

Further strikes at Amazon, Germany

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21 December 2013

On Monday, the service workers' trade union, Verdi, commenced further strike action at Amazon one week before Christmas. The union is seeking a deal with the largest Internet sales platform in the world.

As was the case during the last strike at the end of November, workers were called out in the city of Leipzig and the company's main centre in Bad Hersfeld in Hesse. For the first time, workers at Amazon's head office in Graben, near Augsburg, also participated.

In Bad Hersfeld, the largest Amazon site in Germany, around 700 employees in its two sorting offices joined the strike action, according to union sources. In Leipzig, an estimated 500, and in Graben, a further 600 are supposed to have joined the strike. Verdi says this figure of 1,800 out of the 23,000 workers taking part in the one-day action is a new record for strike participation.

Amazon gave the figure of 1,115 workers in total not turning up for work. They took pains to insist that Christmas deliveries were unaffected.

A representative of Verdi announced further strike action at Bad Hersfeld for Tuesday and Wednesday and in Leipzig on Friday, whereas in Graben they just had the one-day strike. Nothing came of Verdi's announced plan for action in the Werne distribution centre.

Verdi chief Stefanie Nutzenberger justified the strikes with the union's appeal that the employer agree to pay Amazon workers in line with the recognised contract for retail trade workers in the state of Hesse. Ralf Kleber, the CEO of Amazon Germany, repeated his view that the company dealt in logistics, and was therefore bound to pay the lower wage rates applying to this section of workers.

Amazon workers have every right to protest against their pitiful wages and to conduct a struggle against their atrocious working conditions. A number of accounts and journalistic reports, like those of the

French journalist Jean-Baptiste Malet, have exposed the inhuman conditions that they have to work under. Overlong shifts with inadequate breaks, long distances to be walked during shifts—up to 20 kilometres—physically demanding work, tyrannical supervisors and rudeness from top managers are topped by totalitarian surveillance and control of every action taken by the workers.

But Verdi has no genuine interest in improving working conditions, including the lack of job security at Amazon. Only 900 out of the approximate 9,000 employees have a permanent job contract. Fourteen thousand are temporary workers hired from employment agencies. These are paid on a lower pay scale, which Verdi and IG Metall recently negotiated for the next three years.

Verdi is not even concerned about the issue of a pay increase of €1.68 per hour, which remains the stated grounds for these lightning strikes. For years, Verdi has remained silent regarding the pay and working conditions at Amazon. The real trigger of the current Amazon "tariff initiative" was a documentary on the German TV channel ARD reporting that workers from countries like Spain, Rumania and Hungary were being attracted to Germany with false wage promises, and were instead having to work in conditions of "modern slave labour", under the supervision of managers with radical-right convictions.

Only after this documentary unleashed a wave of outrage did Verdi announce its action. The trade union had already not only defused protest within Amazon by instituting the new wage agreement, but also helped in that way to rescue Amazon's public image. Like all trade unions, Verdi uses its workplace contacts to detect when anger and revolt is building up to the point of explosion. Only then do they intervene and offer their services to employers to police the workplace and defuse such protest.

Verdi sought to offer its aid to Amazon after adverse news coverage last year threatened the company with massive worker protests. The failure of US Amazon boss Jeff Bezos to take up their offer has left the German trade union representatives in a quandary. They do not want strike action, but must do something to save face in front of the workers.

Multimillionaire Bezos is not well known for his willingness to help out others unless he benefits financially. He has evidently failed to recognise that Verdi is offering him precisely such financial benefit.

For this reason, Verdi has sought the support of its no-less-corrupt counterparts in the US trade unions. On Monday, a “solidarity action” was staged in front of Amazon headquarters in Terry Avenue North, Seattle—though one could hardly call it an action.

Several trade unions from Washington State announced their support for the protest, including the umbrella union AFL-CIO, the service workers’ union SEIU, the union of telecommunications and IT workers (CWA), the Teamsters transport workers’ union, and the agricultural, food and health workers’ union (UFCW).

In a press leaflet—not aimed at workers—Verdi offered its aid to these organisations and emphasised that the union represented millions of workers. However, these workers did not attend the action, and were very likely not even invited in the first place.

Just two Verdi bureaucrats went on a trip to Seattle to protest along with no more than 20 American trade union functionaries and some of their family members. They carried placards with slogans such as “We are humans, not robots”, “Stop Corporate Greed” and “We are supporting our working families”.

Verdi boss Frank Bsirske absurdly described this “act of solidarity” by American trade unionists as sending a “powerful signal” that cooperation between workers does not stop at national borders. He claimed that the protest sent a bold message regarding the questionable methods of global concerns such as Amazon.

The whole action was a farce and served only to underline Verdi’s desperation to strike a rotten deal with Bezos and his Amazon Group. The strikes at Amazon in Germany since April have made one thing clear: the working conditions and wages of all 23,000 employees can only be improved in a concerted struggle against the influence of the unions.



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