

# Trade unions stage scattered protests on Amazon's Black Friday

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Scattered protests of Amazon workers took place around the world on Black Friday, which kicks off the holiday gift shopping season and a sharp increase in workloads, speed-up and hours for the company's global workforce. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased workloads are creating even more deadly conditions for workers, despite the massive advertising campaign by Amazon to claim that its warehouses are safe.

As small businesses have been forced to close over the course of 2020, Amazon has reaped record profits from increased online sales and the use of labor-saving technology. Its share values have skyrocketed, largely due to the bipartisan bailout of the stock markets in late March.

Amazon has hired over 400,000 new employees since January, meaning that over 1 million workers now confront a global conglomerate worth \$1.5 trillion and run by the world's richest man. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has seen his personal fortune increase by \$80 billion during the pandemic. After concealing the outbreak of cases for months, Amazon acknowledged in October that nearly 20,000 Amazon and Whole Foods workers have tested positive for the virus, a likely underestimation due to limited testing and contact tracing.

There is no shortage of opposition among Amazon workers to these extreme working conditions and broader inequality. However, relatively few workers responded to the Black Friday "day of action" called by an assortment of unions and pseudo-left organizations that make up the allegedly "grassroots" campaign called #MakeAmazonPay.

While media outlets universally proclaimed that there existed an internationally coordinated protest of workers in 15 countries, on every continent except Africa, the *World Socialist Web Site* confirmed participation of actual workers in only a few places, and even there the trade unions isolated the strikes within a narrow framework.

In Germany, workers participated in strikes at seven warehouses, in a one-day action that is regularly called by unions Verdi and UNI Global on Amazon Prime Day and Black Friday. Similar one-day walkouts and strikes were organized in Spain. The turnout this year appears remarkably lower than the Black Friday action called by the same unions in 2018, with no media accounts of the alleged actions in France, Italy, and

Poland.

Dozens of highly exploited garment workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who produce clothing that is sold on Amazon, participated in a protest organized by the union Sammilito Garments Sramik Federation (Combined Garments Workers Federation). In April, thousands of these same garment workers crowded around factory doors hoping to return to work or receive pay after a 10-day government shutdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus, only to be informed by management that they were laid off with no pay. The union did nothing but issue empty statements at that time.

In the Philippines, call center workers under contract with Amazon Ring held a "virtual action." These workers are employed by French company Teleperformance, which negotiates low-wage contracts for workers to provide call center customer service for companies like Netflix and Amazon. In 2019, workers reported 24-hour shifts that forced them to sleep on the floor at work. This year, they have reported lack of sanitation and social distancing, high workloads, lack of safe and affordable housing accommodations, and the usual low wages.

The remaining "actions" cited by media sources mostly consisted of media stunts led by various middle-class "left" organizations, pro-corporate unions, climate activist groups, civil rights organizations and tax reform advocates, with minimal participation of workers.

Protests were organized outside of Amazon buildings by the environmental group Extinction Rebellion in Luxembourg, various unions and activist groups in India and Brazil, former Amazon worker and union promoter Christian Smalls in Seattle, "social justice" organizations in Virginia, and the GMB Union in London. Many of these protests were limited to a handful of people projecting the slogan "Make Amazon Pay" onto the side of Amazon buildings and one of CEO Jeff Bezos' mansion in Washington, DC.

Like the May Day "general strike" earlier this year, the majority of Amazon workers had not heard of, let alone played an active role in these protest actions prior to seeing the media hoopla. This is because the actions were organized from above by professional political operatives and union bureaucrats as an attempt to direct class opposition behind capitalist political

parties and unions before Amazon workers take independent action and organize their own fight.

The #MakeAmazonPay coalition is led by the Progressive International (PI), a movement launched in 2018 by US Senator Bernie Sanders, former Syriza member and Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, and similar upper-middle class figures who provide a “left” and “socialist” cover to capitalist parties, austerity and nationalism.

The list of coalition supporters include the *Jacobin* and *Nation* publications, the Sunrise Movement, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, several members of the Worker's Party of Brazil, former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, Niki Ashton of the Canadian New Democratic Party, Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau, and many more similar figures. Their Amazon coalition has attracted even more organizations and unions, including Our Revolution, Oxfam, Greenpeace, the Athena Coalition, Public Services International, UNI Global Union, International Trade Union Confederation and the Amazon Workers International.

The coalition is demanding that “Amazon change its policies and governments change their laws” in order to make Amazon pay “its debts to workers, the planet, and society.” The specific demands relate to “improving the workplace, providing job security to all, respecting workers’ universal rights, operating sustainably, and paying back to society.”

Some of the demands appeal to the genuine, healthy sentiments of Amazon workers to unite on a broad international basis and carry out a struggle against the conditions in which they are forced to work, stating that a struggle is needed “across national borders and narrow spheres of activism.”

However, the real program of this fraudulent “international” coalition is to strengthen the unions and sow illusions in the capitalist parties of every country. They call upon Amazon to allow “unions access to Amazon worksites to inform workers on the benefits of unionization,” and “invite progressive lawmakers across the globe to join us” and “build legislative power.”

These organizations deliberately conceal the fact that the struggle against this transnational giant requires a political fight by the working class against the whole capitalist economic and political set-up, which gives a single individual the “right” to privately own and control a vast global conglomerate, which dictates policy to governments around the world. These organizations would have workers believe that Amazon can be transformed into a humane “corporate citizen” by the same “left” capitalist parties and unions that have sabotaged workers’ struggles, carried out policies of militarism and budget cuts, and facilitated the growth of social inequality for decades.

The bankruptcy of this perspective is exemplified by the role of Yanis Varoufakis, whose Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) movement in Greece came to power in 2015, promising to fight the austerity measures of the European Union, only to

carry out the most brutal cost-cutting measures in history along with savage attacks on immigrant workers.

Amazon workers cannot allow these treacherous organizations to hijack their struggle. The trade unions want only a seat at the table with management so they can prevent strikes and workplace actions, negotiate agreements to impose the profit needs of the corporations upon the workers, and expand their rolls of dues-paying members.

After decades of collaborating with the employers, the membership of the unions is at historic lows. The income of the union apparatus, however, continues to swell, with union executives trading wage and benefit concessions they impose on workers for corporate seats, control of vast pension funds and shares of corporate stock. The most glaring example of the anti-working-class character of these organizations has been their collusion with corporate management in forcing workers to stay on the job in the midst of the deadly pandemic.

To defend themselves, workers need to build independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, in every Amazon warehouse and office around the world. These committees should fight for control of health and safety and line speed, along with decent wages and against corporate spying and retaliation.

At the same time, these committees must unite Amazon workers with logistics, delivery, auto, health care, education, transit, and other workers in the US and around the world. This struggle should be combined with the political struggle for socialism, including the transformation of Amazon into a public utility and the seizure of the private fortune of Bezos to provide the resources necessary to contain and eradicate the virus and address the vast social crisis.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV), published by the *World Socialist Web Site*, is the leading organizational and political center for Amazon workers to carry out this fight. We encourage all workers who are interested to sign up for our newsletter and contact us today to get involved.



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