

Amazon's Policing Power

A SNAPSHOT FROM BESSEMER

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INTRODUCTION

Sixteen miles southwest of Birmingham, Alabama, lies the city of Bessemer - a working-class, post-industrial, majority-Black suburb of over 26,000 residents. It fits a profile that appeals to Amazon in the southern United States.

In March 2020, the corporate behemoth opened an 850,000 square-foot fulfillment center on 133 acres in Bessemer, quickly becoming the city's largest employer with a workforce of around 6,000. Less than a year later, amid a global pandemic and national racial reckoning, workers organizing with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) launched a historic union election. In March 2021, they lost their first unionization attempt, but that was not the end of the fight.

RWDSU filed objections that unfair labor practices had tainted the election results, and subsequent worker and union testimony delivered before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) detailed these practices. The NLRB eventually set aside the results of the first election, paving the way for a second union election that is currently underway.

The testimony before the NLRB also provided a snapshot of how it feels to be a Black worker at Amazon's Bessemer fulfillment center: isolated and hyper-surveilled under the constant presence of private security and off-duty police officers. Highlighting the Bessemer case as part of an ongoing nationwide study, this report brings a racial lens to the numerous ways Amazon polices its workers, particularly through the use of private security and arrangements with local police. These types of worker control tactics create a culture of intimidation for all workers, but the consequences are amplified for Black workers, particularly in the southern United States. Amazon's approach in Bessemer is marked by a stark convergence of racialized economic exploitation and racialized policing with long historical roots in the Black Belt and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

To examine the policing of Black workers by Amazon, the research team engaged in a multi-method study involving qualitative as well as quantitative analysis. To date, the research team has conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with union organizers, current and former Amazon workers, and community organizers from a network of organizations supporting the campaign. The team has also analyzed and coded documents from the NLRB hearing along with union-provided worker statements, and undertaken a comprehensive review of media reports and academic literature. Finally, the team has coded and analyzed original data compiled primarily from documents made available through FOIA requests in jurisdictions where Amazon's fulfillment centers are located. This data has been supplemented with publicly available administrative data on key variables of interest (e.g., police per capita across different jurisdictions).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary analysis of interview transcripts and other documents from the Bessemer case points to several emerging storylines related to Amazon's policing power and overall organizational strategy:

- Interviews and other statements indicate that Amazon's engagement with local police helps to subdue workers and enforce an organizational culture of near-carceral obedience - what amounts to a **"militarization" of human resource functions.** Police frequently supplement internal private security to resolve workplace disputes, and routine police surveillance combined with Amazon's own internal surveillance via digital and other means has led some Black workers to describe the Amazon fulfillment center as a jail and/or a modern plantation that makes them feel like "slaves". *"It feels like we're coming into prison, and they're trying to make sure we don't escape," said one worker. "It's like we're being watched... To me, [it's like] you've got the slaves out there, and then they're policing them."*
- Often the main employer in economically deprived areas, and with its wide consumer base, Amazon is creating what are, in effect, modern company towns - which includes developing tight-knit relationships with local police, postal services, and others within local and state government. Interviewees describe a blurring of boundaries between Amazon and local authorities that creates a kind of **"corporate police state,"** making it difficult for workers and others to discern the scope of Amazon's power in relation to the state. One union organizer described an *"...overwhelming impression with workers in Amazon that they [Amazon] run the state, they run everything."* Another observed that *"Amazon does a lot of things. If they can call the city of Bessemer and get them to change the speed of a traffic light, they can do a lot of things."* Amazon's influence and pattern of collaboration with local law enforcement also carries immediate implications for organizers of color: *"I'm being humble [when interacting with police near Amazon's facility] because as a Black man, I have to make sure I respond in a way to where I'm going to make it home,"* said one organizer.
- Interviewees describe a **racialization of employment relations** that includes both the intentional targeting and tokenization of marginalized racial and ethnic groups via workplace policies and programming. *"[On] Juneteenth, I know they gave out fried chicken,"* said one worker. *"That is the most racist thing on the planet, and then they gave out a T-shirt that says Black Employee Network [BEN]".* Given the racial connotations of "Uncle Ben," another worker notes having *"had so much trouble trying to explain this to people at work, non-black people at work, about Uncle Ben. They said it was just an acronym. I said, no. There's a hidden message"*. Interviewees also noted that career development opportunities for Black workers have been limited, resulting in a clear underrepresentation of Black workers in managerial roles. As one of the RWDSU organizers mentioned, *"[T]he workers have spoken about the company bringing in young, white workers and they will have the Black workers train them for positions... And then, what the [Black] workers say is that we're good enough to train them, but we're not good enough to get the positions."*

While the qualitative analysis conducted so far has mainly focused on Bessemer, AL, coding and preliminary quantitative analysis of public records obtained nationally point to some larger patterns that are of note:

- Public records indicate that Amazon engages police on an off-duty basis around the country, but this engagement is significantly more prevalent among fulfillment centers located in the Southern “Black belt” than in other parts of the country.^[1] It is also especially prevalent in Southern localities with a very high police presence.^[2]
- Preliminary analysis of the public records data also indicates that, among Amazon fulfillment centers engaging local police on an off-duty basis, those located in areas with a higher percentage of Black residents are more likely to engage police for security as opposed to traffic purposes.^[3]

LOOKING AHEAD

Understanding contemporary forms of worker control at the intersections of exploited labor and policing of a majority Black workforce in a southern company town requires centering race and other worker identities.

As a new union election is launched in Bessemer, AL, this research brings a racial lens to Amazon’s policing practices, which control and intimidate all workers, but has an amplified impact on an almost entirely Black workforce. Conditions in Bessemer reflect a broader national concern that takes on a particularly intense form in the U.S. South – yet another way in which Amazon consolidates its power to subordinate workers and dampens their ability to organize for greater workplace fairness. As the study continues to expand nationwide, researchers will determine whether this set of racialized employment dynamics are a southern strategy, or employed across other regions and workforces.

A full report later in 2022 will describe the national picture in more detail.

[1] Of 291 fulfillment centers for which these public records were sought, records have been obtained for 198 facilities. A lack of evidence of off-duty engagement with police in the public records data does not necessarily mean that these relationships do not exist, but these records provide the best source of information that is currently available. Based on this data, we see evidence of off-duty relationships in 50% of facilities in the deep South (AL, GA, KY, NC, SC, and Jacksonville, Florida) and 23% of facilities in the rest of the country.

[2] Police presence was measured as police per capita in a given municipality.

[3] Observed within a relatively small universe of cases (n=53), this association does not rise to the level of statistical significance, but we think it is notable nonetheless.