



SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL | DISTRICT 1

## COUNCILMEMBER LISA HERBOLD

Dear Mr. Bezos,

Today Whole Foods shareholders voted in favor of your blockbuster deal to acquire 463 bricks and mortar Whole Foods Market locations for \$13.7 billion.

The number of cashier jobs in 2015 was the same as the number in 2005, though according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics U.S. employment overall had increased by 7.6 million jobs. Worker advocates worry that many of Whole Foods' 90,000 employees will lose their jobs. These Whole Foods workers don't have protections like successorship that most of the grocery workers in our city have under their union contracts.

The labor market is changing. We all know that. The gig economy is proliferating and more of our workforce is made up of employees who are contract workers. If this is the new face of labor and you are a visionary leading the evolution of this new model of work, should you not also be a visionary on the forefront of finding ways to help this new workforce – and your workers - thrive? Contract workers don't have the same rights and are not protected by many of our labor laws. But just because an employer can take advantage of contract employees with few rights under the law doesn't mean that employers should.

On a recent trip to Austin, Texas I learned about a new nonprofit gig economy ride sharing company there, [RideAustin](#). Drivers with RideAustin receive between 80 and 100 percent of the fare depending on the type of vehicle they are driving. RideAustin also provides food delivery services similar to those provided by Amazon Prime and UberEats. A non-profit to deliver goods and services is one exciting model.

I was recently contacted by an Amazon Prime Now employee who enumerated several labor practices I found alarming. One was limiting “flex” employees to working 25 hours a week and requiring them to compete to get those hours. This individual explained that several hundred shift-seekers log on to computer systems, see a complex listing of shifts at their home location or alternate locations with shifts of various lengths (rarely more than six hours), and then compete amongst themselves to secure those part-time hours. Shifts are made available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, which means employees must be constantly logged on. A fast typist may get two shifts in the week—about 8-12 hours total. It's not uncommon to find that in less than a minute, all shifts have been chosen.

Surviving on part time work in Seattle – or anywhere for that matter – is impossible. I understand that some contract workers for Amazon are homeless, and many rely on food banks to feed their families. Few can afford health care and turnover is very high. Work schedules change each week, and since many shifts are announced the evening before or the day-of, employees cannot schedule other aspects of their lives. This cannot be the future of work that you envision. Is it?

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Practices like these are precisely the reason my Council colleagues and I passed a Secure Scheduling Law; regulations intended to ensure certain retail and food service workers are given 2 weeks' notice of their schedule and access to a fair number of hours of work. The unpredictable scheduling practices reported by your employees are the same we heard from retail and food service employees; folks who merely wanted to schedule a doctor appointment for their child, a vacation with family, or surgery for themselves.

For better or worse, your quest to turn what was once a small internet sales operation into the multinational behemoth has turbo-boosted Seattle's economy. But not everyone has benefited. You're providing 40,000 Seattle jobs and your company has become a pillar in the foundation of our local economy while you fulfill your dream – and your customers' demands. However, you continue to find yourself faced with [accusations](#) about hostile work environment and harsh working conditions.

The current situation with more than 800 security officers that protect your headquarters, employed by contractor Security Industry Specialists (SIS), is another such example. Many of these guards haven't received wage increases in five years, yet face sub-par working conditions. These officers, community supporters, faith leaders, union members, and [tech workers, have reached out to you to hold SIS accountable and provide these workers with a fair path to form a union.](#)

Workers at SIS and Whole Foods exist in industries that have a long history with organized labor. While these workers may not fall under the Amazon moniker, these companies look to you for leadership. By committing to being a thoughtful, productive member of the conversation around unionizing in the new gig economy you can be that leader.

You have also **given back to Seattle** and recently opened your doors to Mary's Place, and for that I am grateful. It is actions such as these that can help move our City forward. However, there are still many issues facing Amazon and other gig economy workers today. I do not believe that philanthropy is the best test of a progressive employer. The best progressive employer will lead in promoting a vision that ensures communities thrive and that employment policies recognize businesses are not for short-term gain, but for the long haul and the employee is a critical partner in that long-term haul.

I am writing to you today, on what may be a historic day for your company, to ask if you will convene a national conversation with other employers in the gig economy and labor advocates to plan how you will each treat your employees as well as you treat your customers, engaging with them not as data, but as people with real needs and real lives. Not as a metric. If the gig economy is indeed here to stay, you have a responsibility to participate in a conversation about fair work, schedules, and livable wages.

Thank you for your consideration,

Lisa Herbold  
Seattle City Council