

Striking Amazon workers in Germany support call for international cooperation

Our correspondents
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Workers at Amazon distribution centers in Bad Hersfeld went on strike yesterday. Workers have been resisting ruthless exploitation and low wages at the online sales giant for years.

Around 1,000 workers in Bad Hersfeld work at FRA1, the oldest distribution center in Germany, and an additional 2,000-2,200 work at FRA3, which is located on the so-called Amazon Road. Around 100 striking workers gathered at the entrance in the early morning, and 40 departed by bus to Frankfurt to participate in a day of action by retail workers in the state of Hesse, organized by the Verdi trade union.

Amazon is known for its brutal methods of exploitation and workflow, which is organized down to the last detail. It is also notorious for the harsh treatment of anyone who complains. Many striking workers therefore did not want to speak on camera about their working conditions. “I am on the verge of being fired,” was a common refrain.

Thomas, is a “picker,” the name given by Amazon to workers who locate ordered goods in the huge storerooms. He said that he walks between 20 and 30 kilometers each day. “When I take goods from the lower shelf, I have to bend my knees, often go down on my knees,” he said. Even being in good physical fitness cannot assist in such a situation.

Andrea has worked for Amazon for nine years and earns about €2,000 per month before tax, “and that is only because I have been employed here longer than 24 months,” she said. New hires earn much less. “That is €24,000 per year!” said Andrea. By comparison, Amazon owner Jeff Bezos “is the second richest man in the world. He ‘earns’ \$24,000 within a minute,” she said.

Andrea recalled how company management had previously said that there was no money for higher wages because the company would make a loss. “But what about now?” she asked. Profits are exploding today. “We do not participate in the profits,” she added.

Andrea also explained how Amazon “justified” the low wages. “Amazon hires us all as trainees. Yet many of us are trained professionals.” She had trained as a retail saleswoman, with a focus on storage and logistics. “But that is not required. So you run around here as a trainee for years.”

The massive pressure on workers was clear to see on Friday morning. It was barely possible for workers who were not striking to speak as they went to work. However, almost all took the WSWs flyer introducing the International Amazon Workers Voice. Some were reluctant at first, but took it after campaigners informed them that it was not associated with Verdi, which is known for organizing a series of one-day strikes that have no impact on company operations.

Carl was formerly a US soldier and stationed in Germany until 1992. He began to work at Amazon in 1999 when it opened its first storage and distribution center in Bad Hersfeld. Prior to that, he worked as a gardener and landscaper, and he also worked in arms manufacturing and security.

Since his health had been ruined by the decades of labor, Carl spoke out vehemently against the “health bonus” introduced by Amazon management at several German stores. Bad Hersfeld has not yet introduced this system. According to this system, part of the bonus payment is linked to the absentee rate of an entire department. If one worker is absent due to illness, all workers lose out.

The obvious goal of this measure is to encourage workers to check on their colleagues and put them under pressure. “I have to go to the hospital twice a year, sometimes for a long period,” Carl said. “Should the entire department lose out because of that?”

Dave, who has worked in the returns department since 2011, said that he is also opposed to the system. It is merely a “scheme to get workers to turn up to work,” he

said. Workers drag themselves to work when they are ill, for example when they have a cold, and infect more workers. “It just makes the whole thing worse,” he said. He hoped that the works council would manage to block the “health bonus” in Bad Hersfeld.

Jens explained the perfidious system to us on the sidelines of the demonstration in Frankfurt. A trained retail salesman, Jens has worked for Amazon for seven years. The group bonus is designed to work so that “if five people are selected from the department, and one of them is ill, then the entire department gets no bonus, everyone suffers as a result. This is not only a lottery, but also makes a fool of the workers.”

Jens said he knew one worker who forced herself to come to work even though she was ill. “She had a breakdown at Amazon and later died. That shows exactly where this type of thing leads.”

Another Amazon worker added, “If something unexpected comes up, an illness or something needing repaired, then that’s it for you. The wages suffice to barely survive, if even for that, and even then it is difficult.”

Many workers from different retail and online companies took part in the demonstration at Frankfurt. They were very interested to learn of conditions at Amazon, and almost all took the flyer introducing the International Amazon Workers Voice. Many spoke about similar working conditions.

Raffaella, who works on the check-outs at Karstadt, has had experiences with several retail companies: “I think Amazon is terrible. But even at Real it can happen that a note is taken if someone doesn’t work fast enough. Then he is at risk of being taken into the office and cited.”

Elke K. works at Real in Wiesbaden. After being informed about the Amazon flyer, she said that international cooperation against such a company was extremely important. “These conditions are really unsustainable, it reminds me of Bangladesh,” she said. “What amount of pressure must it be when people have to walk 20 kilometres per day.” Elke explained how she knew many colleagues who still had to go to the welfare office, despite working full-time and overtime hours, to top up their income and pay rent. “What a perfidious system!”

Marco, a Karstadt salesman, was horrified to learn that workers in Scotland lived in tents because they could not afford the travel to their work or a nearby apartment. “Hard to believe that something like that is possible in a modern industrial state.”

Gabriele added, “The suggestion to cooperate internationally is interesting. Companies have long since acted internationally and outsource operations to the Czech Republic or Poland and play us off against each other. And the trade unions offer only recipes within the national framework.”

Meanwhile in Bad Hersfeld, Amazon workers at the midday shift change spoke to the WSWS. They have to deal with the fact that many colleagues are not participating in a strike called by Verdi. One reason for this is that there is no grounds for workers to believe that Verdi will represent and fight for their interests. Verdi has been organizing one-day, isolated strikes against Amazon for years.

The trade union is pursuing entirely different goals to the workers. The Verdi trade union is calling for an additional €1 per hour for workers in the retail and online sales sector. But at Amazon, the issue remains one of securing any kind of collective agreement. The world’s largest online sales company has refused to recognize any contract.

With its demand for a collective agreement, Verdi hopes to be recognized by Amazon and cooperate with the company as a partner. This ultimately amounts to jointly organizing the exploitation of workers. Verdi already sits on the supervisory boards of many companies, including Lufthansa, Karstadt and the rail company Deutsche Bahn.

Workers said they could only fight the company by being organized as an international force. Carl said, “We can all secure more if we are all united. Not only in a state or federally, but on an international level.” This is why the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei and its sister parties internationally have established the International Amazon Workers Voice. This newsletter will be international, both in its form and political content. It will link the struggles of workers around the world in a common struggle against the company and the capitalist system.



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