

Amazon workers strike at Coventry, UK warehouse

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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.

Hundreds of Amazon workers took strike action at the Amazon BHX4 facility in Coventry, England this month to increase their hourly wage from £11 to £15 and protest the dire working conditions at the trillion-dollar conglomerate.

Warehouse operatives walked out April 16 to 18 and April 21 to 23, after rejecting management's insulting pay offer of between 1.8 and 2.5 percent last month. Strikes took place in January and February. Workers will have taken part in 14 days of industrial action by the end of this month.

The strike follows the announcement of the mass sacking of 8 percent of Amazon's global workforce last month as part of broader cutbacks in the technology sector.

The Coventry facility employs 1,400 workers, mostly not unionised. The dispute has unified the disparate nationalities employed, successfully crossing language barriers.

Large crowds of workers rallied outside the warehouse during the strike days and stopped cars from entering and delivery lorries from moving. Pickets appealed to workers through their car windows to show their solidarity and join the strike, chanting "No work today!" and "The workers united will never be defeated!" For most of those involved, this is their first time participating in industrial struggles.

Amazon workers in Britain staged a series of wildcat actions at several facilities last summer against the imposition of an insulting pay increase of 35 pence an hour, or 3 percent—a real-terms pay cut.

In January, workers at the site organised by the GMB union held the first official strike since Amazon first

began operating in the UK in 1998. The GMB claims that over 600 Amazon workers have joined the union.

Amazon UK Services, which runs warehouses, had its entire corporation tax bill wiped out in 2021 by a Conservative government tax break to encourage investment in the country. Its revenue in the same period rose by 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 GMB is restricting strike action to a few days and isolating it to a single warehouse, limiting the possible impact on profits. It refuses to advance a genuine, militant class struggle strategy to unify workers against the ruthlessly exploitative company.

Amazon rejects the right of workers to organise in the workplace. It currently does not recognise the GMB, or any other union. This enables the GMB to pose as an oppositional force, but in reality it has offered to collaborate with the employer and rein in the rebellious workforce. Amanda Gearing, a GMB regional organiser, said months ago as the dispute began, "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."

GMB is organising the industrial action to prevent a rebellion of the workers that would spark a broader, politicised strike movement across the country. This is why the GMB takes credit for initiating the industrial dispute and covering up the wildcat strikes that provided the real impetus for the movement.

The GMB claims to have signed up hundreds of new members in the workforce in Coventry and at other Amazon facilities across the UK since the beginning of the dispute and says it is getting closer to the 50 percent membership level that would allow it to apply for

statutory recognition. It is holding recruitment drives at five other sites across the Midlands at Coalville, Kegworth, Mansfield, Rugby, and Rugeley.

Last month, the GMB, along with other health unions, sold out the struggles of National Health Service (NHS) workers by ending the strike by nurses for improved pay and conditions in Scotland. After closed-door discussions, it signed off on a below-inflation pay deal. Rachel Harrison, GMB General Secretary, cynically praised the “strength and hard work of GMB’s NHS members” for enabling the agreement.” The GMB have recommended the government’s offer for NHS workers in England which it presents as a “big win.”

The GMB refuses to organise strike action at hundreds of other employers where it is well-established and has the necessary influence to organise mass action. This has earned the GMB the trust of employers, particularly in sectors of the economy that rely on the super-exploitation of logistics workers. Last year, Deliveroo signed an agreement with the GMB to represent its riders that involved negligible concessions to workers in return for the suppression of the strikes that had begun to afflict the gig economy firm. The GMB affirmed its commitment to the “sustainable business success” of Deliveroo.

The pseudo-left groups have promoted illusions in the union bureaucracy by uncritically praising its role in the dispute and hiding its role in suppressing the class struggle nationally. The *Socialist Worker*, published by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), ran a feature article on April 22, “Why our power is on the picket lines,” that uncritically repeated the half-truths of the union functionaries. They promote the role of activism on the picket lines to “help grow the union” because this “has been the primary place where workers sign up to become members of the GMB union, often with a long line of workers lining up to join on strike days.”

The Coventry strike demonstrates that the wave of pent-up militancy in the working class is growing. Amazon workers have the potential to create a social movement of tremendous strength. Amazon has enormous resources and the full backing of the British government. However, the trade union bureaucracy will not organise genuine opposition by the means of the class struggle but operate hand-in-glove with management.

Amazon workers must take control of their strike strategy by building their own rank-and-file organisations, independent of the union bureaucracy in every facility involving all roles and tiers.

These committees must join up their struggle with Amazon workers in other countries. 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.

Sign up for the International Amazon Workers Voice newsletter.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact