

COVID conflict in close quarters: Expert says issues at Amazon will persist

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Assistant Professor Alessandro Delfanti. Credit: Alison Dias

Whether physical distancing measures are implemented by businesses as people start to return to work, Amazon workers will continue to work in close quarters both during and after the coronavirus crisis subsides.

"At Amazon, you still have literally hundreds of workers working side by side under the same roof even though whether they are actually providing an essential service has been called into question," says Alessandro Delfanti, an assistant professor at UTM's Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology. In the biggest Amazon fulfillment centers, where there might be a staff of roughly one thousand at any one time, several coronavirus cases have been reported among the workforce in North America, including in the GTA.

Delfanti has spent the last few years studying Amazon workers, their labor issues, and the technology employed by its delivery service. He is the author of the rather timely forthcoming book "The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon." (2021)

Although Delfanti says Amazon is a company that often experiences peaks in its service and has always had a flexible workforce, meaning that they have workers at the ready to respond to an influx of orders, the recent demand and unfavourable conditions have resulted in internal strife.

"Even though Amazon has built a foundation to withstand certain ebbs and flows of the market, currently there is an ongoing struggle with management and workers and the whole company is under the spotlight," says Delfanti.

Since the pandemic-related lockdown has motivated people to opt for [online shopping](#) in record numbers in order to minimize contact with others, Amazon has thrived over the past few months, adding over 100,000 positions to its operations in the US, and many more in other countries. Subsequent strikes and protests by workers have cropped up in the US and Europe because the [work environment](#) makes physical distancing a challenge and, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic situation, staff were not supplied with appropriate protective gear. In

addition, technical staff and engineers have staged walkouts in solidarity with the warehouse workers, and earlier this month Amazon vice-president Tim Bray resigned due to the firing of protesting employees.

Delfanti says it is difficult to predict how Amazon will fare as the response to the pandemic evolves. Even the practices they intend to have in place to assess workers for illness when they report for their shifts have the potential to cause further disputes.

"The company has already announced that they are working at implementing their own tests to screen for the coronavirus on site," says Delfanti.

"But the way in which this situation ultimately develops depends on the way the workers will react to the decisions and practices the company makes going forward. However, the main point to make is that mitigating the risk of contracting the virus is crucial for those who must keep working throughout the pandemic situation."

To read further about Delfanti's work in this area, see the blog post he has published with collaborators: "Workers and the Virus: Radical Lessons from Italy in the Age of COVID-19" at <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/workers-and-the-virus/>.

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