

A. I see you've just had an Amazon delivery, George. Did you hear that the Amazon boss, Jeff Bezos, has just announced a \$2 billion-dollar gift to address homelessness, amongst other problems? I'm really glad that like another great American philanthropist, Bill Gates, he is investing some of the millions he has made in doing good.

B. So Helen, what is he planning to do?

A. His idea is to fund capable organisations serving homeless people on the ground, so they can offer better solutions. The people concerned are to be treated well, like customers at Amazon, where the Bezos fortune came from. Excellent idea – don't you agree?

B. No, I don't. This is just another highly original, daring entrepreneur who has given in to the clichés and tragic limitations of American billionaire giving.

A. What do you mean? Bezos' philosophy is: "Where's the good in the world, and how can we spread it?". I don't see how you could possibly disagree with that.

B. There are several problems with this. Firstly, it is an approach borrowed from the business world, where you test something, and then try it on a large scale. But you can't do that with social issues, because entrepreneurial systems and the search for a quick fix don't work with deep-rooted social problems. The business model is not appropriate.

A. Bezos has lots of money. What's wrong with him giving some of it away?

B. Nothing. But he, and other American billionaires, need to look at how they make their money in the first place. Amazon is notorious for low wages, the ultra-fast pace of work, reliance on seasonal workers, and treating its workers poorly. The company contributes to a growing precariousness in the American working class which can sometimes result in homelessness. Yes, it's kind of him to want to help homeless people, but he could do a lot more good if he changed the way his own company works, and persuaded other billionaires to do the same. In my opinion, his wealth is based on exploitation of his workers.

A. I think you are pushing things too far in blaming Bezos and other CEOs for all the problems of the homeless in the USA. I think a lot of homelessness is because city councils and elected governments don't take their responsibility in finding homes for people. It's not the job of companies to build low-cost housing for working people.

B. But look at the issue of homelessness in Bezos' own hometown of Seattle. It's good to provide relief for homeless people, but there are root causes. For example, last year the Seattle City Council voted unanimously to increase taxes on large employers in order to raise \$50 million dollars for homeless services and affordable housing. The companies would have had to pay a tax of \$275 per employee. Amazon joined in with other local companies, and succeeded in overturning the law. Also, Amazon has been inviting America's cities to bid on hosting its second headquarters. The cities have to offer the company enormous tax breaks. That is asking for money that those cities could instead be spending on the disadvantaged.

A. This sounds to me like you want these big companies to become social and humanitarian organisations rather than businesses. If they didn't make these large profits through successful business methods, they wouldn't have money to give away!

B. Companies need to make American capitalism responsive to everybody impacted by their business, not just shareholders. All the stakeholders are important – the workers, and the local communities they are part of. Here's a radical idea: what if Bezos applied himself to the very problem on which his fiercest critics attack him? The treatment of workers.

A. What do you mean?

B. In recent years, unions and collective bargaining has been attacked by the political right and by the new economy which has made traditional trade unions less relevant for many workers. Collective bargaining needs reinventing for the age of Uber, the gig economy, zero-hour contracts and, indeed, Amazon. Workers need to be enabled to fight for decent wages, for insurance against unfair contracts, and for health, safety and dignity on the job.

Outline: This dialogue concerns the recent decision by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, to give \$2 bn to projects to alleviate homelessness in America. One speaker is very positive about this action, which is in the great tradition of philanthropy, and points to Bezos' generosity. The second speaker believes that rather than give money just as relief, Bezos should deal with the root problems of homelessness – treating workers fairly, paying a good salary, and encouraging a new development of trade unions to give workers more bargaining power.

Questions: What do you think of Bezos' statement "Where is the good in the world, and what can we do to spread it?" Is there an obligation on the billionaire bosses of Amazon, Google, Apple etc to engage in philanthropy? Would stronger trade unions be a good development to help with the problem of precarious employment and the gig economy? Is the problem of homelessness best tackled at a national or local level?