

As Jeff Bezos' wealth reaches \$150 billion

Unions strangle strike efforts by European Amazon workers on Prime Day

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Thousands of Amazon workers in Spain, Germany, and Poland are engaged in coordinated strike action meant to coincide with Amazon "Prime Day," the company's invented one-and-a-half-day shopping holiday.

In every case, the unions have worked to limit the strike and prevent any significant coordination by workers across borders.

Prime Day is the occasion for a major publicity campaign by the corporate media in the United States and internationally, akin to a commercial holiday such as "Black Friday," the day after Thanksgiving. The media has done its best to provide Amazon with free advertising for its biggest sale day of the year.

In 2017, Prime Day sales amounted to an estimated \$2.41 billion—a 60 percent increase over the previous year. In the 30-hour time frame of the event, Amazon surpassed its combined sales for Black Friday and Cyber Monday in 2016 and added more Prime members than ever before.

Yesterday, in anticipation of a new record-setting day, Amazon's shares rose by 0.5 percent. Jeff Bezos, the largest shareholder, increased his net worth to \$150 billion—wealth obtained through the brutal exploitation of Amazon's global workforce of more than half a million people.

For Amazon workers internationally, Prime Day, and the weeks leading up to it, are synonymous with stepped-up exploitation, intensified speedup, forced overtime, overheated and unairconditioned warehouses and grueling labor. The immense technological capacities that make possible Amazon's pledge of same- or next-day delivery are, under capitalism, translated into ever more onerous conditions for the

working class.

The strongest of the industrial actions in Europe is taking place in Spain, at the San Fernando fulfillment facility (referred to as MAD4 in Amazon's jargon) outside Madrid, where workers are engaging in a three-day strike. The 77,000-square-meter facility, the oldest and largest of Amazon's warehouses in Spain, was established in 2012 and employs 2,000 people. Some 1,100 are permanent workers, and the rest, 900, are temporary.

The strike by workers at MAD4 follows a two-day strike held in late March after a collective agreement between the workers and Amazon expired in 2016, and a new agreement is yet to be reached. Amazon has continuously attacked workers' night shift bonuses and health care benefits since the opening of the plant. Workers rejected the proposed 2016 contract after the company offered an increase in salaries below the inflation rate. The average annual salary in the logistic center is about 19,000 euros (\$22,100). The contract also would have reduced allowances for night work as well as pay for overtime.

Temporary workers are in a precarious situation, in which they are granted monthly, and sometimes only weekly, contracts.

There is immense determination among Amazon workers throughout Spain, Europe and internationally to fight against their intolerable working conditions and conduct a struggle for improved wages, safety, health care and working conditions. The role of the unions, however, is to actively suppress any such struggle and prevent workers from linking up across national borders.

In Spain, the unions have isolated the strike to a

single warehouse and confined the action to a series of limited strikes, ensuring that Amazon is able to reassign production and minimize any impact on its operations. Amazon runs over four dozen processing plants and warehouses across the continent.

One union leader, Marc Balmes of the CGT, admitted to local news that Amazon had over a month to move merchandise and coordinate production in preparation for the strike at San Fernando. Amazon boasted on Tuesday that the strike had no effect on its supply chain for Prime Day, as other Spanish and European facilities have picked up the slack.

In Germany, the Verdi union called a one-day strike at six facilities employing 12,000 workers in total. Like in Spain, Amazon provocatively announced that the strike will not impact its ability to process orders or maintain shipping commitments during Prime Day. The company claimed only a small fraction of its 12,000-person workforce in Germany, the largest international retail market after the US, are participating in the strike.

In Poland, the union called only for a “work-to-rule protest,” which involves doing only the bare minimum required by contract as a way to slow down industrial productivity.

The strikes by Amazon workers in Europe are part of growing militancy of workers internationally, including of warehouse and distribution workers. In the United States, more than 93 percent of United Parcel Service workers voted last month to authorize strike action as part of negotiations for a new contract. Workers at UPS, FedEx and other shipping companies also face increased workloads on Prime Day.

At UPS as at Amazon, however, workers confront as enemies not only the corporations, but also the trade unions which claim to represent them. The Teamsters union, which covers a quarter-million UPS employees, has reached a sellout agreement that includes the creation of a new tier of low-paid drivers, maintains a 70-hour workweek, and ensures a permanent poverty-level wage for part-timers, who make up 70 percent of the workforce.

Last week, the union announced that it was extending the deadline for negotiations by at least 60 days beyond the expiry of the current agreement on July 31. The purpose of this move is to buy the union time to wear down opposition among the rank-and-file to the

agreement.

The answer to the coordinated global operations of giant warehousing corporations like Amazon must be to unify the struggles by workers across national borders. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees at Amazon and UPS, and in other sections of the working class, to conduct a united struggle, independently of and in opposition to the anti-working class trade unions which seek to strangle any action by workers against the corporations.

The giant distribution and logistics networks currently under the control of billionaire oligarchs like Bezos must be expropriated and placed under the democratic control of working people, as part of the rational reorganization of society on a planned socialist basis.



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