

Amazon workers mount further strikes at Coventry warehouse, posing need for rank-and-file committees

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27 February 2023

Tuesday, February 28 will see an escalation of strike action by unionised workers at Amazon's BHX4 warehouse in Coventry, England, after a 24-hour strike last month for a pay rise to £15 an hour—the first official strike by British Amazon workers since the company began UK operations in 1998.

Around 300 members of the GMB trade union took part in the strike on January 25, out of a workforce of 1,400. It is reported that around 350 workers will take part in the next action. Tuesday's stoppage will be followed by another on Thursday, with a week-long strike planned March 13-17.

The escalation of action shows the desire by Amazon workers to mobilise their collective strength against the giant multinational, which claws billions of pounds of profit out of their backs every year. Years of bottled-up opposition exploded to the surface in a series of wildcat walkouts last summer after derisory pay rises were imposed based on existing local wage rates.

Some of these were one to three percent rises, with RPI inflation standing at 13 percent. Some workers received an insulting extra 35p an hour. At Coventry, where the starting rate was £10.50 an hour (only 8p more than the government-mandated National Living Wage rate effective from April), workers were given 50p an hour more, a five percent rise.

Spontaneous sit-ins in staff canteens were held in Tilbury and Coventry, as well as nearby Rugeley and another warehouse just outside Bristol.

Amazon opposes any form of workers' organisation or representation and refuses to recognise or negotiate pay with the GMB. This has lent the union an oppositional standing it does not deserve. It is offering the company its experience in pouring cold water on a militant workforce, asking for a few crumbs to smooth the process.

This was summed up by Regional Organiser Amanda Gearing who stated, "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."

This quid pro quo approach to the corporations is the reason the GMB was awarded recognition by Deliveroo last year, at the same time as the Amazon wildcat strikes. The union promised its commitment to the company's "sustainable business success" in return for recognition as the workers' "representative."

The GMB is very consciously distancing itself from the pioneering action taken independently by Amazon workers last year. Its strike at Coventry is often presented as the first at the company, rather than the first *official* action.

While the wildcat actions spread quickly and naturally across the Amazon's UK workforce, the GMB is keeping workers divided. At Tilbury, where around 1,500 workers took part in last summer's canteen meeting, the union is discussing a separate ballot of its 200 members.

No campaign is being mounted over Amazon's announced plans to close three warehouses—Doncaster in South Yorkshire, Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire and Gourock in western Scotland—and seven smaller delivery sites. Some 1,200 jobs are at risk. While the company cynically talks of relocating workers, the alternative sites are so far away that relocation is not an option for most, at Peddimore in the West Midlands and Stockton-on-Tees in northeast England. Globally, Amazon is axing around 18,000 jobs.

The union can mobilise so few workers, despite its enormous resources, because it will not provide a fighting programme to combat the ruthless opponent workers confront in Amazon.

After last month's official action at Coventry, strikers

were notified by a company app that they had been marked not as striking but as “no show”—an unauthorised absence, for which the company applies fines and gross misconduct charges. For a legally mandated strike, this would be illegal.

When the message was queried, it became clear this was a deliberate act of intimidation. The company said non-attendance was “not being considered as part of any absence review.” But Amazon’s response contained nothing to indicate no further action would be taken against the workers, and the company did not specify whether the statement meant workers did *not* receive non-attendance records.

Despite involving legal representatives in attempting to clarify this, the GMB was at its most conciliatory. Senior Organiser Stuart Richards said, “We hope and believe this is just an error on Amazon’s part, rather than an attempt to intimidate workers taking legal industrial action.”

He called on Amazon to “sort it out and quick,” saying, “Coventry workers did an incredibly brave thing taking on one of the world’s biggest companies. Now it feels like they’re being bullied.” Given that persistent management harassment and intimidation was one of the long-standing grievances before the strikes erupted, this is a whitewash and hands carte blanche to Amazon to do the same again.

Amid talk of further strike action, Gearing said the GMB “urges Amazon bosses to get round the table and negotiate a pay rise that will stop further strikes.”

According to one report, the action already planned was forced on the union by the workers. One told the *Socialist Worker*, “The GMB gave us a few key dates, but workers said they wanted more.”

However, the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party is working to strengthen the hand of the union bureaucracy, citing a GMB member who spoke of “telling everyone who is already a union member to ask one more person to join. All of this can help build the strikes and get us closer to union recognition.” The SWP falsely claims this is the vehicle for “spreading the strikes”.

UK Amazon workers must look to the experiences of their class brothers and sisters in the United States, encouraged to unionise by the Democratic Party under President Biden and self-styled radicals like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Rather than mobilising workers in a fight against the company, the campaign sought to curb their growing militancy.

The new Amazon Labor Union (ALU) won recognition at the Staten Island JFK8 warehouse, New York by

presenting itself as an alternative to the established AFL-CIO union bureaucracies, which bear responsibility for the destruction of workers’ conditions over decades. But, on winning recognition, the ALU lined up with the anti-working-class AFL-CIO and Democratic administration.

Workers quickly drew conclusions about this “alternative,” voting two-to-one in Albany, New York against unionising with such an organisation.

UK workers should take the support expressed for them by ALU President Chris Smalls and Vice President Derrick Palmer as a warning.

The Coventry strike is further evidence of a growing wave of militancy and the enormous potential power of Amazon workers. They confront a hugely wealthy company backed to the hilt by the world’s governments. The trade unions do not offer a fighting opposition, but corporatist collaboration and partnership with management.

Workers must take control of their own struggles by forming their own organisations and leadership: rank-and-file committees 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 aid the necessary political fight against the corporations, national governments and their union partners.



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