LABOR DAY NEWSLETTER #6, SEPTEMBER 1, 2014.

Compiled by Dick Bennett for a Culture of Peace and Justice

http://jamesrichardbennett.blogspot.com/2014/09/labor-day-september-1-2016.html

(#1 3-8-07; #2 September 6, 2010; #3 August 30, 2011; #4 September 1, 2012; #5, Sept. 1, 2013).

*What’s at stake:  Soon after WWII, reactionary groups and corporations renewed their opposition to the democratic, egalitarian, progressive accomplishments of the Roosevelt years, seeking to suppress Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms and related values. Since the 1980s that campaign has grown more powerful, until today fewer than 10% of the people belong to unions, the minimum wage is not a living wage, and our political system is controlled by corporations and the wealthy. See: Harvey Kaye, The Fight for the Four Freedoms*

*OMNI NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL DAYS PROJECT*

My blog:
War Department/Peace Department

http://jamesrichardbennett.blogspot.com/

Newsletters

http://www.omnicenter.org/newsletter-archive/

Index:

*http://www.omnicenter.org/omni-newsletter-general-index/*
<http://www.omnicenter.org/omni-newsletter-general-index/>

*Earlier Newsletters at end*

*Contents Labor Day Newsletter #6, Sept. 1, 2014*

*Capitalism’s Not-So-Secret Weapon: Commodify Everything*

Lazboy’s Labor Day Sale

Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy*

*Condition of US Labor Today in the Corporate Plutocracy*

Working Overtime

Jim Hightower’s Lowdown on Amazon

Marketing targeted at kids is virtually everywhere – in classrooms and textbooks, on the Internet, even at Girl Scout meetings, slumber parties, and the playground. Product placement and other innovations have introduced more subtle advertising to movies and television. Drawing on her own survey research and unprecedented access to the advertising industry, Juliet B. Schor, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Overworked American,* examines how marketing efforts of vast size, scope, and effectiveness have created "commercialized children." Ads and their messages about sex, drugs, and food affect not just what children want to buy, but who they think they are. In this groundbreaking and crucial book, Schor looks at the consequences of the commercialization of childhood and provides guidelines for parents and teachers. What is at stake is the emotional and social well-being of our children. Like Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed,* Mary Pipher's *Reviving
*US WORKERS TODAY*

*116 Million Full-Time Workers in America Doing the Work of 136 Million People*

* Jim Puzzanghera, Los Angeles Times, Reader Supported News, August 30, 2014 *
*Puzzanghera writes: “Full-time American workers labor the equivalent of nearly an additional day each week, averaging 47 hours instead of the standard 40, according to Gallup poll results released Friday.” READ MORE <https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v1/url?u=http://lists.readersupportednews.org/ss/link.php?M%3D401124%26N%3D12457%26C %3D8443a64f62ba667e6aa7f3704dec35e9%26l%3D16638&k=t8cWouLHMWKnKZhAFQUnEA%3D%3D %0A&r=DcDR4vy8HbzmvxjvQKW7wA%3D%3D%0A&m=0v%2Bw37CK%2Baq8e3L5arzNn8M1msMZ4ldZXATbCJSJZl8%3D %0A&s=ad78c79558e4fa17d0923cee867b3009991c45016015403310454739315d46c7>*

*CHAPLIN, BEZOS, AND AMAZON’S WORKERS*

*August 2014, Volume 16, Number 8*

*by Jim Hightower*

*It’s time to pay attention to what Jeff Bezos and his online retail colossus are doing <http://www.hightowerlowdown.org/node/3724#.U_er5_ldXUV> *

*Like Walmart, only with supercomputers and drones: At Amazon.com “cheap” comes at a very hefty price*

IN HIS CLASSIC 1936 COMEDY, *Modern Times*, silent filmmaker Charlie Chaplin depicted the trials and tribulations of a harried factory worker trying to cope with the sprockets, cogs, conveyor belts, and managerial “efficiencies” of the new industrial culture. The poor fellow continuously finds himself caught up (almost literally) in the grinding tyranny of the machine. The movie is hilarious, but it’s also a powerful and damning portrayal of the dehumanizing consequences of mass industrialization, including monotonous assembly-line work, ruthless bosses demanding more and faster output, mass unemployment, rank inequality, union busting, and police deployed to enforce the corporate order.

“The universe says No to us. We in answer fire a broadside of flesh at it and cry yes!” -- A line from a Ray Bradbury novel that Bezos adopted as his credo in the mid-1980’s.

The ultimate indignity for Chaplin’s everyman character came when he was put on an assembly line that included a mechanized contraption that force-fed workers as they worked. Not only did this time-management “innovation” eliminate the need for factory owners to provide a lunch break, but it also transformed humans into automatous components of the
machine itself. Of course, worker-feeding machines were a comedic exaggeration by the filmmaker, not anything that actually existed in his day, and such an inhuman contrivance would not even be considered in our modern times. Right? Well... if you work for Amazon.com, Inc., you’d swear that Chaplin’s masterpiece is Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos’ idea of a properly run workplace.

Brave new paradigm

*Jeffrey Preston Bezos* is the elfish, almost preternatural man of unbounded ambition who founded Amazon, the online retailing colossus that trumpets itself as “Earth’s most customer-centric company.” At first blush, you might wonder why the Lowdown is digging into a company that has built a strong reputation with millions of consumers and even has a rather hip vibe going for it.

After all, isn't Amazon considered a model of tech wizardry, having totally reinvented retail marketing for our smart-phone, globally-linked age? Yes. And doesn't it peddle a cornucopia of goods through a convenient "1-click" ordering system, rapidly delivering the goods right to your doorstep? Yes, yes, and yes. Also, doesn't it offer irresistibly steep discounts on the price of nearly everything it sells (which is nearly everything)? Yes, again.

However, as an old saying puts it: The higher the monkey climbs the more you see of its ugly side. Amazon certainly has climbed high in a hurry. Not yet 20 years old, it's already a household brand name and America's 10th largest retailer.

Yet, mesmerized by its digital charm and explosive growth in sales, few have looked closely at the Amazon animal. Its media coverage has been more gee-whiz than questioning, generally attributing the retailers’ phenomenal rise to Bezos’ ceaseless search for ever-greater corporate efficiencies. The press marvels that his obsession with electronic streamlining and systems management allows him to sell everything from books to bicycles, barbecues to Barbies, at cheap-cheap-cheap prices, undercutting all competitors—even Walmart.

But what is the source of those "efficiencies" and the low prices that are so greatly admired by Wall Street and so gratefully accepted by customers? Are they achieved strictly by being a virtual store, selling everything through the World Wide Web, meaning that it doesn’t have to build, staff, and maintain any retail outlets? Or is Amazon achieving market dominance the old-fashioned way—by squeezing the life out of its workers and suppliers, by crushing its competitors (from small shops on Main Street to big chain-store rivals) with monopolistic muscle, and by manipulating our national and state tax laws?

Voila! There's the ugly side.
As we've learned in recent years from exposes of the revolting business practices of Walmart, “cheap” can come at a very heavy price. And that price tag is no less revolting because it's asserted by a company that has a cachet of online cool and is based in cosmopolitan Seattle instead of rural Arkansas. Thus, in both this month's issue and September's, the Lowdown will take a hard look at what Amazon is doing to whom--and where that is leading our society.

We're focusing on Bezos/Amazon ("BeZon" would be a more appropriate corporate name, for the man is the corporation and vice-versa), not because this is yet another badly behaving behemoth. Rather, Amazon screams for scrutiny because it, more than any other single entity, has had the infinite hubris to envision a brave new, computer-driven oligarchic order for our society--then has proceeded to assemble it.

For some 30 years, corporate control has steadily (and stealthily) enveloped major elements of our society--workplaces, politics, education, media, upward mobility, etc. This encroachment has even been given a benign name: "The new normal." But it's not normal, and it's not the result of some immutable economic force, marching through history--it is the product of corporate money and power being relentlessly asserted by individuals.

No one has imagined corporate domination more expansively nor pushed it harder or further than Bezos, and his Amazon stands today as the most advanced and the most ambitious model of a future under oligarchic control, including control of markets, work, information, consumerism, media... and beyond. He doesn't merely see himself remaking commerce with his vast electronic networks, algorithms, and metrics—but rebooting America itself, including our society's concept of a job, the definition of community, and even our basic values of fairness and justice. It amounts to a breathtaking aspiration to transform our culture's democratic paradigm into a corporate imperium, led by Amazon.

The birth of Amazon

LEGEND HAS IT that Amazon is a classic story of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. In 1994, a bright, young fellow named Bezos heads off to the Seattle ... [read more]

Bezos, an admirer of Walmart's predatory business strategy, didn't just duplicate it—he wired it into his supercomputers, applied the Big Data techniques of the NSA to it, and routed it through the matrix of his own grandiose imagination. Walmart, the "Beast of Bentonville," is now yesterday's model of how far-reaching and destructive corporate power can be. Amazon is the new model, not just of tomorrow's corporate beast, but the day after tomorrow's. Only, it's already here.

Going inside Amazon

The establishment media are unabashedly infatuated with Bezos and have crowned him with numerous laurels, from "Person of the Year" to world's best living CEO. This May, however, the reigning God of TechWorld was
awarded a less-coveted prize by the International Trade Union
Confederation: “World’s Worst Boss.”

Even high-rankers in the corporation’s hierarchy describe him as a cold,
remote, controlling, ungenerous, and often vengeful gnome of a man with no
empathy for the people who work for him. As far back as the 1980s, when he
was a Wall Street banker, he was perceived as lacking the human touch. “He
was not warm,” remembers one who knew him then. “It was like he could be a
Martian for all I knew.”

To witness the full Bezonian disregard for workers, however, one must look
beyond the relative comfort of Amazon’s expansive cam- pus headquarters and
visit any of about 40 of its “fulfillment centers” spread across the
country (and about 40 more around the world). These are gated, guarded, and
secretive warehouses where most of the corporation’s 100,000 employees are
engaged in: (1) Unpacking the hundreds of millions of items that Amazon
peddles; (2) Coding and storing the items on an immense array of shelves;
(3) Picking individual items off the shelves to fill the consumer purchases
made online; and (4) Packing and shipping the goods to Amazon’s hundreds of
millions of customers.

The warehouses are dehumanizing hives in which Bezos has produced his own
Kafkaesque sequel to Modern Times.

Consider the job of “picker.” In each warehouse, hundreds of them are
simultaneously scrambling throughout a maze of shelves, grabbing products.
This is hard, physically painful labor, for two reasons. First, pickers
must speed-walk on concrete an average of a dozen miles a day, for an
Amazon warehouse is shockingly big—more than 16 football fields big, or
eight city blocks—and pickers must constantly crisscross the expanse.
Then, there are miles of seven-foot-high shelves running along the narrow
aisles on each floor of the three-story buildings, requiring the swarm of
pickers to stoop continuously. They are directed by handheld computers to
each target. For example, “Electric Flour Sifters: Dallas sector, section
yellow, row H34, bin 22, level D.” Then they scan the pick and must put it
on the right track of the seven miles of conveyor belts running through the
facility, immediately after which they’re dispatched by the computer to
find the next product.

Secondly, the pace is hellish. The pickers’ computers don't just dictate
where they’re to go next, but how many seconds Amazon’s time-motion experts
have calculated it should take them to get there. The scanners also record
the time each worker actually takes—information that is fed directly into
a central, all-knowing computer. The times of every picker are reviewed and
scored by managers who have an unmerciful mandate to

Mac McClelland, a fine investigative reporter formerly with Mother Jones,
took a job as a picker in an Amazon-contracted warehouse named Amalgamated
Product Giant Shipping Worldwide, Inc. On her first day, her scanner told
her she had 20 seconds to pick up an assigned product. As McClelland
reported, she could cover the distance and locate the exact shelving unit
in the allotted time only “if I don't hesitate for one second or get lost
or take a drink of water before heading in the right direction as fast as I
can walk or even jog.” She concedes that, “Often as not, I miss my time
target.”
BEZOS' COLD, MICROMANAGED, time-motion approach to the workplace is a direct descendant (and extreme extension) of a theory of "scientific management" developed in the 1880's by Frederick Winslow Taylor... [read more]

That's not good, for Amazon has a point system for rating everyone's time performance. Score a few demerits and you get "counseled." Score a few more, and you're out the door. And everything workers do is monitored, timed, and scored, beginning the moment they punch-in for their shift. Be one minute late, you'll be assessed half a penalty point; an hour late gets you a whole point; missing a shift is 1.5 points--and six points gets you fired.

Then there's lunch. McClelland was reminded again and again by ever-present time monitors that this feeding break is not 30 minutes and one second, but 29 minutes and 59 seconds, literally turning "eat and run" into a command. If you're not back at your next picking spot on the dot, you earn penalty points. Never mind that the half-hour lunch period, as she pointed out, "includes the time to get through the metal detector and use the disgustingly overcrowded bathroom... and stand in line to clock out and back in." Should you desire the luxury of a warm meal, there's another line to use the microwave. Likewise, the two 15-minute breaks awarded by the Amazonians include the mass of co-workers scampering a half mile or more to the break room, waiting in line to pass through the despised metal detector and another line if you need to pee. The fifteen-minute "break" is usually reduced to a harried hiatus of under seven minutes.

Having managers bark "Zoom Zoom! Pick it up! Picker's pace, guys!" as you dart around is dispiriting enough, but the corporation also assumes you're a thief. In addition to those time-sucking crawls through metal detectors, Amazon warns new initiates that there are 500 visible cameras in every nook of the warehouse and another 500 hidden cameras.

All this for $10-$12 an hour, which is under $25,000 a year, gross. But few make even that much, for they don't get year-round work. Rather, Amazon's warehouse employees are "contingent" hires, meaning they are temporary, seasonal, part-time laborers entirely subject to the employer's whim. Worker advocates refer to these jobs as "precarious"-- on the one hand, when sales slack off, you're let go; on the other hand, when sales perk up and managers demand you do a 12-hour shift with no notice (which might let you find a babysitter), you must do it or be fired. Christmas, Thanksgiving, Black Friday, Cyber Monday (invented by Amazon), Election Day, July 4th, or (for God's sake) Labor Day--don't even think of taking off.

Also, technically, you don't actually work for BeZon. You're hired by temp agencies with Orwellian names like "Integrity Staffing Solutions," or by such warehouse operators as Amalgamated Giant Shipping that do the dirty work for the retailer. This gives Amazon plausible deniability about your treatment--and it means you have no labor rights, for you are an "independent contractor." No health care, no vacation time, no scheduled raises, no promotion track, no route to a full-time or permanent job, no regular schedule, no job protection, and--of course--no union. Bezos would rather get Ebola virus than be infected with a union in his realm, and he
has gone all out with intimidation tactics, plus hiring a notorious union-busting firm to crush any whisper of worker organization.