasse.org/eine-neue-stufe-des-kampfes/> (retrieved on the 06.01.2015)
- UNI (2015): Amazon gets the big brother Award.
<http://www.uniglobalunion.org/de/news/amazon-deutschland-erhalt-big-brother-award-2015> (retrieved on the 01.08.2015)
- World Bank (2014): Logistics performance index.

<http://ipi.worldbank.org/international/global> (retrieved on the 06.08.2015)

Waterman, P.; Wills, J. (2001): Space, place and the new Labour internationalisms: beyond the fragments?, *Antipode*, Vol. 22, N° 3, p. 1-7.

Wohlsen, M. (2014): A Rare Peek inside Amazon's Wish-Fulfilling Machine.

<http://www.wired.com/2014/06/inside-amazon-warehouse/> (retrieved on the 26.08.2015)

Interviews and participatory observations

Participatory observations of the solidarity meetings and events from February 2015 to August 2015.

Conversation with a founding member of the solidarity group: January 2015

Participatory observations at workers' presentations on the struggles at Amazon: 23.07.2015

Interviews with four members of the solidarity group: 26.08.2015

Interview with an Amazon Worker: 28.08.2015

Interview with Amazon Worker: 10.09.2015

Interview with a regional ver.di union officer for the retail sector: 31.08.2015

Interview with a national ver.di union officer for the retail sector: 10.09.2015