

Amazon workers' strike in Coventry, UK

Build rank-and-file committees!

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Amazon workers at the conglomerate's warehouse in Coventry, England struck for 24 hours on Wednesday in pursuit of a pay rise to £15 an hour.

The action by around 300 members of the GMB trade union was the first official strike by Amazon workers in Britain since it opened operations with its first fulfilment centre in Marston Gate in 1998. The company has a workforce of around 1,400 at Coventry, located near Birmingham airport. The majority of the Coventry workforce are not in a union.

Coventry was one of several UK sites where Amazon workers walked out in wildcats last summer over derisory pay offers. With inflation already then at 13 percent (RPI), Amazon workers were offered rises of between 1 and 3 percent. The company based this on local wages and existing wage rates, with some workers given just 35p an hour more.

At Coventry and nearby Rugeley, which had even lower starting rates of pay, the rise was 50p an hour, the equivalent of 5 percent. Amazon's starting rates range from £10.50 (as at Coventry) and £11.45 an hour in London and south east England.

By contrast, in 2020, with warehouse workers exposed to deadly pandemic working conditions and sales booming, Amazon paid just £492 million in direct UK taxation on sales of a staggering £20.6 billion. In 2021, Amazon UK reported paying just £10.8 million in tax, despite recording a pre-tax profit of £204 million.

The tensions leading to the latest strike have been building for years. A Coventry Amazon worker described working conditions to the *World Socialist Web Site* after August's walkout by saying, "We have been treated like battery chickens."

The worker explained that despite the limited pandemic regulations that UK had to abide to "to

prevent the spread [of COVID], they still tried to get us to work in this very small area in large groups."

In response to the "massive insult" given by Amazon's pathetic pay "rise", workers staged a spontaneous protest in the staff canteen. When they refused to return to their stations, managers clocked some workers out early and docked wages.

A Coventry worker told the *Guardian* as Wednesday's strike began, "I shouldn't have to work 60 hours a week just to pay bills," and described how workers have to stand 10 hours a day: "If you're caught sitting down, you get... a six-week warning... if you're caught doing it again, you're out the door."

The strike demonstrates the willingness of Amazon workers to fight for significantly improved wages and conditions. But the GMB union has nothing in common with these aims. Its organisation of the Coventry strike is aimed at securing a place at the table with Amazon management, serving as an industrial police force for the company helping to keep its restive workforce under control.

In September, after the consultative ballot, GMB Senior Organiser Amanda Gearing said, "If Amazon wants to keep its empire running, it needs to get round the table with GMB to improve the pay and conditions of workers."

When the substantive strike vote was declared in December, Gearing appealed, "It's not too late to avoid strike action; get round the table with GMB to improve the pay and conditions of workers."

As Wednesday's stoppage began, GMB Regional Organiser Stuart Richards said the union's "real aim is just getting one step closer to dragging Amazon bosses, kicking and screaming, to talk to us."

Amid the Amazon wildcat walkouts last summer, the GMB signed a rotten deal with Deliveroo, with the

company recognising the GMB as the “representative” of its workers and the union in return promising its commitment to the “sustainable business success of Deliveroo”.

The strictly limited strike action organised by the GMB at Amazon stands in sharp contrast to the ruthless actions of the company in imposing harsh working conditions, cutting jobs and closing facilities. Since Christmas it has announced the axing of around 18,000 jobs globally, mostly in head offices. In Britain, where it has more than 30 sites, Amazon will close three warehouses—Doncaster in South Yorkshire, Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire and Gourock in western Scotland—and seven smaller delivery sites.

While it claims workers at these sites will be offered roles in other locations, the warehouses slated for closure are remote from other facilities. Two new delivery warehouses will be built in Peddimore in the West Midlands and Stockton-on-Tees in the north east of England.

Announcing the strike, GMB made no mention of Amazon workers at any other UK plant, let along the 1.5 million employed globally by the company.

Workers in Coventry and at other warehouses in Britain must look to the experiences of their US class brothers and sisters, encouraged to unionise by the Democratic Party under President Biden and self-styled radicals like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Far from mobilising workers against the company in the fight for decent pay and conditions, the campaign was aimed at keeping their growing militancy under control.

The new Amazon Labor Union (ALU) won recognition at the JFK8 warehouse on Staten Island, New York by presenting itself as a “left” alternative to the established AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracies, which bear responsibility for the destruction of workers’ conditions over decades.

ALU Vice President Derrick Palmer has voiced support for the Coventry strike, so workers should note what happened after that JFK8 “victory”. As soon as it won recognition, the ALU lined up with the anti-working-class AFL-CIO and Democratic government.

Within months, Amazon workers were drawing conclusions about this “alternative.” Workers in Albany, New York voted two-to-one against unionising with an organisation that made no real effort to

convince workers they had any strategy to fight the company.

The Coventry strike, the wildcats that preceded it, and the eruption of militancy in Amazon plants internationally points to the great potential power of this section of the working class.

Amazon has vast financial reserves, and full government support in every country where it is based. Against this, the trade unions offer not a fighting opposition, but a corporatist partnership with the company against the workers. Struggles must be taken into workers’ own hands through the formation of 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.

These committees must discuss and coordinate action across national borders with Amazon workers around the world. Rather than agreeing what Amazon claims it can afford, the committees must draw up demands based on workers’ needs. We urge workers to contact the International Amazon Workers Voice and the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, established to empower workers to wage the necessary political fight against the corporations, national governments and their union partners.



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