

Wildcat walkouts over pay at UK Amazon warehouses

“We are not treated as workers but as slaves.”

Thomas Scripps, Michael Barnes
5 August 2022

If you are an Amazon worker, we want to hear from you! Tell us here about conditions at your workplace. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Workers have launched a spree of wildcat walkouts across Amazon warehouses in the UK. The action has been sparked by the trillion-dollar company's imposition of an insulting pay award.

At Amazon's Tilbury warehouse in Essex, one of the largest in Europe, around 800 workers on the Wednesday night shift walked off the job after hearing they would receive a 35 pence pay rise (around 3 percent), from £11.10 to £11.45 an hour for Tier 1 workers and £11.35 to £11.70 for workers with more than 3 years at the company.

Workers staged a sit-in at the canteen, discussing demands for a £2.00-£3.00 increase. They jeered when a supervisor told them to go back to their stations, “You wanted to make a point; you made it. Every level in Amazon is aware of the situation.”

When the supervisor claimed, “Staying in the canteen is probably not very safe with so many people,” there were boos and cries of “We're used to it!” Told their action was “not going to change anything,” the strikers responded, “You're losing money,” with one saying, “The cost of living is going up and up.”

The next day, the Bank of England announced inflation will hit 13 percent in Britain, meaning Amazon is enforcing a de facto 10 percent pay cut to already pitiful wages.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporter spoke with striking workers outside the warehouse.

One explained, “We were told the day previous we were only going to get a pay increase of 35 pence an hour. People were actually weeping in the canteen and telling our managers that they cannot afford to pay their rent. It

absolutely broke my heart when I saw this young girl breakdown and say to the manager, ‘I can't afford to pay my rent,’ and management brought security. It's disgusting.”

Asked about wider strike action at Amazon across the UK and globally he said, “If you can afford to do it, do it. We face not just a national problem. Amazon do in each country what they can legally get away with.”

Another worker said, “If you take the profit margin of how much money they made just last year alone, then they only offer their workers 35 pence? That's terrible and I cannot stand that.”

Amazon UK Services, which runs Amazon warehouses, had its entire corporation tax bill wiped out last year by a government tax break to encourage investment in the UK. Its revenue in the same period rose more than £1 billion to £6.1 billion, with profits of £204 million, up 59 percent on the year before. Accounts for its other UK operations are kept hidden. The cost of an Amazon Prime subscription in Britain has been lifted from £7.99 to £8.99, a 12.5 percent increase.

The same worker continued, “I have got family at home, others have family at home, mortgages and so many other things, and you want to settle for a 35 pence rise?”

“We deserve more for what we go through in there. If you knew what we go through inside that building. It's like prison in there. We stand on our feet for 10 hours, only entitled to two thirty-minute breaks. And you want to give us 35 pence increase? No.

“We are not treated as workers but as slaves. We get threatened a lot in this place. They threaten to give you a verbal warning for ‘time off task’, for going to the toilet or getting a drink of water. What kind of slavery mentality is that?”

A Freedom of Information request by the *Daily Mirror* last November found that ambulances had been called to 24 Amazon warehouses nearly 1,000 times since 2018, including 178 visits to Tilbury. Between 2017 and 2019, almost 50 serious injuries were recorded at the Essex warehouse. The paper documented workers falling asleep on their feet during long shifts.

Walkouts also took place on Wednesday at the BHX4 warehouse outside Coventry in the West Midlands, the nearby BHX1 depot in Rugeley, and the BRS1 warehouse outside Bristol in the South West.

At Coventry, workers say hundreds joined the walkout in disgust at a 50 pence pay increase, starting from a lower hourly rate.

A worker involved in the action told WSWs, “The walkout is to show that we are making a stand, that we deserve to be offered a bigger wage increase for what we have done for this company. Coventry alone has seen a massive cut in staff as they let all the agency workers go. They have been overworking us with large amounts of volume with less staff in the building. We have been treated like battery chickens locked away.

“It’s been a really difficult and challenging time working through COVID at Amazon because even through the pandemic and putting regulations in place to prevent the spread, they still tried to get us to work in this very small area in large groups. They have not cared about us at all, and this offer they have given us of a 50p wage increase is a massive insult.”

When the general manager told workers to return to their station, “We all refused, of course, so he then decided to clock some of us out early on the system so we lose pay and docked our wages. It is disgusting treatment which we have been given and treated like slaves.”

Over 100 workers at the Rugeley site took the same action midday Wednesday. One told the *Birmingham Mail*, “Amazon Rugeley announced a 50p wage increase citing the local/Rugeley pay rate average. The news didn’t sit well with the associates and more than 100 people walked out in the canteen as a protest, which affected a lot of customer shipments.

“It’s an embarrassment of an announcement that comes as a mockery towards current employees.”

Amazon workers are taking action in the face of severe repression by the company. Security have reportedly been told to confiscate phones and workers have been threatened with instant dismissal for filming the walkouts, with managers scouring social media for evidence.

The multinational corporation, one of the largest in the

world, is reacting fiercely because it fears the wildcat action will spread.

Workers at Tilbury, Coventry, Rugeley and Bristol have given a hint of the enormous power of Amazon’s workforce, 75,000 strong in the UK and 1.5 million globally, on which the company’s vast operations and shareholder fortunes depend. They join their international brothers and sisters who have organised strikes and protests at Amazon in the United States and throughout Europe.

Trade unions like the GMB only publicised the UK walkouts after the fact. They have no connection with the militant class sentiment that sparked the action and minimal representation among Amazon workers. The unions’ decades of corporatist dealmaking and betrayals have allowed low-wage and precarious work to flourish. The GMB has made a specialty of targeting employers like Deliveroo that previously excluded unions but which now recognise their usefulness in policing an increasingly restive workforce. GMB is eyeing the same opportunity at Amazon.

The way forward for Amazon workers in the UK and internationally lies in the formation of rank-and-file committees to lead and coordinate action across all sections of the company globally and the wider logistics and distribution sector. Amazon uses its global financial status to leverage favourable deals with national governments to enforce dictatorial conditions in its warehouses. Its employees must leverage their own position as one of the largest global workforces to secure a genuine cost-of-living pay increase, strict regulation of hours, workloads and workplace safety, and full benefits including sick pay, maternity leave and pensions.

To aid in this fight, the *World Socialist Web Site* publishes the *International Amazon Workers Voice* newsletter, informing and connecting workers all over the world. Sign up and get in touch today.



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