

Amazon workers hold strike votes at UK Midlands warehouses, GMB union seeks recognition

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Amazon workers in the UK in the GMB union are balloting for strike action at Mansfield and Rugeley till June 9. They are demanding a wage increase from £10.50 an hour to £15 and improved terms and conditions.

Warehouse operatives have recently joined the union in the wake of wildcat walkouts that began last summer. The GMB has held 14 days of intermittent industrial action at the Amazon warehouse in Coventry in the last four months.

Management at Amazon refuses to grant any concessions. Workers toil in unacceptable conditions for low pay to generate super-profits for one of the world's largest transnational corporations. The company operates in dangerous working conditions, enforces brutal productivity targets, and implements continuous surveillance and monitoring of their employees.

Amazon employees have been forced to continue working throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, their lives endangered by exposure to viral infection in overcrowded warehouses with insufficient health and safety measures in place.

The development of wildcat strikes at Amazon warehouses marked the entry of one of the most critical sections of the international working class into the UK's strike wave. Like other workers, warehouse operatives are taking action to maintain their living standards amid high rates of inflation and government budget cuts to social welfare benefits and services.

The strike movement follows the announcement of the sacking of eight percent of Amazon's global workforce this Spring as part of broader cutbacks in the technology sector.

This sentiment does not find authentic expression in the GMB or any other union bureaucracy, which intervened in the wake of the unofficial strikes to bring the growing mood of rebellion under control. It has no intention of waging the necessary campaign of militant class struggle required to win significantly improved conditions from a ruthlessly exploitative company with immense financial resources.

Instead, the GMB is holding a series of limited actions designed to prompt Amazon to grant the union a seat at its table. Many workers have been left cold, with those polled in consultative ballots at three other Amazon warehouses rejecting the GMB's strike plans.

The union is seeking official recognition by Amazon at the Coventry logistics facility. The GMB states that it has reached the required threshold of 51 percent of the 1,400 workers employed at the warehouse. Amazon has refused, claiming that it would not be "an appropriate path" to voluntarily recognise the union.

To challenge this, the GMB contacted the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC), the government's business tribunal service, earlier this month. The CAC may grant a trade union the right to conduct collective bargaining with an employer on behalf of its members. It must grant this status to the GMB if it is the chosen representative of the majority of workers at the facility in disputes over pay, terms, and conditions.

Amazon contests the union's figures and the GMB reports warehouse operatives are aware of management plans to quickly recruit hundreds of new staff to prevent a majority of members being reached, shutting the door on official union recognition.

If the CAC grants the GMB the right to represent workers at Amazon's BHX4 facility in Coventry, this

would be the first official union recognition at an Amazon warehouse in the UK. But for Amazon workers, official recognition of GMB would not provide the basis for a genuine industrial fight-back against the wealthy conglomerate.

Management's rejection of the right of workers to organise in the workplace enables the GMB to pose as an oppositional force, but it has offered to collaborate with the employer and smooth over industrial relations with a few figleaf improvements.

Amanda Gearing, a GMB regional organiser, stated 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."

The GMB plays a similar role across the UK logistics sector, which depends on super-exploited delivery drivers. Last year, the union signed an agreement with the fast-food delivery company Deliveroo to represent its riders, entirely over the heads of the workers, accepting negligible concessions in return for suppressing strikes and confirming its commitment to the "sustainable business success" of the gig economy firm.

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. It allowed a mass fire or rehire campaign to take place at British Gas in 2021 and prevented any strike action taking place among logistics workers at Asda in 2022, pushing through a substandard pay deal. These and countless other examples have earned the union the trust of many employers to keep workers' discontent within safe channels.

Amazon workers in Britain must learn the lessons from the experiences of their colleagues in other countries. In the United States last year, over 8,000 workers at the JFK8 warehouse at Staten Island, New York became the first to formally join a union, the newly founded Amazon Labor Union (ALU). This was encouraged and celebrated by pseudo-left tendencies represented by figures like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Although the ALU is formally independent of the existing big union organisations in the US, its political perspective remains rooted in the narrow, national parochialism of the old bureaucracies, sharing their pro-

capitalist and corporatist character. It is merging with the apparatus of the AFL-CIO union federation (the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) and the big business Democratic Party that have overseen decades of deteriorating conditions.

Today the ALU is alienated from the workers after doing nothing to improve their situation, coming to a de facto agreement with Amazon management to share responsibility for imposing pay cuts and exploitative working conditions. This betrayal led to workers at other nearby warehouses to reject subsequent unionisation votes.

Strikes at Amazon warehouses show the determination of this critical group of workers to improve their conditions. They have the potential to create a social movement of tremendous strength. But this requires a programme based on internationalism, class struggle, and the primacy of workers' needs over Amazon's profits.

The "organisation" offered by the GMB is the policing of the workforce and its demands on behalf of management. Workers need democratic organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees composed of trusted colleagues in every workplace in all roles and tiers, independent of the union bureaucracy.

The first principle of these committees would be the common interests and struggles of the entire working class, starting with other workers in the logistics and delivery sector—for example, Royal Mail workers facing a savage attack by the company and an attempted sellout organised by the Communication Workers Union.

Rank-and-file committees would also provide a framework for coordinating the struggles of Amazon workers internationally, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge workers to follow the International Amazon Workers Voice and to get in touch to discuss taking up this necessary political fight against the corporations, national governments and their union partners.



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