

Amazon workers in Japan to protest against brutal conditions

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Workers at Amazon Japan are planning to protest in Tokyo on November 25 in opposition to appalling working conditions. They are joining many of their co-workers around the world, including in Europe and the United States, in demonstrating during the company's Black Friday "shopping holiday."

Delivery workers at the e-commerce giant have pushed back in recent months against the conditions imposed on them. In Japan, e-commerce has skyrocketed over the last few years, profiting off of the COVID-19 pandemic, with shipping companies delivering more than 4.68 billion parcels in 2021. Amazon Japan recorded \$20.46 billion of revenue in 2020, while workers have been pushed harder without additional pay or protections.

The delivery workers are listed as "self-employed," or independent contractors, in order for the world's biggest corporation to skirt even the minimal protections contained in Japan's Labor Standards Acts. This category of worker has no employment protection, no regulated working hours or daily limits, and no overtime pay, among other exploitative terms.

One Amazon worker in Yokohama explained to the *Mainichi Shimbun* that once the pandemic started, his workload almost doubled from 2020 to 2021. The worker said the extreme hours had left him exhausted and depressed. He stated, "I am being forced to do excessive work and keep driving. If I keep on like this, I might cause an accident or collapse. These packages might kill me."

While these workers are searching for a way to fight back, this week's protest is being organized through "Make Amazon Pay," a coalition of middle-class protest groups and pseudo-left political organizations, backed by unions in various countries. The campaign promotes the illusion that scattered and isolated protests

will bring attention to the role these workers play in the global economy and pressure Amazon to "change its policies" and introduce fair pay and conditions. This path will only lead to a dead-end.

The main aim of the organizers is to promote the unions, which play a key role internationally in enforcing exploitative conditions at Amazon. In September, 15 Amazon delivery workers in Nagasaki formed a union, following 10 workers in Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture, who unionized in June of this year, with Tokyo Union (GU) coordinating the formation of both. These are the first such unions at Amazon in the country.

Like its counterparts around the world, the Japanese union bureaucracy serves as an industrial police force, tasked with blocking the growth of the class struggle and subordinating workers to the dictates of big business and the state.

GU is part of the Japan Community Union Federation, which is affiliated with the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, commonly called Rengo. It is by far the largest union group in the country with almost seven million members, and controls more than 33,940 sub-divisional unions.

Formed at the end of the 1980s as Japan's opposition parties and unions were moving to the right, Rengo has drawn closer to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in the past 30 years. Rengo has even started endorsing LDP candidates for office, including the LDP-backed Yoichi Masuzoe for Tokyo governor in 2014.

As in other countries, Japan's unions have suppressed any opposition to the government's criminal agenda of mass COVID infection, demanded by corporations such as Amazon, which view all public health measures as a drain on their profits. More than 48,000 people have died in Japan as a result.

The unions and middle-class protest groups are seeking to isolate the delivery drivers from the broader working class, who all experience similar conditions, including brutally long hours. Death by overwork is a common occurrence in Japan where overtime at the expense of one's health is an unspoken requirement, placing workers at greater risk for conditions like heart failure and suicide. Dying after more than 80 hours of overtime per month is considered the legal threshold for a death to be considered *kar?shi*, literally "worked to death."

In September, officials at the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) publicly apologized at a press conference for the *kar?shi* death of a reporter in October 2019. The man was working an average of 92 hours of overtime a month for five months leading up to his death. In 2013, another reporter, 31-year-old Miwa Sado, died of *kar?shi*-related heart failure while she was assigned to the same post.

Educators in Japan also face severe overwork and are heavily underpaid. According to a survey conducted by researchers at Nagoya University, over 70 percent of high school teachers are reporting more than 80 hours of overtime every month. Researchers also found that one in three elementary school teachers were asked by administration to underreport their hours if they logged more than 40 hours per week. Around half of all surveyed teachers reported "zero" break time.

A government investigation in 2021 found that workers at nearly 40 percent of companies are logging overtime in excess of 45 hours a month, the official legal limit. Companies are able to push workers to an additional 80 hours if the worker supposedly agrees. Japan's brutal workplace culture makes it next to impossible for an employee to disagree.

At almost 1,900 workplaces, the government's probe found workers averaging over 100 hours per month; and workers from at least 93 companies were struggling with 200 hours of overtime per month. If found guilty of violating overtime, companies generally receive a slap on the wrist of up to 300,000 yen (\$US2,144) in fines.

Economic conditions compel workers to accept these conditions. Real wages have fallen for the past six months straight due to inflation, dropping 1.3 percent in September from a year before. Wages have remained stagnant since 1997, at the equivalent of \$US38,395,

according to data from the OECD. This has been driven by the casualization of labor and the rise in part-time and "self-employed" gig-economy workers, like those at Amazon Japan. Casual workers comprise nearly 40 percent of the total workforce.

The conditions facing Amazon workers in Japan are the same as those faced by Amazon drivers in the US and elsewhere. The global nature of such corporations poses the need for workers to organize internationally and fight for the socialist reorganization of the world economy.

To do so, however, requires workers to rebel against the trade unions, which promote nationalism to keep workers divided, and enforce brutal working conditions while promoting the illusion that governments and corporations can be pressured through isolated protest actions.

What is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees, at every distribution center and workplace, controlled democratically by workers themselves, and independent of the unions and capitalist parties. We urge Amazon workers in Japan to contact the WSWS to discuss this perspective.



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