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Article Summary

The article *Amazon's New Algorithm Will Set Workers Schedules According to Muscle Use* was written by Edward Ongweso, Jr. and published in Vice on April 15, 2021.

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3xeba/amazons-new-algorithm-will-set-workers-schedules-according-to-muscle-use>

The article describes a letter sent to shareholders by Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, in which Bezos proposes a new solution to reducing the risk of injury to warehouse workers: an adjustment to the worker scheduling algorithm which would rotate workers through different positions in order to evenly distribute repetitive stress across the body. The article notes the frequency of injuries in Amazon warehouses, many of which are caused by repetitive motion, and Bezos's planned algorithmic change would be "central to the company's strategy going forward."

I worked in agriculture and construction for much of my youth, which gave me a great appreciation for work that degrades our bodies for minimal pay. Later, I entered the film industry, where I discovered work with punishing hours that took its toll emotionally and mentally. (Though long hours "chained to a desk" have left their own physical marks.) I have been thankful for my union, which grants me better pay and benefits, and allows me to fight for restitution when an employer mistreats or shortchanges me.

I am concerned about technologies that sit between workers and supervisors or consumers, particularly automated decision-making tools. Amazon's worker-scheduling algorithms have received scrutiny in the past as one of the causes for poor working conditions at Amazon facilities—employee performance and behavior is measured automatically, and employees who do not meet performance benchmarks are automatically fired. In an article for Verge employees describe a grueling work environment. I was amazed to see Amazon's proposed solution to poor safety and overwork to be tuning their algorithms, not to reduce employee workload, but simply to adjust employee workload *for even greater efficiency*. This only further serves to embed human labor into mechanized systems. Amazon is a notoriously bad actor in this area, but the problem extends to other companies as well, such as "sharing economy" platforms like Uber.

How do we move into a technological future that empowers and uplifts working people, instead of allowing the few who control major technological platforms to enrich themselves through worker exploitation?