



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, August 2021

Asylum workers in German logistics centres

Žiga Podgornik Jakil¹

Abstract

Relaxed labour laws in Germany has led logistics companies (such as Amazon) to work with private employment agencies to mobilise asylum seekers to work in warehouses as pickers and packers. The pandemic only accelerated the growth of the logistics sector, with the growth in e-commerce. However, the intense demand of the jobs available negatively impacts asylum seekers' social mobility.

Keywords

logistics; labour; asylum seekers; Germany

To be quoted as:

Jakil Podgornik, Žiga. 2021. Asylum workers in German logistics centres. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. <https://doi.org/10.48509/MoLab.6444><https://doi.org/10.48509/MoLab.6444>

This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

¹ zigajakil@gmail.com, Freie Universität Berlin.

The role asylum seekers play in the German labour market has often been at the centre of intense public discussions, most recently during the European ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015.² A group of asylum seekers, mainly from Africa, chose to work in the German logistics sector, a sector that plays an important role in contemporary capitalism.³ This entry examines how large logistics companies and private employment agencies together exploit the uncertain situation of asylum seekers by pushing them into jobs with little chance of upward social mobility. I do this through a short story of Rahi, an Eritrean asylum seeker who came to Germany during the ‘refugee crisis’ and has since been working in various logistics companies in Berlin, including in one of Amazon's fulfilment centres between October 2020 and July 2021. I met him in 2018 at a language café organised by local civil society actors and have been in regular contact with him and some of his Eritrean friends since November 2020.

Easing the Labour Market Access to Asylum Seekers

Faced with growing labour needs in sectors of the economy that lack a sufficient domestic workforce, Germany has somewhat relaxed restrictions on labour market access for asylum seekers with pending or recognized status over the past three decades—before then, asylum seekers were mainly excluded from the German labour market.⁴ During the European ‘refugee crisis’ of late, not only civil society but also major employers' associations and banks praised the ‘useful’ role that asylum seekers can play for the German economy if the state invests in their integration.⁵

A report by the Institute for Employment Research, the research arm of the Federal Employment Agency, showed that the majority of asylum seekers take low-salaried manual jobs, such as cleaners, construction workers, food service workers,⁶ and, increasingly, logistic workers.⁷ Against the backdrop of Germany's leading role in logistics worldwide⁸ and the sector's increasing need for semi-skilled manual labour,⁹ it is not surprising that more and more recognised asylum seekers are working for logistics companies.

² Brücker, Herbert. 2020. *Wir haben die Flüchtlinge besser integriert als in der Vergangenheit* [We integrated the refugees better than we have in the past]. 31 August 2020. Available online at: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/arbeitsmarkt-ab-2015-wir-haben-die-fluechtlinge-besser.769.de.html?dram:article_id=483368. Last accessed 9 July 2021.

³ Cowen, Deborah. 2014. *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence of Global Trade*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.

⁴ Heckmann, Friedrich. 2015. *Integration von Migranten. Einwanderung und neue Nationenbildung*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

⁵ Hamann, Ulrike and Serhat Karakayali. 2016. Practicing Willkommenskultur: Migration and Solidarity in Germany. *Intersections. EEJSP* 2(4): 69-86.

⁶ Groll, Tina and Katharina Schuler. 2019. Was schon geschafft ist – und was nicht. [What we have accomplished – and what not] *Zeit Online*. 25 June 2019. Available online at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-06/fluechtlinge-integration-arbeitsmarkt-sprachkurse-wohnungen-daten>. Last accessed 6 July 2021.

⁷ Ohlert, Clemens and Oliver Bruttel. 2018. Auswirkungen des gesetzlichen Mindestlohns auf die Beschäftigungssituation von Geflüchteten [Consequences of the minimum wage on the working conditions of refugees]. Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung. Available online at: http://doku.iab.de/fdz/reporte/2018/MR_07-18.pdf. Last accessed 6 July 2021.

⁸ Germany Trade & Invest. 2021. Logistics Industry. Available at: <https://www.gtai.de/gtai-en/invest/industries/logistics/logistics-industry-66266>. Last accessed 9 July 2021.

⁹ Vgontzas, Nantina. 2020. A New Industrial Working Class? Challenges in Disrupting Amazon's Fulfillment Process in Germany. In: Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese (eds.). *Amazon in the Global Economy*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 116–128.

Moreover, as there has been a shift from traditional retail to e-commerce,¹⁰ the need for labour that sorts goods in logistics centres (warehouses) and distribute them directly to customer's doorsteps has grown accordingly.¹¹ The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift.¹² The pandemic further increased the demand for mobile services available through platforms and online retailers.¹³

These low-paid and monotonous jobs are usually taken up by intra-European mobile populations with little knowledge of German, such as Polish commuters who travel daily to logistics hubs at the outskirts of Berlin.¹⁴ However, during my field research between November 2020 and June 2021, I found that asylum seekers, especially from African countries, also make up an important part of this workforce.

Filling in the Labour Shortage in the Logistics Sector

After arriving in Berlin in October 2015 and getting his asylum recognised, Rahi found his first job in a warehouse of the German food company Bahlsen, where he packed food products—among them the famous Leibnitz biscuits. After working there for a year, his contract expired and he decided to receive social assistance from the state, which covered the monthly costs of his accommodation in a shared shelter for refugees and his health insurance and granted him the basic standard rate for the unemployed of around 400EUR. This allowed him to take German courses to improve his language skills. He obtained a language certificate at B.1 level and enrolled at B.2 level, the minimum tier required to be eligible for a state-funded apprenticeship (Ausbildung) for carpentry.

However, since he was receiving social assistance, he was regularly reminded by the Job Centre, a state employment office responsible for implementing basic benefits for jobseekers, through regular phone calls, personal consultations, and job recommendation letters, to find a job as soon as possible; otherwise, the assistance would be cut. Unsatisfied with the offers from the state employment office, he finally turned to a private employment agency. On his phone, he showed me the message he sent to the agency via WhatsApp. He told me that after contacting the agency, he was immediately invited for an interview, which took place a week later. Without a clear goal of what he wanted to do, the agency staff offered him a job at Amazon. After he signed the employment contract with the agency, the

¹⁰ Apicella, Sabrina. 2021. *Das Prinzip Amazon: Über den Wandel der Verkaufsarbeit und Streiks im transnationalen Versandhandel* [The Amazon principles: Changes in retail labour and strikes in the transnational mail order selling]. Berlin: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

¹¹ DGB. 2021. *Regeln für Plattformarbeit* [Regulation for platform labour]. 24 March 2021. Available online at: <https://www.dgb.de/++co++f012a364-8c7b-11eb-8bce-001a4a160123>. Last accessed 12 July 2021.

¹² Douglas, Danielle. 2021. Amazon's Mobile Workforce and its Protest Movement in the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic. MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

¹³ Altenried, Moritz, Manuela Bojadživev and Mira Wallis. 2021. Platform (im)mobilities: Migration and the Gig Economy in Times of COVID-19. MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

¹⁴ Podgornik-Jakil, Žiga, Baum, Franziska, DeDauw, Patrick, Grimm, Carmen, Lambert, Laura, Stark, Fabian, and Mira Wallis. 2018. Logistics under Construction – Mobility and Standstill in the Berlin-Brandenburg Airport Region. *Berliner Blätter*: 27–55.

agency became his official employer for his work at Amazon and paid him an hourly wage rate of about 11,2 EUR gross.¹⁵

Rahi was lucky that Amazon warehouse was only half an hour walking distance away from the refugee facility in which he lives. Three of his friends who contacted different employment agencies were sent to Großbeeren, a logistics hub located in the neighbouring federal state of Brandenburg, which took almost two hours to commute one way. They do not enjoy their work but see it as a temporary way to earn money while they try to complete an Ausbildung.

Precarity of Labour in Logistics Centres

The logistics sector is known for its problematic employment practices. For instance, Amazon and other logistics giants employ non-unionised workforces and run campaigns to discourage workers from unionising in warehouses.¹⁶ In Germany, the United Services Trade Union, or *Ver.di*, has been fighting for eight years to get the company to recognize collective wage agreements for its warehouse workers, but so far unsuccessfully.¹⁷

Logistics companies commonly hire through employment agencies, partly due to the wide fluctuations in workload that make regular employment uneconomical for the employer.¹⁸ In Germany, Amazon often relies on a large number of temporary workers.¹⁹ Employment agencies such as Adecco, Headway Personal, Randstadt, and Workservice mobilize workers according to seasonal needs for warehouse labour.²⁰ In this way, logistics companies avoid labour costs that would be accrued during periods when little or no work is available. Meanwhile, logistics companies often work with several employment agencies at the same time. As each agency subjects its workers to its own working conditions (contract length, benefits, length of work breaks allowed, etc.),²¹ this multiplication of labour rights often functions as a way of preventing potential collective actions in the warehouses.²²

‘Just-in-Time’ Labour Regime and its Impact on the Social Mobility of Asylum Seekers

¹⁵ This was about 2 EUR more than the Berlin minimum hourly wage rate at the time of his employment. Rahi later told me that his two Somali friends, to whom he suggested working at Amazon, had chosen a different employment agency and were paid an hourly wage of 10,5 EUR gross.

¹⁶ Weise, Karen and Noam Scheiber. 2021. Why Amazon Workers Sided With the Company Over a Union. 16 April 2021. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/technology/amazon-workers-against-union.html>. Last accessed 7 July 2021.

¹⁷ Ver.di. 2021. *Aufstand bei Amazon* [Uprising at Amazon]. Available online at: <https://www.verdi.de/themen/geld-tarif/amazon>. 8 February 2021 Last accessed 7 July 2021.

¹⁸ Vgontzas, Nantina. 2020. A New Industrial Working Class? Challenges in Disrupting Amazon’s Fulfillment Process in Germany. In: Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese (eds.). *Amazon in the Global Economy*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 116–128.

¹⁹ Maillasson, Hélène. 2021. Amazon startet in Völklingen mit vielen Leiharbeitern. [Amazon starts working in Völklingen with many contract workers]. 27 August 2021. Available online at: https://www.saarbruecker-zeitung.de/saarland/saar-wirtschaft/70-prozent-leiharbeiter-zum-start-von-amazon-in-voelklingen_aid-53008245. Last accessed 11 August 2021.

²⁰ Podgornik-Jakil, Žiga, Baum, Franziska, DeDauw, Patrick, Grimm, Carmen, Lambert, Laura, Stark, Fabian, and Mira Wallis. 2018. Logistics under Construction – Mobility and Standstill in the Berlin-Brandenburg Airport Region. *Berliner Blätter*: 27–55.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Mezzadra, Sandro and Brett Neilson. 2013. *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press.

At our meeting in a park in Berlin with his friends at the end of May 2021, Rahi told me that since he started working at Amazon, he only does night shifts. He said Amazon has a three-shift system and after you select your work schedule preferences, the agency responds to the warehouse's need for labour within that time frame and sends a schedule a week in advance. He showed me the image of his schedule on his phone, and I noticed that he has only one free day a week. He said that this schedule is not reliable. If the warehouse suddenly has a reduced need for labour, he and his colleagues are informed by their agency via WhatsApp that they do not have to come to work that day or on one of the following days. However, the opposite can also happen, especially during holidays or major sales events such as Black Friday or Amazon Prime Day. They may receive a call from their agency on their days off and be asked to come to work when there is a need for labour. Even though he has the option to say no, Rahi always obliges, because a 'no' could arouse suspicion of being 'lazy' and eventually lead to his dismissal. He believes that some of his co-workers have lost their jobs after refusing to come to work on their days off.

Rahi decided to work night shifts because he wanted to have free time to attend German courses and other activities. Without overtime, his work schedule normally consists of seven hours six times a week. However, the constantly changing schedule results in a weekly working time of thirty-five to forty hours, even over forty hours in the high season. Such uncertain schedules do not allow him and his friends to attend their classes regularly and the work is exhausting. Indeed, Rahi was too tired to continue his language course and eventually dropped out, while he used most of his free time to rest after work. While we are talking in the park, an Eritrean man in his mid-thirties who does not work in logistics comments on his friends' jobs: "You never see them, they are always busy. We meet only once every few months and mainly for some holidays."

Rahi said if you're a 'good worker', Amazon will hire you directly, which offers benefits like safer sick leave and a stable work schedule. He believes that taking sick leave while employed by the employment agency is another risk of being considered 'lazy' that can result in termination. He told me that at Amazon, he and his colleagues' performance is regularly reported to the agency that employs them. If they were not, as he puts it, "flexible enough", they would soon be fired by their agency.

At the time of our conversation in the park, he thought about working until his contract expires so he can continue to seek an Ausbildung and build a career as a carpenter or caregiver in Germany. But when I met him a month later in June, he said Amazon wanted to hire him directly after his contract at the employment agency expires at the end of July. He believes he was offered the contract because Amazon considered him a good and reliable employee who always showed up for work when he was needed and never called in sick. He accepted the deal, but it never materialised, as he broke his hand two weeks before the signing of the new contract and was forced to take a sick leave by the doctor. "At Amazon, they suddenly told me that they do not need new workers," he told me. In August 2021 he started to work for DB Schenker, one of the global leaders in supply chain management and logistics solutions. Nevertheless, his hope for an Ausbildung still remains somewhere in the future.