

# Pushing the Boundaries: How the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) Innovated its Strategies for Representing Amazon Workers.

Marta D'Onofrio, *Graduate Research Fellow at University of Eastern Piedmont.*

*March 2018*

Amazon, the leading company in the e-commerce sector, is an interesting case study to show how industrial relations, together with its fundamental institutions, are daily challenged by the decisions made within giant corporations. The main problem lies in the fact that the asymmetry in power and the gap in the ability to attract and distribute resources both exasperate and dangerously knock the legs out from under the conflict between multinationals and trade unions. The latter, we know, have long been more occupied with implementing defensive strategies and protecting their margins of action which have been challenged by many parties due to the transformations that are taking place within the labour market.

The case study of Amazon can be fruitful, as it represents a rather ambiguous and, in some ways, unprecedented example of a company where what there is of 'old' and 'new' in terms of work are constantly mixed up. On the one hand, Amazon has, with good reason, entered the common imaginary as a leading and representative enterprise of the 'Digital Revolution', through its extensive use of digitalization as an instrument of organization. By means of digital technologies and the use of Big Data, it has succeeded in a few years in competing with the main companies of brick-and-mortar stores, through substantial investments in innovation which have made it possible to achieve its well-known standards of efficiency. On the other hand, the paradox of Amazon's fulfillment centres emerges, characterized by a work organisation that seems to arise from the past. This is underlined by the fact that, more and more often, it has become usual to hear expressions like *Digital Taylor-Fordism* or *New Taylorism* in reference to the warehouses of the multinational.

Trade unions, therefore, are facing old challenges and, at the same time, they have to protect needs that they consider as elementary, and within a broader framework, where digitalization becomes a key factor to be considered.

The challenges that trade unions must face today with Amazon are difficult and this is highlighted by the many collective actions that have been undertaken so far in several European countries and that have not ended with the expected positive outcomes (for a comprehensive review of collective actions in Europe, although no longer updated, see Jörn Boewe and Johannes Schulten in *The Long Struggle of Amazon Employees*).

The purpose of this contribution is to analyse how an Italian trade union, the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), decided to change its organisational strategies, implementing innovative practices, in order to manage relations - and conflict - with Amazon. Actually, the CGIL is now oriented towards the coordination of synergies that extend both horizontally and vertically along the organizational structure. The demand for change came mainly as a result of the realization of how much the Amazon supply chain is, within the Italian context alone, extremely articulated and complex. The company, indeed, has three major fulfillment centres, precisely in Castel San Giovanni (PC), Passo Corese (RM) and Vercelli and several handling centres located mainly in Lombardy. In addition, the extensive logistic satellite activities of the company must be considered, as they are carried by companies very different from each other in terms of size, territorial competences, etc. The Amazon distribution chain, therefore, is represented by a network that has as its central hubs the fulfillment and handling centres of the company, which in order to carry out their activities fully rely on external couriers and delivery companies. The structural complexity of the Amazon network has a strong influence on the characteristics of the workers situated along the distribution chain and, consequently, the determining factor that describes this workforce can be summarized with the term 'heterogeneity'. Firstly, there is a clear heterogeneity in the nature of the tasks performed and the considered sectors. At the same time, there are differences in the ways with which workers are treated and protected, even when they perform the same tasks or belong to the same sector, and this creates a further element of complexity.

Ultimately, a fundamental problem for the union is represented by the difficulty of interpreting the complexity of both the organisational structure and the distribution network of the company within the national context. After a series of attempts to approach the company, that had little if no success, which have taken place since 2016, the CGIL has decided to give a sudden turn to its strategies of organisation and coordination, choosing a path that goes beyond the sectoral boundaries of the national federations and that unites local action with national action. The outcome of this effort culminated in a final document of the 21st February 2018 drawn up by

the *National Coordination of the Amazon Group*, which was preceded by an inter-confederal meeting (on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 2018). This document is interesting not only for its contents, but also and above all because of the modalities which have preceded its emergence. The case of Amazon has fuelled the need of the union to go beyond sectoral and territorial boundaries and this has been made possible by promoting a confederal meeting between FILCAMS (commerce and services sector), FILT (transport and logistics sector), SLC (communication sector) and NIDIL (the category of atypical workers), within which have been involved delegates and union officials throughout the confederal apparatus, from the company level (with RSA delegates), passing through the territorial (with officials from Chambers of Labour), up to the level of the National Secretariat.

The contents of the final document highlight on the one hand the main lines of trade union intervention on the problems identified in Amazon and on the other the need for a constant commitment by the participants of the *National Coordination of the Amazon Group* to coordinate and maintain constant the flow of information inside and outside the organisational borders, which we remember to be a fundamental condition for the success of coordination.

Regarding the lines of intervention, the union has decided to act on:

- *Employment*: with special attention to the percentage of agency workers in order not to exceed the threshold set by collective agreements and towards layoffs with suspicion of illegitimacy.
- *Work organisation*: this aspect would present numerous areas of intervention, as the rhythms and workloads are considered excessive, both within the fulfillment centres and outside (couriers and postmen).
- *Health and safety*: taking action on the work organisation means to indirectly act on the issue of health and safety, as the nature of the tasks could contribute to causing occupational diseases (both mental and physical).
- *Wages, professional classification and bargaining at company level*: there are problems of non-compliance with collective agreements, as the professional classifications are not respected; in particular, there would be a gap in the treatment of workers directly hired by Amazon (with permanent contracts) and workers hired through work agencies, where the latter are placed in lower levels even if this is contrary to contractual provisions. According to trade unionists, a new agreement at company level could help resolving these issues.

Regarding the commitment to coordination and spread of information, the document contains a part in which we read that the organization of the mobilization phases concerning Amazon requires a specific communication, a constant collaboration between workers belonging to different sectors and contractual categories and that the flow of information is kept constant within the organisation and between the organisation and external enrolled/users. The emphasis, as we can see, lays to one side on the integration of workers and on the need to build solidarity in spite of and through differences and to the other on the importance of keeping communication flows and information exchanges active.

In the end, the document recalls that communication and information exchange are useful practices not only within the confederation or between the confederation and its members, but also for the relations between different confederations at national level and, most importantly, among the several trade unions at the transnational level. The CGIL, through these statements, demonstrates that the implementation of best practices at the national level has an impact at transnational level too: only through a full awareness of what is happening in single countries it is possible for trade unions to operate within an informative context as complete as possible, which simultaneously allows to organise transnational mobilizations that could reach the goal that have been set.