

Working at Amazon.fr: from honeymoon to divorce

Although he is only in his early 30s, Julien Vincent can already look back on a long career as an Amazon employee and union activist. We first met him in London during a meeting of the global alliance of trade unions representing Amazon employees, when we were so impressed with his honesty and candour that we arranged to meet him again (in a bar in Paris' 12th arrondissement) to hear his story in full.

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70% of workers at Amazon.com are under intense job strain. They are subjected to strong psychological pressure coupled with limited decision-making latitude.

Image: © Belga



The US-based company Amazon needs no introduction – there can be few people out there who have not already ordered goods via one of its regional websites and then received delivery of a parcel decorated with the ubiquitous smile, or at the very least seen one being delivered to a neighbour. As an e-commerce company, Amazon operates on a simple premise, which is essentially an extended and optimised version of the business model known as distance selling: the customer accesses the Amazon website (using a computer at home or in the office, or using a smartphone on the move), chooses from among the items on offer (almost 250 million in France in 2018¹), and receives them at his or her doorstep in record time. It's a concept for our times which has been enthusiastically welcomed both here and elsewhere in the world, with 5 billion Amazon deliveries and 100 million Amazon Prime members around the globe in 2017.² All of this has made Amazon a giant in the sector with a market value of USD 1 000 billion in 2018, and its founder (Jeff Bezos) one of the five richest people in the world.

Yet Amazon is also a company which is never far from the headlines, and the stories and reports about working conditions in its million-square-foot warehouses (which its PR people like to remind us are as large as multiple football pitches) are getting more and more alarming. Amazon employed around 540 000 workers around the world in 2018, and both its workforce and the number of sites at which they work are on an upward trajectory. The company's core competencies centre around logistics – from receiving goods and stowing them on shelves through to preparing orders for packaging and shipping ("Inbound" and "Outbound" respectively, to use the in-house jargon). The task of delivering orders from the warehouse to the end customer is generally contracted out (although delivery drivers fare no better in terms of working conditions).

70% of "Amazonians" under intense stress

Working conditions are tough at Amazon, and productivity targets are as over-ambitious as they are in the rest of the logistics sector. Most of the work involves manual and repetitive goods handling tasks, and the "pickers" (who prepare orders) and "stowers" (who stow products on shelves) can rack up miles of walking in a single day. "Packers" have to endure the discomfort of standing in the same position for hours on end, and all workers are obliged to use handheld scanners which both guide and track their movements at all times. Managers make their presence felt and enforce the rules strictly, for example by monitoring workers to ensure that they do not exceed the minimum statutory break times (20 minutes twice per shift, which includes the time taken to complete the long walk between the warehouse floor and the break room). An investigation

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1. Interview with Frédéric Duval, head of Amazon France, by Rémy Dessarts and Emmanuelle Souffi for *Journal du Dimanche*, 3 March 2018.

2. Cf. "Work Hard. Have Fun. Make History", article by Amandine Clout for *Le Soir*, Friday 23 November 2018 (pp. 16-17).

3. Expert investigation carried out in April 2018 upon request by the Committee on Hygiene, Safety and Working Conditions with the aim of obtaining a clear overview of psychosocial risks within the company, prompted in particular by feedback from the occupational physician and the local health insurance fund. One third of employees responded to the survey on working conditions.

carried out at Amazon.fr's Montélimar site by the company Syndex, which specialises in working conditions and psychosocial risks,³ revealed that 70% of workers at the site ("Amazonians", to use the company's preferred term), suffer severe job strain as a result of high psychological stress paired with low decision-making power. Physical suffering was also identified as an issue, with three quarters of survey respondents stating that they experienced pain which they believed was linked to their work. Julien Vincent – in his role as employee representative to the Committee on Hygiene, Safety and Working Conditions – was the person responsible for commissioning this report, and so he is familiar with its contents. Having worked at the Montélimar site since it

opened back in 2010, he was unsurprised by the alarming picture it painted of workers' mental and physical health, and was happy to see his own personal opinion of the situation and his shop-floor experiences validated by third-party occupational health experts whose investigations were based on recognised scientific models.

The "getting to know each other" phase

Julien Vincent has not always been as critical of the company as he is today; like the majority of Amazonians, Mr. Vincent joined Amazon with high hopes for the future, delighted to have found a full-time permanent contract in an area which is not abundant in employment opportunities – and one which was well-paid enough to cover his mortgage. Amazon looks good on the French labour market, since it pays its employees 25% above the minimum wage, offers a 13th month's salary for workers with at least one year's seniority, and also organises day-to-day events such as "pancake parties" and awards vouchers for family days out to the best-performing Amazonians. Perhaps this is the reason why Amazon can boast that its online employee surveys reveal a satisfaction rate of 82% among its employees in France (80% at the Montélimar site, with a 90% response rate) – or perhaps the employees are simply afraid to express their dissatisfaction. In Julien Vincent's opinion, and based on his observations during a 10-year career at Amazon, the truth probably lies somewhere between these two extremes; after all, when workers first join the company, they are happy with their lot and enthusiastic about their future career with the company.

Mr Vincent – like almost all Amazon employees – started off on a temporary contract and saw other new starters still in their one- or two-month probationary periods getting fired on a near-daily basis because their productivity figures were not up to scratch. After receiving condensed training on four different roles in one day, Julien Vincent had to roll up his sleeves and practically run from one place to the next, since his managers were not happy with his performance. "I didn't have a clue what I was doing, I just followed the scanner", he said. At the end of the month, he was devastated to hear that his contract

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would not be extended, although he was told by way of consolation that his productivity was "not terrible". And yet it was when Julien Vincent decided to slow down and work out his contract without overtaxing himself that his performance improved – and he was more surprised than anyone. "I took a more relaxed approach to my work, and that made me more productive," he remembers. "When you walk quickly, you concentrate on walking quickly... and you lose time. When you walk slowly as though you were strolling through the shops, you have time to look at your scanner while you're walking, think about what you're going to be doing and save time when you get there." His new approach meant that he joined the ranks of the "most productive workers" and was ultimately given a permanent contract.

From honeymoon to disenchantment

After becoming a permanent member of staff, he gradually gained the skills he needed for new roles, and several months later his manager suggested that he might one day become a leader if he could ratchet up his productivity another few notches. "Everyone thought I'd gone nuts," he says when he describes working twice as hard as everyone else in order to achieve this goal. Yet his body refused to play along, and at the age of 23, after having worked for Amazon for 18 months, he suffered an attack of sciatica brought on by overwork. He took three weeks off sick and reported it as an occupational accident, but his employer argued the toss – all of a sudden, as though a switch had been flipped, he realised that his relations with the company were not as rosy as he had thought. Many other disillusionments followed this first one, denting his confidence in the company and its managers and encouraging him to stand up for his rights and his health and for the rights and health of his colleagues.

Julien Vincent quickly realised that almost all Amazon employees go through a similar process of disenchantment after an initial honeymoon period of two years or so, by which point they have worked their way around all the different jobs, have started to feel the physical impact of the work (even if they have been lucky enough not to suffer an accident), have become weary of the relentless pressure to achieve productivity targets and aware that the benefits which go along with the job are not worth the trade-off, and have realised that there is no real opportunity for career progression. After passing through this process of disillusionment, most employees leave the company either sooner or later: the average length of service at the Montélimar site is estimated at only two or three years and this extremely high turnover rate has an impact on trade union activities. The long-term task of bringing successful claims against the company is made even harder because employees leave when they realise exactly how tough working conditions are.

4. Logan J. (2006), The union avoidance industry in the United States, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44(4), pp. 651-675.
Logan J. (2008), *US anti-union consultants: A threat to the rights of British workers*, London, TUC.

Standing up for workers

Julien Vincent decided to stay after becoming aware of the reality of working conditions at Amazon, but he developed his own personal strategies of silent resistance. He started by adhering strictly to the company's "stupid" (in his words) safety rules, in particular the instruction to drink fluids every hour in order to avoid dehydration – and after drinking one litre of water every 45 minutes, he ended up needing to take toilet breaks every 10 minutes. He also decided that he would no longer be intimidated by the managers who came into the break room to tell workers to get back to their positions five minutes before their time was up, and instead remained seated until the very last minute – even though it meant staring at his boss who would come and sit in front of him every day for four of those minutes.

This period of passive resistance showed Mr. Vincent that workers needed to mount a more organised form of opposition to their employer, and so he decided to get involved in union activities and stand for election as an employee representative. His trademark irreverence does not sit well with everyone within the company, he has fielded criticism from certain "old-school" unionists and also from employees who are still in the honeymoon phase, who find his way of doing things too direct. He turned up for his first meeting with the local management after being elected to the Committee on Hygiene, Safety and Working Conditions with 50 different demands; he admits now that he was too inexperienced to prioritise the most important, but it is hard to deny the fact that his approach ("do what it takes to get the company to respond") is an effective one.

Building skills

This was the start of his career as a union activist, he quickly learned to schedule his tasks, to negotiate and (most importantly) to communicate effectively without losing his direct and provocative style. He learned how to play the system by turning the tables on Amazon's managers and subjecting them to the kind of pressure they usually subject on others: when a problem is reported to him, he goes to see for himself what has happened, takes photographs (which he sometimes posts to social media) and draws up

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a report which he then sends to all managers with a request to take action. He is well aware of the significance of image and reputation for an e-commerce company, and his approach gets results: "Sometimes I feel like I hold more sway than one of the company's managers."

Over time, Julien Vincent gradually took on more responsibility at regional and then national level, and today acts as the central trade union delegate for Amazon France. He also continues to build his skills through training, in particular on health-related topics, in order to assess the risks to which workers in the Amazon warehouses are exposed and to identify the countermeasures which could be taken, with a particular focus on the standards which apply in areas such as carrying heavy loads and working postures, as well as making further refinements to the method he has developed to report problems and get them fixed, for example by using photographs.

Julien Vincent has recently become involved in a global alliance of trade unions representing Amazon employees, which has already met three times since 2017; at these meetings, union representatives and workers from different European countries, the United States and Australia shared details of their situations and strategised ways of mounting a united front against Amazon. The latter – one of many companies known to pursue anti-union strategies – does not make life easy for its union representatives, and John Logan⁴ (a researcher specialising in the anti-trade union strategies adopted by major US corporations) has collected examples of job listings for managerial positions at Amazon which include knowledge of anti-union tactics among the required skills. Mr. Vincent is aware that this makes the work he does even more important and he believes that trade unions need to launch a collective counter-offensive against the methods deployed by Amazon to exploit and control its workers by "fighting fire with fire". The alliance coordinated strikes across several countries last November under the slogan "We are not robots", which is clear evidence that it is starting to find its feet in organisational terms and take action, although Julien Vincent wishes that progress were faster, he has plenty to keep him busy in France – not least the role of central trade union delegate, which involves negotiating agreements for present and future Amazonians. ●