

The Amazon That Customers Don't See

Each year, hundreds of thousands of workers churn through a vast mechanism that hires and monitors, disciplines and fires. Amid the pandemic, the already strained system lurched.



Jeff Bezos, Amazon's founder

By Jodi Kantor, Karen Weise and Grace Ashford

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LAST SEPTEMBER, Ann Castillo saw an email from Amazon that made no sense. Her husband had worked for the company for five years, most recently at the supersize warehouse on Staten Island that served as the retailer's critical pipeline to New York City. Now it wanted him back on the night shift.

"We notified your manager and H.R. about your return to work on Oct. 1, 2020," the message said.

Ms. Castillo was incredulous. While working mandatory overtime in the spring, her 42-year-old husband, Alberto, had been among the first wave of employees at the site

to test positive for the coronavirus. Ravaged by fevers and infections, he suffered extensive brain damage. On tests of responsiveness, Ms. Castillo said, “his score was almost nothing.”



Mr. Castillo with his wife, Ann, and their children.

For months, Ms. Castillo, a polite, get-it-done physical therapist, had been alerting the company that her husband, who had been proud to work for the retail giant, was severely ill. The responses were disjointed and confusing. Emails and calls to Amazon’s automated systems often dead-ended. The company’s benefits were generous, but she had been left panicking as disability payments mysteriously halted. She managed to speak to several human resources workers, one of whom reinstated the payments, but after that, the dialogue mostly reverted to phone trees, auto-replies and voice mail messages on her husband’s phone asking if he was coming back.

The return-to-work summons deepened her suspicion that Amazon didn’t fully register his situation. “Haven’t they kept track of what happened to him?” she said. She wanted to ask the company: “Are your workers disposable? Can you just replace them?”

Mr. Castillo’s workplace, the only Amazon fulfillment center in America’s largest city, was achieving the impossible during the pandemic. With New York’s classic industries suffering mass collapse, the warehouse, called JFK8, absorbed hotel workers, actors, bartenders and dancers, paying nearly \$18 an hour. Driven by a new sense of mission

to serve customers afraid to shop in person, JFK8 helped Amazon smash shipping records, reach stratospheric sales and book the equivalent of the previous three years' profits rolled into one.

That success, speed and agility were possible because Amazon and its founder, Jeff Bezos, had pioneered new ways of mass-managing people through technology, relying on a maze of systems that minimized human contact to grow unconstrained.

But the company was faltering in ways outsiders could not see, according to a New York Times examination of JFK8 over the last year.

In contrast to its precise, sophisticated processing of packages, Amazon's model for managing people — heavily reliant on metrics, apps and chatbots — was uneven and strained even before the coronavirus arrived, with employees often having to act as their own caseworkers, interviews and records show. Amid the pandemic, Amazon's system burned through workers, resulted in inadvertent firings and stalled benefits, and impeded communication, casting a shadow over a business success story for the ages.

Amazon took steps unprecedented at the company to offer leniency, but then at times contradicted or ended them. Workers like Mr. Castillo at JFK8 were told to take as much unpaid time off as they needed, then hit with mandatory overtime. When Amazon offered employees flexible personal leaves, the system handling them jammed, issuing a blizzard of job-abandonment notices to workers and sending staff scrambling to save them, according to human resources and warehouse employees.

After absences initially soared and disrupted shipping, Amazon left employees mostly in the dark about the toll of the virus. The company did not tell workers at JFK8 or other warehouses the number of cases, causing them to worry whether notifications about "individuals" testing positive meant two or 22. While Amazon said publicly that it was disclosing confirmed cases to health officials, New York City records show no reported cases until November. The company and city officials dispute what happened.

Amazon continued to track every minute of most warehouse workers' shifts, from how fast they packed merchandise to how long they paused — the kind of monitoring that spurred a failed unionization drive led by frustrated Black employees at an Alabama warehouse this spring. If productivity flagged, Amazon's computers assumed the worker was to blame. Early in the pandemic, the online retailer paused its firing of employees for low output, but that change was not announced clearly at JFK8, so some workers still feared that moving too slowly would cost them their livelihoods.

"It is very important that area managers understand that associates are more than just numbers," an employee wrote on JFK8's internal feedback board last fall, adding: "We are human beings. We are not tools used to make their daily/weekly goals and rates."

The company touted breathtaking job-creation numbers: From July to October 2020 alone, it scooped up 350,000 new workers, more than the population of St. Louis. Many recruits — hired through a computer screening, with little conversation or vetting — lasted just days or weeks.

Even before the pandemic, previously unreported data shows, Amazon lost about 3 percent of its hourly associates each week, meaning the turnover among its work force was roughly 150 percent a year. That rate, almost double that of the retail and logistics industries, has made some executives worry about running out of workers across America.

In documenting the untold story of how the pandemic exposed the power and peril of Amazon's employment system, reporters interviewed nearly 200 current and former employees, from new hires at the JFK8 bus stop to back-office workers overseas to managers on Staten Island and in Seattle. The Times also reviewed company documents, legal filings and government records, as well as posts from warehouse feedback boards that served as a real-time ticker of worker concerns.

This April, Mr. Bezos said he was proud of the company's work culture, the "achievable" productivity goals, the pay and benefits. In interviews, the head of human

resources for warehouses and the general manager of JFK8 said that the company prioritized employee welfare, noted that it had expanded its H.R. staff and cited internal surveys showing high worker satisfaction. Some managers from JFK8 and beyond described building deep relationships with their teams.

Amazon acknowledged some issues with inadvertent firings, loss of benefits, job abandonment notices and leaves, but declined to disclose how many people were affected. Kelly Nantel, a spokeswoman, suggested that those problems and some others chronicled in this article were outliers.

Ofori Agboka, the H.R. leader, noted that social distancing and masking had made it harder to engage employees in personal ways during the pandemic. Still, he said, “98 percent of everything’s going great — people are having the right experiences,” getting the help they need when they want it.

But several former executives who helped design Amazon’s systems, and still call themselves admirers of the company, said the high turnover, pressure over productivity and consequences of scaling up have become too critical to ignore. The company has not ambitiously addressed those issues, said Paul Stroup, who until recently led corporate teams devoted to understanding warehouse workers.

“Amazon can solve pretty much any problem it puts its mind behind,” he said in an interview. The human resources division, though, had nowhere near the focus, rigor and investment of Amazon’s logistical operations, where he had previously worked. “It felt like I was in a different company,” he said.

David Niekerk, a former Amazon vice president who built the warehouse human resources operations, said that some problems stemmed from ideas the company had developed when it was much smaller. Mr. Bezos did not want an entrenched work force, calling it “a march to mediocrity,” Mr. Niekerk recalled, and saw low-skilled jobs as relatively short-term. As Amazon rapidly grew, Mr. Niekerk said, its policies were

harder to implement with fairness and care. “It is just a numbers game in many ways,” he said. “The culture gets lost.”

Even Mr. Bezos, in his final lap as chief executive of the company he created, is now making startling concessions about the system he invented. In a recent letter to shareholders, he said the union effort showed that “we need a better vision for how we create value for employees — a vision for their success.”

“We have always wanted to be Earth’s most customer-centric company,” he wrote. Now, he added, “we are going to be Earth’s best employer and Earth’s safest place to work.”

Amazon is also on pace to become the nation’s largest private employer within a year or two, as it continues expanding. About a million people in the United States, most of them hourly workers, now rely on the company’s wages and benefits. Many describe the job as rewarding. Adama Ndoye had supported her family on her JFK8 pay while attending college remotely. “Lights on, food, clothes, everything,” she said. Dawn George, a chef, said she was grateful to JFK8 for taking her in after hotel kitchen jobs disappeared last spring. “I’m willing to work my socks off just for an hourly income,” she said.

Some admire Amazon’s ambition. “It was like being a pitcher on a team that had a game every night,” said Dan Cavagnaro, who started at JFK8 when it opened in 2018 and worked with Mr. Castillo.

But Mr. Cavagnaro was mistakenly fired in July while trying to return from leave, and could not reach anyone to help.

“Please note the following,” he wrote in his final, unanswered email plea. “I WISH TO REMAIN EMPLOYED WITH AMAZON.”

‘Like a Ghost Town’

In late March 2020, Traci Weishalla walked the length of JFK8, forgoing the fluorescent vest that marked her as a manager. She wanted an unfiltered look at what she would soon be helping to oversee: a warehouse the size of 15 football fields, serving America’s largest metropolis just as it was becoming the national epicenter of the pandemic.

The noise, from conveyor belts whipping around packages, was like the roar of an oncoming subway train. Built to conquer the most lucrative market in the country, the facility ran almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Ms. Weishalla had helped open the warehouse a year and a half earlier, and now — as homebound customers across the nation clamored for thermometers, disinfectant and puzzles — she saw opportunity and purpose in her return as assistant general manager. For an organization that dealt in logistical miracles, the coronavirus was just another obstacle to overcome, she said.

“That’s what we do,” Ms. Weishalla, 38, explained later. “We work to figure out the impossible problems.”

Overtime Notifications

JFK8 announced workers would have mandatory extra time, or M.E.T. in March, a message in direct conflict with its policy of unlimited unpaid time off during this period.

- March 18, 2020
Hello Amazonians This is a reminder that All Departments will be on MET For the week of March 22nd. More than ever our customers are relying on us. Please utilize A to Z to check your schedule. Also don’t forget to report ALL absences, so that we can make sure your time is documented correctly and there are no issues.

But Amazon’s mighty system was lurching. Semi trucks sat at warehouses around the country, without enough workers to unload them. Customers discovered that items the

company had deemed nonessential might take a month to arrive — an eternity for a business that had routinely delivered within two days.

One critical reason: Warehouse laborers were not showing up.

Delays Plagued Deliveries to Customers in New York City

With the warehouses short-staffed and the company prioritizing essential items, Amazon's typically fast deliveries took longer to reach customers. In April 2020, 28% of Amazon packages took more than a week to arrive.

To lure them back, Amazon offered a temporary \$2-an-hour raise, double pay for overtime and, for the first time, unlimited unpaid time off. Executives thought that workers should be able to stay home without fear of being fired, and that with greater flexibility, some might still come in for part of a shift, according to two people familiar with the decision. (Like some other senior leaders in this article, they spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment.)

Across the country, almost a third of Amazon's 500,000 workers were staying home. Some new hires abandoned jobs before they even began, according to former recruiters. JFK8 "was like a ghost town," recalled Arthur Turner, a worker who remained.

Even Alberto Castillo considered staying home. The numbers on the news were unfathomable: at least 20,000 New Yorkers already infected, city hospitals jammed, as many as 1.7 million deaths projected nationwide.

But this was no time to go without his income: The Castillos, immigrants from the Philippines, yearned to buy a house. He worked nights, troubleshooting and training with gentle mastery, frequent jokes and "Star Wars" references, colleagues said, and he had just applied for a promotion.

JFK8 was also giving contradictory instructions: Despite Amazon's promise of unpaid time off, workers were alerted that every department would be on mandatory overtime.

When Mr. Castillo arrived on March 24, he heard the warehouse had its first positive case. He messaged his boss, who replied, “Yes, forgot to bring that up,” and added that everyone who worked with the employee had been notified. Mr. Castillo called his wife to discuss whether to head home. They decided he would finish out his shift.

On the dawn drive back to New Jersey, his throat began itching.

Organized Labor

That morning, two workers drove in the opposite direction, beelined to JFK8’s break room and told dozens of colleagues: The virus had breached the warehouse, Amazon could not be trusted to tell them the truth and the facility should be shut down.

Derrick Palmer and Chris Smalls, Amazon teammates and best friends, weren’t part of any formal effort. Their employer considered unionization a dire threat, and had even backed out of building a second headquarters in New York in part over potential labor-organizing plans. A retail workers’ union had once boldly declared that JFK8 would become the first unionized Amazon warehouse in the country, but the effort had died.

Both men had been at Amazon since 2015 and knew the company from the lowest rungs. Mr. Palmer, then 31, was observant and deliberate, so fit that he often headed to the gym after a 10-hour shift. After dropping out of community college, he worked in a string of warehouses, joined Amazon and was now a “picker” at JFK8, pulling products off robotic shelves. He often produced top numbers on the software that tracked productivity, and had been selected to train others and help open a warehouse in Illinois.

He also felt let down, believing that Amazon’s towering success didn’t accrue to workers like him. Employees felt managed largely by app, algorithm and strict but poorly explained rules, he said. When he met Ms. Weishalla at a 2019 session for workers to share feedback, he said, he requested more human interaction from

management and told her he aspired to a job like hers. But he saw no changes. “If we go beyond the requirements, there’s no reward,” he said in an interview.

When Mr. Palmer last sought a promotion, in early 2020, he was among 382 people who applied for the position. Though he didn’t know it, the odds were steep by design, an outgrowth of Mr. Bezos’ management philosophies.

Amazon intentionally limited upward mobility for hourly workers, said Mr. Niekerk, the former H.R. vice president who retired in 2016 after nearly 17 years at the company. Dave Clark, then head of operations, had shot down his proposal around 2014 to create more leadership roles for hourly employees, similar to noncommissioned officers in the military, he recalled.

Instead, Mr. Clark, who is now chief executive of Amazon’s consumer business, wanted to double down on hiring “wicked smart” frontline managers straight out of college, Mr. Niekerk said. By contrast, more than 75 percent of managers in Walmart’s U.S. stores started as hourly employees. Following a pattern across Amazon, JFK8 promoted 220 people last year among its more than 5,000 employees, a rate that is less than half of Walmart’s.

Amazon’s founder didn’t want hourly workers to stick around for long, viewing “a large, disgruntled” work force as a threat, Mr. Niekerk recalled. Company data showed that most employees became less eager over time, he said, and Mr. Bezos believed that people were inherently lazy. “What he would say is that our nature as humans is to expend as little energy as possible to get what we want or need.” That conviction was embedded throughout the business, from the ease of instant ordering to the pervasive use of data to get the most out of employees.

So guaranteed wage increases stopped after three years, and Amazon provided incentives for low-skilled employees to leave. Every year, Mr. Palmer saw signs go up offering associates thousands of dollars to resign, and as he entered JFK8 each morning, he passed a classroom for free courses to train them in other fields.

Mr. Agboka, the H.R. leader, said while the company offered training and careers at Amazon to those interested, it was proud to also provide people short-term employment for the “seasons and periods of time” they need.

As the virus arrived at JFK8, Mr. Palmer worried about how Amazon would protect and communicate with workers. Notification about the warehouse’s first positive case had been uneven. A colleague working near Mr. Smalls had appeared sick, her eyes bloodshot as she struggled through her shift.

The two men saw only one solution: for JFK8 to pause, clean and reassess, as an Amazon facility in Queens had briefly done. Unpaid leave wasn’t enough, they said — a company run by the richest man on earth shouldn’t force workers to choose between safety and a paycheck.

Mr. Palmer invited dozens of workers to share concerns on an Instagram chat.

“This is why my ass been staying home,” one wrote.

“Health before wealth honestly, kiss your loved ones daily,” another replied.

“Are you guys actually just picking essential items?” one asked, referring to Amazon’s early-pandemic efforts to ship only necessary merchandise.

“Man, I’m stowing dildos,” another responded.

Nearly all the workers in the group were Black, like Mr. Palmer and Mr. Smalls, or Latino. So were more than 60 percent of associates at JFK8, according to internal Amazon records from 2019. Management, the documents show, was more than 70 percent white or Asian. Black associates at JFK8 were almost 50 percent more likely to be fired — whether for productivity, misconduct, or not showing up for work — than their white peers, the records show. (Amazon said it could not confirm the data without knowing more specifics about its source.)

Workers of Color Fuel Amazon's Operations

A vast majority of the company's warehouse workers in the U.S. are included in the first group in the 2018 data below. These employees are largely people of color, while higher levels of the company tend to be majority white.

Between the constant monitoring, the assumption that many workers are slackers, and the lack of advancement opportunity, “a lot of minority workers just felt like we were being used,” Mr. Palmer said later.

“We’re the heart and soul of that building,” he wrote in the chat. “Nothing gets done without us.”

The two men continued their break-room warnings for several more days, and confronted JFK8 managers. “If, God forbid, somebody in this building passes away, or somebody’s loved one passes away, that’s going to be on your hands, not mine,” Mr. Smalls, the firecracker of the pair, told the warehouse’s top leader, according to an audio recording of one conversation.

On March 30, they demonstrated in the parking lot with a small group of other employees. Mr. Palmer carried a sign that read, “Treat your workers like your customers.”

In Seattle, executives still grappling with cratering attendance sought to minimize the protest but instead drew more attention to it. Amazon fired Mr. Smalls, saying his demonstration had violated a quarantine order based on his contact with the sick co-worker. (Mr. Palmer received a warning for violating social-distancing rules.) Meeting notes taken the next day by the company’s top lawyer and leaked to Vice News called Mr. Smalls “not smart or articulate.”

Though the lawyer soon said he didn’t know Mr. Smalls’s race, a group of Black corporate employees wrote a letter calling the smear part of “a systemic pattern of racial bias that permeates Amazon.” The New York attorney general’s office and Senator Elizabeth Warren asked if the firing was retaliation, which Amazon denied.

Mr. Palmer chose to stay at JFK8, determined to change it from the inside. Mr. Bezos, who had been holing up at his ranch in West Texas, made a rare visit to an Amazon warehouse near Dallas on April 8, flashing a thumbs-up to employees.

Summoning Workers Back

With so many employees staying home — because of family needs, fear of contracting the coronavirus and reluctance to use public transit — the unthinkable was happening to Amazon: Its customers were turning to competitors.

By mid-April, Walmart, Target and other retailers were clearly gaining ground. To reverse the trend and serve its customers, Amazon would have to find a way to bring back workers. Any decision the company made would affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of employees.

The task of sweating out the scenarios fell to Paul Stroup, who ran data science teams in Seattle. Mr. Stroup had been a veteran of what he described as “the brain” of Amazon operations — a division of thousands of employees finding tiny efficiencies to optimize for cheaper, faster and more predictable deliveries — when, in 2019, he made an unusual switch to Human Resources. Some shocked colleagues teased that joining H.R. would be like going on sabbatical.

But he had once been a low-wage worker himself, unloading trucks part time at a Home Depot store for \$9 an hour. Home Depot had also paid half his college tuition. Soon after graduating, he moved to the corporate office.

“If I wanted to help as many people as I could, being at H.R. at Amazon, which is one of the largest employers in the world, has a huge impact,” Mr. Stroup said. He hoped to help improve life not just at Amazon, he said, but for hourly employees at companies that look to its example.

As he evaluated the return-to-work options, he felt confident that Amazon’s warehouses were growing safer, thanks to billions of dollars spent on virus safeguards.

On Staten Island, Ms. Weishalla piloted a process for spraying disinfectant between shifts that was later rolled out across the United States and Europe. Thermal temperature scanners were installed at JFK8 and other warehouses. Colored tape marking one-way paths crisscrossed the floors. Artificial intelligence engineers built a program that projected virtual six-foot circles around employees to help them keep their distance.

“We can’t wait three months,” Ms. Weishalla said. “This is priority No. 1.”

Mr. Stroup also helped data scientists and epidemiologists assemble tools to spot potential outbreaks, creating a centralized source to track cases. While a few Amazon buildings had concerning spikes, he said, the analysis showed that most, including JFK8, had infection rates at or below the known levels — testing was initially limited — in communities where their workers lived. There were no large reported outbreaks in the warehouses like those at meatpacking plants, but Covid deaths around the country were swiftly climbing.

Amazon Lost Market Share Early in the Pandemic

Competitors cut into Amazon’s substantial market share in the U.S., in part because the company was showing customers long delivery times.

Mr. Stroup worried how Amazon would summon workers back. The company needed to know who didn’t intend to return so that it could replace them. But forcing employees too abruptly could result in firing tens of thousands of people. Mr. Stroup knew the work offered a lifeline: “The cleanliness, the procedure, the pay, the benefits — all of that is very competitive,” he said.

He prepared surveys and data for Mr. Clark, the operations chief, who would make the final decision. “I’d heard Dave was saying: ‘Let’s just move faster. This isn’t helping people not knowing if they are coming back to work or not. We’ve created a safe place to work — we’ve proven that people aren’t getting Covid at work — so let’s just find out if they want to come back or not,’” he said.

In a virtual meeting, Mr. Stroup told Mr. Clark that if employees were brought back gradually, over a month or two, only 5 to 10 percent were projected to stay home and lose their jobs. Under the faster plan, many more were likely to be fired for not showing up. “The cold-turkey example was pretty bad,” Mr. Stroup said, “like it was 20 to 30 percent of people would be let go in the month.”

Within days, he heard Mr. Clark had chosen that route. “My team took it hard,” Mr. Stroup said. Even so, he understood Mr. Clark’s predicament. “There’s a lot of pressure when your website normally says one or two days, and now it says 28 days to get something,” he said.

Ms. Nantel, the spokeswoman, said the decision was about supporting customers and communities in a time of need while providing safe jobs for people who wanted them. Amazon declined to make available several of its most senior executives for interviews, including Mr. Clark; Beth Galetti, the head of human resources; and Mr. Bezos.

In late April, Amazon told workers that unlimited unpaid time off would not be extended into May. The company eased requirements for personal leaves; to remain home without penalty, workers had a week left to apply. That decision created chaos.

Human Resources by App

Immediately, leave applications flooded into an Amazon back office in San José, Costa Rica. The system couldn’t keep up.

Dangelo Padilla, a Costa Rican case manager who started at Amazon in 2016, woke up every morning to confront what he described as insurmountable tasks before him and his colleagues. They had already been overwhelmed by a backlog of almost 18,000 cases in early March, emails show, and over the last week in April got 13,500 more requests.

Panicked workers trying to take leaves found phone lines busy and got auto-replies warning of delayed responses. Some who applied for leaves were being penalized for

missing work, triggering warning notices and then terminations. When their messages reached Mr. Padilla and his colleagues, workers were distraught.

“This is impacting the employees and impacting us,” Mr. Padilla said he entreated their managers. “You have to fix this.”

The V.O.A. Board

Workers turn to the internal Voice of Associates (V.O.A.) board with issues large and small, including overtime, which can be mandatory (known as M.E.T.) or voluntary (V.E.T.). Employee names have been redacted for privacy reasons.

- **worker** Oct. 16, 2020
How can MET be called with no notification, no text, no email nothing. You just put it on our schedule. Once I finish my shift today ill be at 55hrs. I would only be able to work 5hrs tomorrow im not going to travel 3hrs to work 5hrs that makes no sense at all
- **manager** Oct. 19, 2020
Hey [name redacted], thank you for reaching out! Based on risk to customer orders this past weekend and limited VET acceptance for Saturday, the decision was made to call MET just for the DC7 cohort to ensure we could meet these customer commitments. The JFK8 team is generally very proactive in calling MET as to give our teams plenty of time to plan ahead, however due to increased customer orders on Prime Week and that impact on the weekend, it was necessary to call at that time. MET notification was sent out prior to lunch on Friday, which is within the allotted time to announce for those on site. A to Z was then adjusted a few hours after that. For instances such as this, our HR team is able to work with those that have extenuating circumstances. Thank you!

The team that vetted leaves had long struggled with rickety technology, according to Mr. Padilla and eight other current and former employees in Costa Rica. Right before the pandemic, they started using a new case-management system called Dali to address the problems and provide flexibility, but it was buggy. Staff members were constantly encountering problems. “We were lost,” Mr. Padilla said. “Not even our managers knew how to handle it.”

Faxes and emails that were supposed to be automatically sorted ended up in a massive inbox that had to be manually triaged. Approved leaves that were supposed to be

directly reflected in worker attendance programs instead had to be input by hand at another back office, in Pune, India.

When that wasn't done on time, warehouse employees with approved leaves got notices warning that they would be fired for abandoning their jobs. "I saw those situations every day — people getting U.P.T. deducted for no reason, people being terminated for no reasons," Mr. Padilla said.

In interviews, more than 25 current and former Amazon employees who dealt with the disability and leave system — executives, human resources personnel from JFK8 and other warehouses, and back office staff in the United States and abroad — bemoaned its inadequacy, calling it a source of frustration and panic. For years, they said, it had been prone to the kinds of errors Mr. Padilla described. Amazon catches many of the mistakes; some employees fight their own cases and prevail. Others give up and quit.

Ms. Nantel, the spokeswoman, said that the company quickly approved personal leaves during this period, hiring 500 people to help process the increased volume. She said Amazon received more than a million leave requests in the first year of the pandemic, twice its forecast, and worked hard to contact employees before they were fired to see if they wanted to keep their jobs.

Workers turned to H.R. teams in the warehouses for help, though they weren't primarily responsible for leaves. Even under normal circumstances, they were stretched thin. In interviews, veterans from Staten Island and across the country described long hours trying to fix errors, enforce Amazon's rules fairly and respond to the problems that plague any low-income work force — transportation breakdowns, lack of child care. At JFK8, some employees said they had spent an entire 30-minute break waiting in line for H.R. without getting to speak to anyone.

In the warehouses, self-service kiosks performed many traditional human resources functions. An app called A to Z handled everything from payroll to schedule changes.

Many workers said they found the app easy to use. It has a 4.7-star rating in Apple's App Store, but even some of those who praise it see broader problems. "App is awesome, very helpful. BUT!!!!!!!!!!!" begins one five-star review users have designated as most helpful. "Associates should be able to speak to a person, not a virtual chat bot to get individual help. ... Especially when many say they were fired because the chat reps forget sometimes or it doesn't get through."

The technology is designed to give workers many ways to communicate and was not meant to replace live interactions, Ms. Nantel said. She added that the H.R. staff for warehouse workers had grown by 60 percent since 2019 — a rise that parallels that of the hourly work force. At JFK8, the human resources team for the more than 5,000 employees has increased from 25 to 34 staff members since the start of the pandemic.

Mr. Padilla resigned from Amazon last summer, but returned this May, grateful to join a team that has nothing to do with managing leaves. "Being there," he said, "basically destroyed my mental health and my stability."

Record Profits, Halted Raises

On Staten Island, workers began getting the dreaded warnings.

Mr. Cavagnaro, who had worked with Alberto Castillo, had taken a leave from Amazon. He suggested a June return date on a doctor's note, but couldn't reach the company to ask questions or discuss coming back. Amazon's attendance systems recorded him as a no-show, and he began getting job-abandonment notices. Unable to get a reply, he threw his hands up and allowed himself to be fired.

After The Times asked Amazon about his situation, the company offered him his job back. (His case "should have been handled better," Ms. Nantel said.)

By the time Mr. Cavagnaro was struggling in late spring to return to JFK8, Mr. Castillo had severely declined. Doctors told his wife that he would never again speak, eat or work. Unable to visit him because of virus restrictions, Ms. Castillo created a mural in

their small apartment, showing the family of four celebrating church festivities, doing martial arts and wearing matching Halloween costumes. On Father's Day, the couple's two children stood outside the medical center where he was being treated, with posters declaring their devotion.

Health insurance that Amazon provided covered most of the medical bills, but Ms. Castillo discovered that her husband's short-term disability payments had stopped. "I kept sending in medical forms but couldn't tell if anyone on the other end was actually receiving them," she said. The house they had hoped to buy was a vanished dream; now she was counting every penny and accepting donations from friends.

JFK8's human resources manager apologized and set the 10 weeks of missed payments right. Amazon said the documents Ms. Castillo had submitted never made it to his case manager, a systems issue that had affected others as well.

As workers returned, Amazon informed employees nationwide that it was ending the \$2-an-hour raise and double overtime pay. The extra wages had not been "hazard" pay, officials said, but an incentive to show up.

The V.O.A. Board

- **worker** March 2, 2021

It would be nice if there were more advancement opportunities for jobs inside amazon that are outside the FC. Most jobs at higher level require experience that people don't have and will not get an opportunity to get. Thanks

- **human resources** March 3, 2021

Hi [name redacted], thank you for your comment. We do have numerous job opportunities posted, which can be found on Jobfinder.com. [name redacted], your manager will be following up with you to discuss in more detail, help you find what you are looking for and answer any questions you may have. Update 3/4/21: Thank you for speaking with [name redacted]. Please let us know if you have any additional questions or concerns. Thank you!

The decision to force workers back ushered the company into the most profitable era in its history. By late May, JFK8 was a top-performing warehouse, bringing in 1.68

million items in a single week, Christine Hernandez, who worked in human resources, boasted on Twitter. “Yasss!!!” she cheered.

In July, Amazon announced \$5.2 billion in earnings for the quarter — a record, until the next quarter brought \$6.3 billion.

Amazon had been “running pretty much full out” since the beginning of May when more people were back at work, Brian Olsavsky, the company’s finance chief, explained on a call with reporters. That let the online retailer meet the enormous demand more efficiently, working at full capacity around the clock. It was like Black Friday every single day.

The Power of the Metrics

For Traci Weishalla and her peers, a key to boosting thousands of employees to that level of performance was setting the pace. Speed was essential, but so was keeping the whole warehouse in rhythm. If new items were unpacked more quickly than they could be prepared for shipping, all of JFK8 could jam. The fulfillment center was one organism in an even bigger ecosystem of warehouses, and to coordinate with them and the fleet of delivery drivers, Ms. Weishalla had to maintain a quick, consistent pulse.

Two measurements dominated most hourly employees’ shifts. Rate gauged how fast they worked, a constantly fluctuating number displayed at their station. Time off task, or T.O.T., tracked every moment they strayed from their assignment — whether trekking to the bathroom, troubleshooting broken machinery or talking to a co-worker. The company pioneered new ways to calculate both metrics in the mid-2000s, when a smaller, scrappier Amazon set out to revolutionize warehouses.

Mr. Niekerk, the former H.R. chief for operations, said the emphasis on productivity tracking, alluring in a company as analytical as Amazon, was debated from the start. He had been skeptical, arguing that “a productivity metric is always a frightening thing,” conveying “One slip-up and I will fall behind.”

“I lost that battle,” he said. Eventually, he said, promises of firmer, faster delivery created “a multiplying effect on the demand for higher productivity.”

In newer, robotics-driven warehouses like JFK8, those metrics were at the center of Amazon’s operation. A single frontline manager could keep track of 50, 75, even 100 workers by checking a laptop. Auto-generated reports signaled when someone was struggling. A worker whose rate was too slow, or whose time off task climbed too high, risked being disciplined or fired. If a worker was off task, the system assumed the worker was to blame. Managers were told to ask workers what happened, and manually code in what they deemed legitimate excuses, like broken machinery, to override the default.

Internal documents show that managers were instructed to address only the “top offender” for time off task in each department per shift. Less than 1 percent of terminations in 2019 were over rate or time off task, according to Ms. Nantel.

But workers didn’t know that. The goal, JFK8’s internal guidelines state, “is to create an environment not where we are writing everyone up, but that associates know that we are auditing for T.O.T.” Workers could not readily see their T.O.T. totals, increasing anxiety. Word spread that Amazonians couldn’t take bathroom breaks — a misperception rooted in real apprehension. Some employees chronicled their workday down to the minute in a notebook, just in case.

The V.O.A. Board

- **worker** Oct. 21, 2020
It is very Important that area managers understand that associates are more than just numbers or just our logins but that we are human beings. We are not tools used to reach their daily / weekly goals and rates but that we need their support in becoming better employees.
- **manager** Oct. 22, 2020
Hi [name redacted], let's meet in person to discuss your concerns in further detail.

Mr. Agboka said time off task was intended to identify impediments a worker may face. “We don’t want people working with the mind-set of loss of employment versus being productive and being successful,” he said.

Some employees, like Arthur Turner, found the systems fair: “If you come here and do the right thing, you follow all the protocols that they want you to, you can’t get in any trouble.”

Dayana Santos, 32, who started at JFK8 in June 2019, appreciated the metrics. “How can I do my job efficiently if the next person isn’t doing theirs?” asked Ms. Santos, who sometimes raced with colleagues for fun. “Why does everything have to be a competition with you, Santos?” her boss would tease.

After months of praise from her managers, Ms. Santos had one very bad day. She had been working in robotics, but because her bus was late, she was sent to picking. She was offered a different assignment after lunch, but it never came through, and her station in picking was occupied. She traversed the warehouse looking for another one, racking up more time off task. That afternoon, she was stunned to discover that she was being fired.

Stories like that intimidate workers even before their first day, a human resources team at Amazon headquarters found. “Everyone in your community, every third person, has worked at Amazon,” Mr. Stroup said. “You have pieces of information that you’ve been told at the dinner table or with friends.”

Experiments by one of Mr. Stroup’s teams found that prodding workers did not make them productive enough to be worth the anxiety. The team joked that giving a worker \$5 “probably would have a better impact than a manager going and telling you, ‘You did a bad job last week.’” Work on the issue stalled when the pandemic created more pressing priorities.

But over the summer, resistance to the policies was rising. With the extra Covid pay gone and Black Lives Matter protests spreading across the nation, a small group of

Black workers at a new warehouse in Bessemer, Ala., on the outskirts of Birmingham, were bristling at how Amazon micromanaged their time. Frustrated, one of them in an online search hit upon the retail workers' union that once had ambitions to organize JFK8.

In New York, Ms. Santos was making her own small stand. Amazon had contested her unemployment benefits, arguing that she had been fired for cause. She fought back, and an administrative court judge sided with her, noting that she had never received a warning and that Amazon hadn't proved she was off task.

In midsummer, a message from Ms. Weishalla landed in JFK8 workers' email inboxes and was posted inside bathroom stalls, saying that "productivity feedback" was suspended because of the pandemic. That meant no one would be fired for being too slow. Confusingly, the message, which also noted extra minutes for hand-washing, said the changes had been in effect since March.

Until the notices, many workers had no idea Amazon had relaxed one of its most controversial employment policies. Rates were still displayed at workstations, and initial instructions to managers had been marked "verbal guidance only." Ms. Nantel said that managers were supposed to tell each worker individually, calling it a high-touch approach. The building-wide notices from Ms. Weishalla had been prompted by a lawsuit — later dismissed — challenging pandemic working conditions at JFK8. The lead plaintiff was Derrick Palmer.

Though workers couldn't be punished for low rates, managers still encouraged speed. One late summer day, Thalia Morales, then 28, was limiting bathroom trips to improve her productivity. She finally couldn't wait any longer — and found the nearest ladies room closed. Ms. Morales exploded in anger at a cleaner, who said she couldn't enter. She was fired for the verbal altercation, she recalled in an interview, and told she could never reapply.

Soon, to her shock, the app pinged her for missing work. She returned to the warehouse with trepidation, completed her shift and still works there today. It turned out her termination hadn't been processed properly — Amazon had erred in her favor.

By the end of September, word traveled around JFK8 and other warehouses: The reprieve on rate was over. The holiday season was coming, and it was expected to be like none other.

Burning Through the Work Force

On Oct. 13, the bus stop outside JFK8 was flooded with workers hired in a surge without parallel in American corporate history. It was Prime Day, the invented Amazon shopping holiday that kicked off the Christmas season. To meet the moment, the warehouse was absorbing entire friend and family units without job interviews, and in most cases, little to no conversation between employer and applicants.

As dusk settled and trucks rolled by, Tiara Mangroo, a high school student just off her shift, embraced her boyfriend. He worked for Amazon on Staten Island too, as did her father, uncle, cousins and best friend. Keanu Bushell, a college student, worked days, and his father nights, sharing one car that made four daily trips between Brooklyn and JFK8. A mother and daughter organized containers of meals for their middle-of-the-night breaks; others packed Red Bull or Starbucks Frappuccinos in the clear theft-prevention bags that workers carried. Most said they were grateful just to be employed.

Kevin Michelus, 60, and retired after a lifetime of odd jobs, had been drawn in by a postcard advertising work. “No résumé, no job experience required,” he said. “I’ve never heard of a job like that.” He and the other newcomers had been hired after only a quick online screening. Internally, some describe the company’s automated employment process as “lights-out hiring,” with algorithms making decisions, and limited sense on Amazon’s part of whom it is bringing in.

Mr. Niekerk said Mr. Bezos drove the push to remove humans from the hiring process, saying Amazon's need for workers would be so great, the applications had to be "a check-the-box screen." Mr. Bezos also saw automated assessments as a consistent, unbiased way to find motivated workers, Mr. Niekerk said.

Amazon boasted about the jobs it created, calling itself a force for growth and sustenance. What the numbers masked was that many workers cycled out of Amazon within months or even days.

Amazon's Turnover Outpaces Its Peers'

Amazon is so large, and its churn so high, it affects the industry turnover rate where it operates, according to a Times analysis. In the two years after Amazon opened a new facility, the county turnover rate of warehousing and storage employees rose an average of 30 percentage points compared with two years prior.

As the weeks wore on, hints of trouble were cropping up, according to interviews and posts on JFK8's internal feedback board viewed by The Times. Several said workers should get more warning about mandatory overtime, that schedules changed "with no call, no text, no email, nothing." H.R. representatives were "hard to find," "not trained," and "not able to handle genuine complaints." Others wondered why they had to go find an H.R. representative to fix errors in unpaid time off deducted by the A to Z app. "Look at all the technology we have now," one employee wrote. "I'm sure this can be corrected."

Some of the workers faltered immediately or just seemed wrong for the job. Ms. Mangroo wasn't even supposed to be there; Amazon's hiring policies don't allow for high schoolers. She was fired for time off task problems, after what Amazon called repeated coaching attempts. Soon her best friend and uncle were gone too. Mr. Michelus, the retiree recruited by postcard, had a low productivity rate. Stressed, he quit 11 days after he began.

Keanu Bushell, half of the father-son commuting tag team, didn't trust Amazon's systems to tally his time correctly and resigned. With limited hours on public transit,

some newcomers were struggling with 2 or 3 a.m. wake-ups in far corners of the city, three-hour odysseys to the warehouse and nearly 12-hour shifts. Others were washouts — stealing merchandise, playing games on their phones for long stretches in the bathroom, abusing the leave policy.

In 2019, Amazon hired more than 770,000 hourly workers, even though the company, including corporate staff, grew by just 150,000 that year, John Phillips, the former head of mass hiring, wrote on LinkedIn. That meant the equivalent of Amazon’s entire work force — roughly 650,000 people at the start of the year — left and were replaced that year. The company declined to provide numbers for 2020.

For some, the short-term relationship worked. Stephen Ojo, a dancer in Brooklyn, joined JFK8 in the spring. “It was a good way for me to make extra money, it wasn’t clashing with my schedule, it fit with my life at the time,” he said. But he also knew that Amazon wasn’t his future. He was a star dancer in Beyoncé’s film “Black Is King,” which would stream to viewers in the summer. By then, he was done at Amazon.

Others needed the work. Days after Mr. Michelus quit, he was back at the bus stop. “I’ve got to learn to deal with the pressure,” he said. Amazon took him back, and soon he was picking items again.

The V.O.A. Board

- **worker** Feb. 28, 2021

I don't have any complaints today is just my final day working here. I want to say, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. It is because of Amazon that i was able to make friends, learn, grow, and pay off my college bill. I thank the incredible stow team and their leaders and everyone that made this place what it is. Thank you amazon for everything.

- **manager** March 1, 2021

[name redacted] we wish you all the best and thank you for your service here at JFK8! Although it's a big team it really does feel like a family here and we will miss having you here on the team but all the best in your new endeavors! :)

With the high churn, multiple current and former Amazon executives fear there simply will not be enough workers. In the more remote towns where Amazon based its early U.S. operations, it burned through local labor pools and needed to bus people in.

“Six to seven people who apply equals one person showing up and actually doing work,” Mr. Stroup explained. If Amazon is churning through its entire work force once or twice a year, he said, “You need to have eight, nine, 10 million people apply each year.” That’s about 5 percent of the entire American work force.

Ms. Nantel responded to multiple questions about Amazon’s turnover by repeating, “Attrition is only one data point, which when used alone lacks important context.”

Many newcomers were in impractical situations, whether because of schedules or commutes. “Sometimes, it’s simply not a good fit,” said Ms. Weishalla, the JFK8 manager.

Mr. Stroup says he is forever “an Amazon fanboy.” But over time in human resources there, he became disappointed that he “didn’t hear long-term thinking” about the company’s quick cycling through workers. He likened it to using fossil fuels despite climate change.

“We keep using them,” he said, “even though we know we’re slowly cooking ourselves.”

He left Amazon too. After almost nine years at the company, he joined Shopify, another e-commerce business, where he hoped his insights might have more impact.

Billions, Bonuses, Bananas

Ann Castillo stood outside her New Jersey apartment complex in early December, about to take on the responsibility of a lifetime. She had decided to bring her husband, now on hospice care, home and tend to him herself. Even with Amazon’s long-term disability insurance, she might have to move into low-income housing.

“If he’s going to go, then at least he’s with us,” she said.

She saw no sign that anyone in charge at JFK8 knew what was going on. “They never called and asked to follow up on how he’s doing,” she said.

A moment later, a procession of emergency vehicles flooded the small parking lot, lights flashing in salute. The drivers, town officials who were strangers to Ms. Castillo, told her to call day or night. When the ambulance arrived, it took all of the visitors to maneuver Alberto Castillo into the apartment.

Ms. Castillo’s own employer, a nonprofit home health care provider, overwhelmed her with support, arranging twice as many hospice nurse visits as usual, donating the extra nursing time and giving money from an emergency fund. Nearly everyone else in their lives, and even some strangers, had pitched in too, Ms. Castillo said: teachers, fellow parents, soccer teammates and coaches, church members, and old friends from the Philippines sent groceries, meals, gift cards and checks.

Months later, after inquiries from The Times, an H.R. official and a JFK8 staff member reached out to Ms. Castillo. A spokeswoman expressed regret that Ms. Castillo did not feel properly supported. Mr. Agboka, the H.R. leader, said in a statement, “We have her, her husband, and their loved ones in our thoughts and prayers.”

Inside the warehouse, Ms. Weishalla, who had been promoted to general manager, tracked nearly every conceivable metric about JFK8’s demand, attendance and inventory. But she said she did not keep tabs on how many workers were infected. “It’s not a daily thing I track — it’s hard to quantify that,” she said in an interview. “No one is sending me a number.”

(Ms. Nantel said Ms. Weishalla had access to cases via an online portal and was well informed of JFK8’s case count.)

The holiday-season sprint known as Peak arrived just as a second wave of the virus slammed into the region. The true measure of infection among JFK8 workers was hard

to know. Amazon was providing free on-site testing by October. But it did not share with the general work force the names of those infected, for privacy reasons, or offer guidance on where or what shifts they worked.

As a result, many employees learned about positive cases informally, setting the rumor mill running. When Derrick Palmer realized the company never sent a notification about a colleague who told him she was sick, he confronted managers, who could not explain why. (Ms. Nantel said it was an error, adding that the warehouse has since found only one other missing notification.) To him, that lapse, along with the lack of clarity about Covid numbers, underscored his belief since March that Amazon was not being transparent about the virus threat.

For months, Amazon had said publicly that it was reporting confirmed cases at JFK8 and other warehouses to local health authorities, as required of employers. But New York City health department records show no reports until November.

Ms. Nantel said that Amazon had regularly reported cases since March 2020, and attributed the lack of records to the city health department's being overwhelmed early in the pandemic. A spokesman for the agency, Patrick Gallahue, acknowledged that its reporting system was not set up until July, but said there was no reason that cases reported later would not be documented.

According to city data and records disclosed by Amazon in a lawsuit, the warehouse had at least 700 confirmed cases between March 2020 and March 2021. Given the limited testing in the New York metropolitan area last spring, that may well be an undercount.

As Christmas approached, JFK8 was setting an Amazon record for volume. "Huge congrats to the team hitting over 1 Million units in 24 hours kicking off Peak 2020!" Ms. Weishalla cheered on LinkedIn. The workers "achieved the unachievable," echoed another manager. Soon Ms. Weishalla was promoted again, supervising multiple warehouses in the Midwest.

JFK8 was just a small part of Amazon's success. From October through December, Amazon brought in \$125.6 billion in sales. In the pandemic year of 2020, it spent \$44 billion leasing airplanes, constructing data centers, and opening new warehouses — and still produced more than \$21 billion in profit. Globally, it spent \$2.5 billion on the extra pandemic pay in spring and seasonal bonuses; for the holidays, warehouse employees got \$300, \$150 for part-timers.

Amazon Is Building Warehouses Faster Than Ever

In Facebook groups, warehouse workers across the country shared photos of the messages their managers sent to motivate and reward them. Some won air fryers or Fire TV Sticks. In Connecticut, a manager messaged employees at their workstations that if they handled 400 items an hour, or about one every 10 seconds, “you WIN CANDY.” At another, a sign went up during the holidays: “Today's Snack: A Banana *Available 9 a.m. until 7 p.m.*” In Ohio, workers got scratch-off cards to win prizes.

One employee scratched off two with the same message: “Please try again.”

Looking for Signs of Change

A few weeks into the new year, Derrick Palmer took a 16-hour road trip with Mr. Smalls to Bessemer to witness the most serious push workers had ever made to challenge their status at Amazon. The employees galvanizing Amazon's first-ever unionization vote framed their treatment as an issue of racial justice. Above all, they objected to the time off task system and other productivity monitoring, and called their campaign a quest for respect in the workplace.

Amazon waged a ground war, warning — through posted signs, texts and mandatory meetings — that union negotiations could risk the good jobs and benefits workers already had. In the end, the election was not even close: The retail union lost by more than 2 to 1.

Back on Staten Island, Mr. Palmer and Mr. Smalls embarked on a new mission anyway. As legal fights continued over whether JFK8 was safe during the virus and how Amazon handled the March 2020 protests, they began collecting hundreds of workers' signatures in a quest to unionize JFK8. Amazon pulled out its Bessemer playbook and fought back, posting discouraging signs in bathrooms and at the building's entrance. Mr. Palmer, still packing boxes as the company countered his efforts, felt the pressure on him grow.

But at the same time, the Alabama rout was leading to an unexpected moment of recognition by the company. The complaints heard in Bessemer were echoed by workers at multiple warehouses across the country. A new, labor-friendly president was in the White House. The virus had magnified fundamental questions about Amazon's relationship with its employees, and the reopening economy presented workers with other options — a potential problem for a business whose growth ambitions are larger than ever.

In the final months of Jeff Bezos' tenure as chief executive, his high-turnover model looked riskier, and the concerns about how Amazon treated the workers who powered its rise were tarnishing his legacy. During the pandemic, Mr. Bezos' personal wealth exploded from \$110 billion to more than \$190 billion. He had also been building a \$500 million superyacht, according to the new book "Amazon Unbound," and preparing for his first spaceflight after investing billions in his rocket company, Blue Origin.

Mr. Bezos' commitment in April to become "Earth's best employer" raised questions — about what exactly that meant, and how far he and his successors would go.

Amazon soon rolled out more raises. Starting wages at JFK8 went up 50 cents, to \$18.25. The company announced safety initiatives and diversity plans, including a goal to "retain employees at statistically similar rates across all demographics" — an implicit admission that the numbers had been uneven across races. Ms. Weishalla's successors on Staten Island were holding weekly "talent review" meetings to ensure

that Black and Latino workers, among others, were finding advancement opportunities.

In an interview, Mr. Agboka, the head of warehouse human resources, acknowledged that the company had relied too heavily on technology to manage workers. “We’re recognizing that in many times, where we thought self-service was good, self-service was not the only — can’t be the only — solution,” he said. “Every experience matters. And when the experiences aren’t right, we’ve got to find a way to fix it.”

But it wasn’t clear how much the company was willing to reconsider the sacrosanct systems of productivity, automation and high turnover that propelled it to dominance. “Are they going to address the issue of an expendable work force?” asked Mr. Cavagnaro, the fired worker who was returning to JFK8. “Are there going to be any changes?”

After repeated inquiries from The Times about the time off task policy and Dayana Santos, the JFK8 worker who challenged her termination, Amazon this month announced an immediate change: No longer could someone be fired for one bad day. All those who had been were now eligible for rehiring. The company said it had been reconsidering the policy for months.

In Seattle, Paul Stroup, whose teams studied Amazon’s hourly work force, watched the recent events and read Mr. Bezos’ letter. He felt caught between skepticism and hope that the company would finally deploy what he considered its best qualities — a penchant for fresh, open-minded thinking and tackling ambiguous, hard problems — in service of its workers.

“It would be an amazing thing for hourly employment across industries,” he wrote in a note on LinkedIn. “Jeff’s comment makes me think things could change, but it may be too late to reverse the damage it has done.”

“Now,” he said, “let’s see if they can innovate their way out of this.”