Meeting report: "An Amazon for workers? Visioneering alternatives for digitalized logistics work". Workshop, 2025, Leipzig, DE

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Amazon is one of the key companies in the digital economy driving forward new practices in retail and cloud services. Beyond the innovative business model lies an often-hidden world of logistics work in warehouses and delivery trucks, which is deeply shaped by inequality and surveillance. For almost 15 years, workers and trade unions are struggling against low wages, unhealthy working conditions and despotic management practices, first in European countries like Germany, Poland and France but now also in the company's home country USA, in India and other countries. Digital technology is a key element of these unfair labor practices as it is used to monitor the performance of employees and intensify their work.

In April 2025 these issues motivated a visioneering workshop with Amazon workers from around the world about alternative ways of organizing digitalized logistics work. The workshop was initiated by the research projects *IANUS* and *VIDITRA* at the Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis within Karlsruhe Institute of Technology and was organized together with *Amazon Workers International*, a transnational network of Amazon employees that has been meeting for about ten years to foster collective action in the company.

The aim of the workshop was to gather knowledge about digital technologies at Amazon from the perspective of workers and to explore alternative ways of organizing technology by democratizing the workplace. 34 workers and unionists from Japan, India, USA, Canada, Italy, France, Poland and Germany participated, offering a wide range of international perspectives. 22 of

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the participants are working for Amazon themselves, either in warehouses, where goods are stored and delivered, or in last mile delivery per truck.

Surveillance, robotization, and a lack of trust

For the first part of the workshop, these different experiences from national contexts and workplaces were gathered to map the situation of digital technologies for workers. It soon became clear, that their situation is strongly shaped by different national labor laws and industrial relations, especially when it comes to digital surveillance. Delivery drivers from the USA reported about far-reaching digital monitoring, for instance through cameras in their trucks, enabling the management to track the eye movement of drivers. Similarly, in Canada, warehouse workers reported constant surveillance of their handheld scanners. In contrast, employees from Germany and France emphasized that digital surveillance was not a major concern as performance tracking is forbidden by law or effectively curtailed by works councils and unions. Overall, different regulatory contexts also seemed to shape the awareness of workers about the significance of technology. Workers in less regulated countries like Poland or the USA could speak more intensely about the effects of technology on their work than employees from Germany, who were less concerned about this topic.

However, across all countries, warehouse robotization posed a shared concern, threatening jobs and increasing monotonous work. Amazon's very own logistics robots can move whole shelves to automate logistical processes. Workers, who could formerly walk independently through the warehouse to pick goods, are now locked in cages, where they wait for robots to deliver the shelves. As the legal ability to shape such automation is very limited in all countries, this development was seen as a crucial topic for worker organization from Germany to Japan.

In both cases, i.e. performance measurement and automation, workers' attitudes towards technology were strongly influenced by their mistrust of the company's willingness to respect employee rights and distribute the benefits of technological progress fairly.

Visioneering and social inequality

The second part of the workshop was about visioneering alternative paths of digitalization for Amazon. For that, the team of *VIDITRA* presented their research about how democratic governance of technology works in worker-owned industrial cooperatives. The presentation aimed to serve as an epistemic device for imagining an Amazon shaped by workers' decisions, however, this revealed some challenges. While workers could effectively envision technologies to ease daily tasks, such as robotic arms or conveyors for lifting goods, they struggled to envision broader changes to work organization or decision-making processes. Rather than using the democratic practices in industrial cooperatives as an epistemic device to stimulate creativity, workers were even partly discouraged by the example since they felt they would never be able to exercise so much influence in their

own company. Instead of imagining an alternative Amazon for workers, they focused on whether workers in industrial cooperatives also face work intensification and wage inequality.

This highlights a key challenge in visioneering alternative futures with stakeholders of technical change: The ability to imagine other realities is deeply shaped by knowledge, skills and imaginative powers, which are unevenly distributed in society. Unionized workers have high levels of expert knowledge when it comes to the effects of digital change in their own working life. Compared to other stakeholders in different workshop formats, for example in non-specific citizen workshops, they mobilized very detailed knowledge about the functions of technologies, regulatory bodies and their ability to influence, prevent or cope with certain digital solutions. This expert knowledge is an outcome of longtime collective organization of workers, where they developed shared expertise and interests. However, collective organization at Amazon is currently mainly a rather defensive

workers, pressuring those in the lower ranks, and pitting employees against each other, creating mistrust and discouraging union participation. The control of this information by all employees was therefore envisioned as a major step to democratize technology at Amazon. At the same time, it was problematized as potentially leading to an internalization of performance norms by the workers. Furthermore, a stricter enforcement of health protection standards was envisioned as a way to set limits for work intensification. Finally, a demand for automation justice was raised, claiming that Amazon workers should profit from higher productivity by reduced working hours with no loss in pay. These principles could help shift the focus of digitalization debates to tangible workplace concerns such as health and safety. The participants quickly developed specific technopolitical demands regarding their working lives, against the backdrop of their lack of trust in Amazon's willingness to use technology responsibly.

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action of workers against management practices. They were able to increase the democratic participation over new technologies introduced in warehouses only to a limited extent. Workers had limited opportunities to practice participatory thinking on the future of technology as competences to envision future paths of digital innovation at Amazon are monopolized by management and senior engineers. Hence, the very ability to think about futures is unequally distributed in a hierarchical division of labor.

Nevertheless, in the workshop, the Amazon employees discussed several mid-term claims to democratize technological innovation in their corporation. In particular, there was a strong demand for transparency in the central labor management software used in warehouses. Access to decision-making processes regarding the use of technology was therefore considered crucial in light of the lack of trust towards the company. The software evaluates the performance of workers, records times spent on certain tasks, displays expectable quotas for tasks on digital devices and is used to allocate workers to different work stations. It is a central tool for managers to control the activities of workers and at the same time establishes sharp information asymmetries, because only senior management positions can access this information. The workers also expressed that the software used performance data to undermine solidarity by rewarding certain

Participatory technology assessment in the world of work

Compared to more open formats like citizen workshops, where participants often self-select, which creates a bias towards more affluent and highly educated parts of society, taking participatory technology assessment (TA) to the world of work reflected challenges posed by social inequality. It matters who is considered to be a stakeholder, who has the resources to attend participative forums and who is capable of speaking up in such formats. Participatory TA needs to reflect on this. In return, by engaging more actively with issues of the workplace, it can reach a stakeholder group with highly detailed, domain-specific expert knowledge, moving beyond general discussions about technology in society. Participatory methods can thus be enriched by longtime organizational experiences of workers and high self-awareness about the effect of technical change on their lives – and TA's commitment to an inclusive design of technological change can be fulfilled more comprehensively.