

# Amazon workers strike in Italy

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Thousands of Amazon workers and delivery drivers participated in the first-ever nationwide strike in Italy on Monday.

According to the national union federations, approximately 75 percent of employees struck. Amazon reported a much lower strike rate of between 10-20 percent. The company reportedly employs more than 9,500 workers directly across the country, and an estimated 15,000 via a network of third-party subcontractors, who are not directly employed by Amazon but are subject to the diktat of its onerous quota algorithms.

The strike takes place amid a major campaign by the trade unions in the United States to secure recognition at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama plant. Democratic President Joe Biden has publicly backed the unionization campaign and called on Bessemer workers to vote for union recognition. In this context *Jacobin* magazine, the publication of the Democratic Socialists of America, a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party, has prominently reported on the Italian strike, labeling it as "historic for the labor movement" and a sign of a potential "revival of the unions."

The strike in Italy clearly points to the enormous opposition and growing resistance among Amazon and other workers around the world. The company has significantly expanded its Italian operations over the past five years, including building six new fulfillment centers since 2017.

Striking workers who spoke to the media described conditions of brutal exploitation. Francesca, 30, told *La Repubblica*, "When you are involved in picking, you have to do the same movement for eight hours, inside a cage. You do not change. Within a few days, you have pain in your arms, back and knees. On the third day, a picker was unable to walk due to the leg pain. ... After a month, your wrist tendons ache. Every now and then someone faints."

Gianpaolo, 38, said he wears an ankle brace because of the long journeys of more than 20 kilometers he has to walk each shift. "The system is driven by an algorithm,

which demands results," he said. "Whoever is in charge does not care how those numbers are obtained. The power is in the hands of these managers, 25- to 30-year-olds who have just graduated, who sometimes decide to use it even in an uncompromising and dangerous way."

There is a sharp contrast between the sentiments of Amazon workers, however, and the interests motivating the trade unions who called Monday's strike. It is worth noting that in the various statements about the strike, the unions did not raise a single concrete demand relating to wages, working hours or conditions as the reason for the action. Rather, their central demand is that Amazon agree to negotiate with them on the terms of a national agreement and establish "stable trade union relations" with them.

Three national unions—Filt Cgil, Fit Cisl and Ultrasporti—announced the strike two weeks ago, after they claimed Amazon had refused to continue negotiations with them on a national contract covering delivery drivers.

The CGIL released a statement by Confederal Secretary Tania Scacchetti on Monday, declaring, "Today is a very important day. The workers of the Amazon supply chain have decided to protest to claim a normal system of trade union relations." She added, "In a company with that type of turnover, it is correct to build a system of relationships that recognizes workers with a performance bonus and contractual conditions. That is, stable trade union relations."

CGIL General Secretary Maurizio Landini stated that the strike "requires answers from the multinational and the immediate reopening of negotiations." He called for "concrete acts by the government and Parliament, to reaffirm the principle that doing business in our country means recognizing the right to national and collective bargaining and to a correct system of trade union relations."

These appeals make clear the real concerns of the unions, which have nothing to do with defending the interests of Amazon workers.

By “stable trade union relations,” they mean the incorporation of the trade unions into the structure of corporate management, to function as a well-paid industrial police force against the workers. They would oversee, not the raising of Amazon workers’ conditions, but their continued reduction, the boosting of profits and the suppression of strike activity. Their difference with Amazon comes down to how much of the money extracted from the workforce should go into the bank accounts of the unions and their well-paid executives.

This is the function that trade unions play internationally. Under the impact of globalized production and the development of multinational corporations, their earlier program of limited national reforms has been transformed into one of increasing the exploitation of the workforce and boosting the “international competitiveness” of their own nation-state.

Across Europe, over the past three decades, the unions have been more closely incorporated into structure of the capitalist state. The results have been a continued disaster for the working class in a relentless growth of social inequality and poverty.

In the United States, the DSA is attempting to use the strike as an argument for strengthening the trade union apparatuses. On Tuesday, *Jacobin* published an article by Francesco Massimo, entitled, “Italy’s Amazon Strike Shows How Workers Across the Supply Chain Can Unite.”

Massimo writes: “In the last two decades, Italian confederal unions went through a process of institutionalization—following an embrace of social dialogue and corporatism from the 1990s onward, which fueled a process of incorporation into the Italian state. Unions gained access to policymaking—but in exchange conceded wage devaluation and an end to industrial conflict. This especially hurt unions’ ability to mobilize the periphery of the labor market—notably, the emerging logistics industry.”

In other words, the unions’ role in lowering wages and suppressing strikes over decades has repulsed millions of workers, who see no purpose in paying these pro-business entities. In the latest walkout, Massimo admits, “loyal to their narrow conception of social dialogue, [the unions’] their aim is to force Amazon back to the negotiating table—to establish the normal industrial relations that exist in other sectors.”

Despite the devastating picture he paints of the unions, Massimo nevertheless still writes as a supporter of “social dialog” between the union bureaucracy and corporate

management. His conclusion is not that workers should break from the trade unions and form their own independent, rank-and-file organizations of struggle. Rather, he proposes that workers continue to subordinate themselves to these pro-corporate bureaucracies and engage in hopeless attempts to push them to the left.

He declares that Monday’s strike “is historic for the labor movement. But whether it can also prompt a broader revival of the unions depends on workers’ ability to keep the fight going and extend it to other workers...”

Pseudo-left parties like the DSA defend the trade unions not in spite of but because of their anti-working class policies. They speak for affluent sections of the middle class, including trade union bureaucrats, whose wealth has been inflated by three decades of social austerity, the suppression of strikes and rising share prices.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to form their own rank-and-file committees at Amazon hubs and fulfillment centers, independent of the trade unions and controlled directly by workers themselves. These would provide the means for reaching out and uniting with Amazon workers internationally, which is the only basis upon which a successful struggle can be waged.

This must be combined with a new political strategy, based upon the mobilization of the working class internationally for socialist policies. Corporate giants like Amazon should be taken out of private hands and transformed into public utilities, democratically controlled by the working class and used for the rational organization of society according to social need.



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