

DEBATE

Interview with Gianpaolo Meloni from the Amazon EWC

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Gianpaolo Meloni started working for Amazon in 2012 in a facility center in Piacenza, Italy. After getting involved in union work over years within the work of Amazon, he became an essential part of the team negotiating to found the European Work Council (EWC) in Amazon starting at the end of 2018. The negotiations came to a successful conclusion in 2022 and the EWC began its work with the first meeting in April 2023 with Gianpaolo Meloni as the elected EWC secretary.

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The following interview was conducted in writing:

How important are trade unions and other employee representatives for you?

Gianpaolo Meloni: To answer this question, I have to talk about how we used the union in the first centre in Italy. I was in trouble because I was helping my colleagues and did not follow the managers' directives on pressure, so I was also taken out of my role of responsibility because they did not accept points of view different from theirs. Productivity rules! In 2015, I decided to join with other colleagues (very few) who had the courage to stand up against this multinational. We decided to contact a trade union (the unions had not shown up in front of our gates up to that point, none) and begin a dialogue to get information and find out if they could help us. I didn't know the unions until that moment either. Some of my colleagues just wanted to make a

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fuss so they could get a good economic exit, but for me it was a matter of dignity. In the end, in a few months we managed to secretly collect about 50 delegations from our colleagues and I was one of the first workers' representatives in Italy. I tell you this because I am convinced that if there had been more union presence even at the beginning, we probably would not have ended up with such difficult problems as workers. On union confrontation and the fight to protect colleagues, I think there is an urgent need for a change in union and political approach. The prospect of new technologies should only worry me, but it should be on the table of all unions and on political agendas around the world. This is a revolution that will lead to a mass replacement of workers (AI, Androids, drone dispatch, gpt chat, self-driving vehicles, etc.). The union is a useful tool, but I think it needs a revolution in approach and above all it needs to start an international collaboration (in amazon with UNI GLOBAL it has been going on for a few years) to make the struggle effective, involving European and international political structures and laws to protect the defense of jobs. The union is fundamental to me, there is certainly no doubt about that. We need to raise workers' awareness of the situation.

The problem is social, we live in a society that is not aware of the cliff we are approaching and that leads us to fight more against ourselves instead of fighting against the real issues. I think it is crucial now to unite and fight, without thinking about anything other than protecting the health and safety of colleagues and thinking about how labor might develop in 10 to 20 years. A global and prospective view of the issues, without thinking about the cost of the efforts, but only about a common struggle that could potentially lead to a future social war over joblessness.

The negotiations with Amazon founding the European Works Council (EWC) were long and difficult. What empowered you in the end to achieve an agreement even beyond the minimum standards of the European directive (2009/38/EC) on the establishment of an EWC?

Gianpaolo Meloni: In 2018 we started negotiations to be able to have Amazon's European Works Council, in this case it was the French, Spanish and Italian unions that initiated the request for this. The workers' representative group consisted of 16 members, I had the honor of being elected from the beginning to the chairmanship supported by colleagues whom I already, in part, knew from several European meetings. Right from the start the company was very uncooperative and tried to manipulate us in order to have the most favorable agreement possible, to the detriment of the protection of the European right to information and consultation. For quite some time the dialogue was confrontational and, thanks in part to work based on group involvement and democratic decision-making in a context open to all the

opinions of fellow members, the company was unable to influence our goals. In 2020, in February, we were to have a meeting with the company in Luxembourg, where the workers' representatives were ready to break off negotiations so that we could start the EWC without an agreement and thus avail ourselves of the minimum requirements by law (although it would have been a more difficult path to take). Unfortunately, this meeting never took place, due to the pandemic. Since that time, a virtual dialogue has begun. You can imagine the misunderstandings and difficulties in handling a negotiation with such a company on a virtual level. The company decided to change some members of management because they realized that we would not sign any agreement. The new managers were more respectful toward us, we always maintained a confrontational tone, however, the dialogue had improved. Through a new dialogue approach, we were able to present what were our major points of interest, and negotiations began. Every time they proposed an agreement, it was always below the standards set by law on the point of view of information and consultations, and we kept asking for more. We often found that although there were European-level managers and a legal staff at the management table, decisions were not made by them but always deferred to some figure even higher up than them. We come to 2022, to the penultimate meeting (which could have been the last) where we were ready not to sign, once again, the agreement. The management, however, very astutely presented us with an agreement with lots of changes on points of interest that certainly would have been interesting for us because it was going to mediate many points that we could use to start getting more information from the company. At that point we opened a dialogue between us representatives and we weighed the pros and cons. Even our expert, who up to that point had advised us not to sign anything, gave a favorable opinion of the agreement. The critical points were the transnational consultations, which had a threshold. Otherwise, we had managed to include the United Kingdom in the agreement, to get two meetings instead of one, per year. Information covered all lines of business while consultation was tied to the operations side (previously the company only wanted to focus on operations). Between the pros and cons, we decided by vote that we would try to use this tool that allowed us to start the EWC quickly. If we had not signed up, we would certainly still be in litigation for the failure of negotiations and this would have delayed the exchange of information. I think at the end of the day, despite some weaker points, this agreement is definitely the best we could have brought home. In addition, it is fair to point out, that we were always supported by the European unions who helped us at all stages, including the final stage, always in contact with our expert. It is not easy to sum up a negotiation that lasted almost 4 years in a few sentences, however, I could conclude by saying that it was difficult, stressful but in the end also, personally, satisfying.

Your actual work of the Amazon EWC has started quite recently. How would you describe the work so far? Did the relationships from the negotiations maintain within the new founded EWC or are there unexpected changes? How would you say is the management acting towards the EWC? Is there timely information, do you have time and capacities to work out your consultation?

Gianpaolo Meloni: I do not consider the role of the EWC member (or chairperson) a job, but a kind of social commitment, and I do it willingly, as do many of my colleagues. The problem is that to really be able to work, to be informed about everything that is happening in Europe and in your country, to read and study the information that is provided to us, and to do the phone and video call meetings with colleagues takes a lot of hours. I am still a warehouse worker at Amazon, as a labor and safety representative I have about 14 hours a month to spend working for my local Union. The European legislation does not help us because it does not impose an adequate number of hours to make this actually a job. We negotiated to have 72 h paid leave from the company annually if you are part of the select committee and 24 h for all EWC members. Obviously, this does not allow us to work effectively and to be always ready and up to date but is better than subsidiary requirements. I say this because if you want to achieve changes you should invest in the resources and people who are committed to this and not burden them with work and think that it is all done on your own time. I was saying, in my spare time what I try to do is to maintain relationships with colleagues from other countries who are willing to dialogue concerning shared issues. We dialogue a lot via chat, I try to do a video call every month at least with the select committee members to update situations and discuss news. The basis of this work is dialogue and exchange of information, I will say it over and over again. What path it will take with Amazon's European management, I am also pessimistic because in the first meeting we were told data that had already been shared with the press previously and they handled the relations, as they always do, from the top down, not answering sensitive questions and criticizing when the workers' representatives' tones were raised, rightly so, because they did not feel respected. We held only one information meeting in February and we are waiting for the next one, which will be in October; it is too early to know whether the company will respect the information agreements. If it does not, we will be ready for whatever it takes to enforce the right to information and consultation. One thing I have learned in these 11 years at Amazon: they always think they are untouchable. I am Italian, and this feeling brings to mind realities that should no longer exist.

What specific challenges do you see within a multinational company like Amazon for workers?

Gianpaolo Meloni: I have been working at Amazon since 2012, and since 2015 I have lived my work in a conflictual way. I believe there is nothing worse in life than being in a place where you are constantly in the eye of the storm. However, this is happening now, and the most challenging aspect for me is seeing how difficult it is to coordinate forces on the worker protection side. Every country, every union thinks it can fight the battle alone, but fails to realize that the only way to face a giant like this is to set aside individual interests and work together. Paradoxically, the challenge posed by a multinational force like this is to face it in a united and resolute manner. Coordinate social, trade union and political actions to establish boundaries and constraints on the freedom of action and abuse of this giant. Protecting health and safety should be the first priority, but safeguarding employment itself and the future of work is an equally important challenge.

How can we overcome national perspectives to achieve transnational solidarity?

Gianpaolo Meloni: The problem linked to the social struggle affects all of us, and we can all act ethically. This type of problem arises from a question that we almost never ask ourselves when we are buying something on this platform: "Why is it so cheap?". Often, we don't ask ourselves the question because we don't want to know the answer, because it would surely be too uncomfortable to listen to. On a social level we are entering an era where self-centeredness and selfishness are the masters. However, the effects of our choices already fall on employment and market dynamics and will fall infinitely worse.

I think we are taking the media approach wrong, and that it takes much more strength to bring out all the dirt that is hidden under the rug. In conclusion, in order to overcome local and national perspectives, there is a need for a union of intents at European and international levels. This is being done by both trade unions and workers' movements. For example, the Uni Global, with which we are confronted, has launched an international alliance between trade unions to collect information and fight Amazon. For example, the slogan "make Amazon pay" was created by them. From my point of view, the same type of coordination is also needed at the level of the workers. Bringing information to workers, so they don't feel alone and know that there are many of us fighting. And at the same time work for an effective local, national and international media campaign; to bring out all the improprieties and hypocrisies of this company. In the end I could conclude with some keywords which are: collaboration, sacrifice, passion and shared vision.