Amazon workers in Germany strike against lack of coronavirus protection

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More than 2,000 Amazon workers are in the second day of a two-day strike at six facilities in Germany to protest the company's refusal to provide adequate protection from the coronavirus. Workers are striking two facilities in Bad Hersfeld as well as fulfilment centres in Leipzig, Koblenz, Rheinberg and Werne.

In Bad Hersfeld, located in the state of Hesse, some 500 workers participated in a motorcade on Monday. Almost the same number of workers are involved in the strike in Leipzig. In Werne, North Rhine-Westphalia, some 400 workers participated in a rally yesterday, while a further 400 workers are striking in Rheinberg and a similar number in Koblenz.

Throughout Germany, 13,000 permanent employees work at 13 Amazon locations.

The strikers are under pressure from management and are being generally ignored by the media, but the solidarity of the surrounding population with the strikers is immense. Many workers confront similar exploitative and dangerous working conditions as those experienced by Amazon workers.

The situation came to a head in Bad Hersfeld after at least three dozen workers were infected by the coronavirus, according to Mechtild Middeke, a secretary of the Verdi trade union. Workers were not informed about the number of colleagues who had been infected or the departments where they worked.

Amazon is not announcing COVID-19 cases publicly. Nor is it offering tests to the entire workforce. People who come into contact with the virus are not being systematically isolated.

This is resulting in thousands of Amazon employees being exposed to great risk. In April, 68 workers out of a total workforce of 1,800 at the Ham2 Winsen facility near Hamburg were infected. Although Amazon invests billions to accelerate workflow and increase the exploitation and surveillance of workers, it is not prepared to ensure safe, transparent and healthy working conditions.

After the company did virtually nothing to protect its workers, the local public health office in Bad Hersfeld issued an order for masks to be worn in the fulfilment centre. But the pace of work is so brutal that workers are complaining about breathing problems, which are made even worse by the high temperatures in the distribution centres.

This is why the demands raised by the strikers include more breaks, a reduction in the work pace, and paid leave for workers with health problems. The workers are also demanding the reinstatement of the €2 coronavirus bonus that was slashed in May.

The exploitative and inhumane working conditions at Amazon are so brutal that they cause physical and psychological damage even under normal circumstances. Workers are put under immense pressure to fulfil the company's quotas. With fully laden shopping trolleys, pickers and commissioners rush through the kilometres of multi-storey storage halls, while scanners set the pace at which they have to work. Packers have to stand for hours on end at packing tables.

Everyone is working against time, under constant surveillance, and must expect to lose points if he or she falls behind the prescribed pace of work. The entire system degrades human beings to the status of robots.

The perfected exploitation that has made Amazon owner Jeff Bezos a multibillionaire and the world's richest man is enforced in thousands of distribution and fulfilment centres around the world. These are ideal conditions for the coronavirus to spread, as has been demonstrated in dozens of Amazon facilities in the United States, France, Italy and Spain since February.

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As a result of the totally inadequate safety measures, Amazon workers are putting the lives of their families and loved ones at risk. Pandemic hotspots, including in Amazon fulfilment centres, can trigger new waves of the pandemic that will cost the lives of thousands.

Amazon workers around the world have been fighting for better workplace protection since the outset of the pandemic. Hundreds of workers in the United States, Italy, Spain and France have spontaneously refused to work so as to avoid exposing themselves to infection. They have also launched spontaneous strikes to support courageous employees who were fired for protesting against the working conditions. After strikes in New York, Chicago and Detroit, Amazon workers in Minneapolis walked off the job to prevent the firing of a worker who had protested against the conditions. In the United States, at least nine Amazon workers have died from COVID-19.

The strikes at Amazon are part of a growing international strike wave. Workers from different countries and economic sectors are fighting for better protection against the coronavirus and opposing layoffs and wage cuts.

In Mexico's maquiladoras, where parts are produced for the US auto industry, 3,200 workers went on strike last week. At auto plants in Detroit, workers have stopped production and begun in recent days to establish rank-and-file safety committees to break free of the trade unions and take the struggle for safe working conditions into their own hands. Job actions have also been launched by nurses in California and steel workers in the Netherlands.

The strike in Germany is being widely welcomed within the working class. Twitter user Katja K commented, "Amazon continues to make obscene profits and ruthlessly exploit its workforce. Disgraceful company!" Another Twitter user wrote, "Huge profits amid the coronavirus, billions in turnover, and all small online retailers crushed, but the workers can't even be paid according to a collective agreement and are working themselves to death. It's disgusting."

While Amazon workers enjoy widespread support, they confront not only management as a hostile force, but also the trade unions. The service trade union Verdi is doing everything it can to isolate the Amazon strike internationally and limit its impact.

Verdi intervened at Bad Hersfeld in 2012-2013 only after a wildcat strike broke out, with hundreds of temporarily employed foreign workers drawing attention to their plight. Verdi conducted a strike vote in April 2013 that resulted in a 98 percent vote for strike action. It then organised a walkout in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig.

Ever since, Verdi has called for tactical "pinprick" strikes, which are generally of short duration and isolated to one location. From the beginning, its goal was to channel the workers' struggles in a safe direction, prevent strikes from spreading to other economic areas, and convince Amazon management that Verdi is a useful partner to control the workforce.

Amazon workers can protect themselves only by organising independently in rank-and-file safety committees, with the aim of linking up with workers at other Amazon facilities across Germany and internationally. Such safety committees would halt work in Bad Hersfeld and other locations impacted by COVID-19. They would also demand full pay for workers who can't work, and fight for the reorganisation of the distribution and delivery sectors to meet the safety needs of the workers.

This must be part of a broader mobilisation of the working class against the criminal indifference shown by the ruling elite to the lives of working people during the pandemic. "It must develop into a global class conscious movement of the working class against capitalism and for socialism," as the International Committee of the Fourth International recently noted in a statement.

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