

UK Amazon walkouts continue: Build rank-and-file committees!

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Amazon workers downed tools on the Monday night shift at the BRS2 fulfillment centre in Swindon this week. A second walkout at the Tilbury site in Essex is planned by the Wednesday night shift.

The continuing wildcat actions that began last week at warehouses across the country mark the entry of a critical contingent of workers into the struggles of the British working class.

Amazon, one of the largest companies in the world, is synonymous with rampant exploitation and profiteering. Its UK workforce has grown by 40,000 in the last three years, making it one of the largest private employers in the country with 75,000 employees.

Hundreds of workers walked off the job last Wednesday-Thursday, organised through word of mouth and WhatsApp groups, opposing a pitiful 35-50 pence an hour pay rise—around 3 percent when RPI inflation is already at 11.8 percent and which according to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research think tank will rise to above 17 percent before the year end.

Walkouts took place at sites in Tilbury, Coventry, Rugeley, Bristol and Coalville. Since then, ongoing protests have been held at Tilbury, Dartford, Belvedere, Hemel Hempstead and Chesterfield, where workers are processing just one package an hour.

The actions are the product of building anger among Amazon workers at the brutal pace of work demanded by the company and the de facto wage cuts caused by inflation making day-to-day living impossible.

Workers at Tilbury told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “People were actually weeping in the canteen and telling our managers that they cannot afford to pay their rent”, “We are not treated as workers but as slaves. We get threatened a lot in this place.”

Amazon and the trade unions

Having launched their fightback, Amazon workers are confronted with how to take forward their struggle.

The answer advanced by numerous pseudo-left groups and the trade unions themselves is that Amazon must be unionised.

Amazon refuses to recognise trade unions, putting its employees in the same situation as the 74 percent of the working population not covered by a collective bargaining agreement. Particularly among the younger workers (under 35) who predominate at Amazon, unions are barely a feature of their working life. Over 80 percent of workers aged 25-34 are not in a union, and over 91 percent aged 16-24. Trades Union Congress (TUC) research among workers aged 20-29 found, “The vast majority hadn’t heard the words ‘trade union’ and couldn’t provide a definition.”

Unite and the GMB unions, already representing a handful of Amazon workers, are advanced as the best “collective voice” for Amazon workers. But nothing could be further from the truth.

These organisations, if they were recognised by Amazon, would act as they do in every other unionised workplace—to discipline the workforce in intimate collusion with management to prevent strikes and other protests.

The trade unions, led by affluent bureaucrats, have presided over an unprecedented stagnation of wages and are now enforcing below-inflation pay deals across the country, leading to the biggest collapse in household incomes on record. These organisations, with decades of working arm-in-arm with management behind them, offer the working class nothing.

In a revealing tweet, the GMB’s Steve Garelick wrote that he had “been advised [that] the daily cost per department at Amazon sites that have taken action over their pay offer is approximately £100,000 per department per day[.] Proof that the cost to the Amazon could have been mitigated if they had not imposed a such a miserable sum.”

This is the unions’ real pitch: to insert themselves as an industrial police force on behalf of the trillion-dollar company and its billionaire shareholders in return for a comfortable niche in the structures of management.

What the GMB would do at Amazon has already been proved by its actions at Deliveroo, where it signed a “Voluntary Partnership Agreement” over workers’ heads last May. After years of wildcat protests by workers, including some organised by the small Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain, and

fearing worse as the cost-of-living crisis bites, the previously anti-union company brought in the GMB to act as its enforcers.

The agreement named the GMB as the official representative of the workforce, enshrined Deliveroo's hyper-exploitative employment practices and promised, "The Partners [Deliveroo and the GMB] are committed to the long term, sustainable business success of Deliveroo and nothing in this Agreement shall operate to undermine this objective." The deal was hailed by the TUC as a "landmark agreement."

Lessons of the US unionisation drive

Amazon workers should draw on the experience of their colleagues in the United States, where a unionisation drive at the BHM1 fulfilment centre in Bessemer, Alabama last year and early this year, was given unprecedented support by US President Joe Biden.

Biden hoped to push the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) and its counterparts forward as the corporate partners of Amazon, trusting them to demobilise and betray strikes, and enforce sellout deals on pay and conditions on its million-strong workforce as they have done in other major corporations.

The Bessemer workers rejected the RWDSU for the same reasons that recommended it to Biden, with the union losing two workplace votes for recognition.

A second unionisation push, by the newly created Amazon Labour Union (ALU), narrowly succeeded at JFK8 in Staten Island, New York, in large part because the ALU took its distance from the trade union bureaucracy organised in the AFL-CIO, and from Biden's Democratic Party. With the vote won, however, the ALU used its popular support to burnish the tattered credentials of these discredited organisations. This backfired spectacularly. A second ALU recognition vote at the nearby LDJ5 centre went to defeat. The WSWS commented, "Every step towards the bureaucracy and the Democratic Party represented a step away from the workers."

Events in Bessemer and New York, explained the International Amazon Workers Voice, underscored how "a new orientation is needed. Where the unions promote corporatism and class collaboration, workers need an anti-capitalist perspective. Where the unions promote national chauvinism, working class internationalism is needed. Where the union proceeds from what management is willing to part with, workers must proceed from what they urgently require."

For rank-and-file committees!

The UK walkouts at Amazon were organised totally independently by workers. They had no connection with the bureaucratic paper campaigns run by the GMB (Your Union in Amazon) and Unite (Action on Amazon), or the Make Amazon Pay coalition they both support.

But one way or another, Amazon workers will still find themselves struggling in opposition to the trade union bureaucracy and its "left" backers. They have proved in the last week that powerful action can be taken by the rank and file. But to succeed, they must develop their own organisations and leadership: rank-and-file committees of workers operating independently of the unions in every warehouse and depot, across all roles and tiers.

Amazon has vast financial reserves and the full support of the government in every country it operates. Winning workers' demands will require a widespread, determined and international struggle. The committees must discuss and coordinate action across national borders with Amazon workers in the same situation across the world, and others in the warehousing, transport, delivery and retail sectors. In the UK, the Communication Workers Union has been forced to authorise four days of strike action—to be held later this month and in September—by over 100,000 Royal Mail post workers.

Pressure will be put on Amazon strikers to suspend their actions, enter pointless talks and accept substandard offers and worthless promises. The committees must counter by drawing up and agreeing demands based not on what Amazon claims it can afford, but on workers' needs.

All possible support will be given to these efforts by the International Amazon Workers Voice and the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, established to empower workers to wage the necessary struggle against the corporations, national governments and their union partners. We call on all Amazon workers to take up this fight by getting in touch today.



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