

Union seeks to block strike as Polish Amazon workers contract COVID-19

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13 April 2020

Several cases of COVID-19 were confirmed last week at different Amazon warehouses in Poland, as the total number of confirmed cases in the country rose to 6,674 as of Sunday night. Two hundred and thirty-two people have reportedly died from the virus.

These numbers are likely a significant underestimation of the severity of the outbreak. The far-right Polish government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) has so far organized far fewer COVID tests per capita than most European countries. Meanwhile, news broke last week that PiS set up its own special division at the state-funded National Institute for Hygiene early on in the crisis to provide for fast “VIP” tests for members of the government and their families.

The news about the first confirmed cases at Amazon, which employs a total of 16,000 workers in Poland, came just days after US workers at Amazon, Instacart and Whole Foods engaged in a wildcat strike. Cases were confirmed in three different warehouses last week: in Pawlikowice, Końskowice and Sosnowiec. Three of the cases were at the warehouse in Końskowice, which is located close to the city of Szczecin (Stettin) on the Polish-German border.

Amazon is one of the most important employers in the area, which has been socially devastated by the restoration of capitalism in 1989. Before Poland and Germany went into lockdown in March, it was possible to reach Szczecin within less than two and a half hours with public transport from the German capital Berlin. Germany now has 126,656 confirmed cases, as of Sunday afternoon.

Amazon has only confirmed these cases to the media after pictures emerged of one worker in Końskowice being taken away by an ambulance. However, the company has released no information to its workers about exactly how many have been infected or placed

in quarantine.

As in the US and other countries, Amazon workers are deemed “essential workers” and have continued to work as the country went into lockdown. They have been working regular shifts with hundreds of workers often in a given area at the same time. They have not been provided with masks or any other kind of protective equipment by either the company or the government. Amazon only asked its employees to wash their hands often and installed some hand sanitizer dispensers.

Calls have been growing among Polish Amazon workers for a wildcat strike. The strike action taken by their colleagues in the US in early April was widely followed by workers in Poland. However, the union, the OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza Amazon, has clearly sought to block similar strike action from taking place in Poland. Asked by the media whether a strike was now impending, the union’s spokesperson Marta Rozmysłowska said, “We’ll see,” and insisted that the union was now prioritizing an open letter directed towards Jeff Bezos, in which it pleads for PPE and other basic safety measures.

Appealing to Bezos, the world’s richest man whose wealth is based on the brutal exploitation of Amazon workers, to change course and look after their safety, is a complete dead-end that exposes the bankruptcy of the union.

The union maintains close ties to the pseudo-left Lewica Razem (United Left), which also intervened in last year’s national teachers’ strike to prop up the Polish Teachers Union (ZNP) and the Trade Unions’ Forum (FZZ). The strike, which enjoyed broad public support and shook the far-right government of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, ended in the union selling the teachers out completely.

The union and Lewica Razem seek to prevent a strike under conditions where the coronavirus pandemic is starkly exposing the devastating consequences of the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Even with a comparatively modest spread of the virus so far, the Polish health care system, ruined by decades of cuts that were implemented by all bourgeois parties, is on the verge of collapse. Entire hospitals lack ventilators necessary to treat critically ill patients for COVID-19.

One paramedic described in a recent interview with the *Newsweek Polska* said that he and his colleagues often had to drive for hours from one clinic to another because many were refusing to take in suspected COVID cases, fearing that they would have to close down entire units, if not the entire hospital, for hours or days. Every day, units and hospitals are closing throughout the country because they are deemed contaminated.

There are already far too few units and hospitals to deal with a growing number of patients. According to the *Rzeczpospolita*, every day of 2019 a medical department was closed in a Polish hospital due to lack of funding and personnel. In some months, up to three departments were closed per day. The number of medical departments at hospitals specializing in infectious diseases was cut from 119 to 79 in the past few years. Starvation wages for doctors have made tens of thousands of young Polish doctors leave the country, leaving behind a workforce in hospitals that is often close to or above the retirement age.

A compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis, available in epub and print formats.

Conditions in the health care system have prompted numerous protests and hunger strikes by various sections of health care workers in recent years, including doctors and paramedics. In February, just before the crisis hit Poland, nurses in Bia?stok in eastern Poland were about to go on strike.

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of workers in Poland have already become unemployed. This includes hundreds of thousands Ukrainian immigrant workers who cannot return to Ukraine, and tens of thousands of caregivers who used to work in Germany until a few weeks ago. Unemployment is widely expected to reach 10 percent, if not more, within the

coming months. These workers, most of whom earned poverty wages before, are now facing almost immediate financial destitution.

The PiS-government has been trying to exploit the crisis to accelerate its drive toward dictatorship. Despite a de facto lockdown, which has now been extended until at least May 3, it is insisting on holding presidential elections on May 10. The main candidate of the liberal opposition party Civic Platform (PO), Ma?gorzata Kidawa-B?o?ska, has already declared that she will drop out of the race. The incumbent PiS President Andrzej Duda is expected to win the first round with a bit over 50 percent, as no other competitor is considered to stand a chance of winning against Duda. Recent polls showed that 73 percent of the population oppose holding the elections under a de facto a state of emergency.

The science minister Jaros?aw Gowin from the Agreement party (Porozumienie), a coalition partner of PiS, opposed the move by PiS and announced his resignation last week. He declared that his party would remain in the coalition with PiS for the time being “for the sake of Poland.”

Under these conditions, any major strike action by Amazon workers or other sections of the working class has the potential to lead to a massive political crisis and a much broader movement against capitalism. The biggest fear of all sections of the ruling class and their props in the trade unions is that such a movement by workers in Poland will link up to the emerging strike wave by the working class in the US, across Europe and internationally.



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