

Amazon warehouse workers strike in Coventry, UK as part of international “Black Friday” protests

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Workers at Amazon’s BHX4 warehouse in Coventry, UK, held a one-day strike on November 24 to fight for improved pay and working conditions. The walkouts were part of an international protest held on “Black Friday”, one of the most profitable days for retail firms.

Black Friday has been exported internationally from the United States where it marks the day after Thanksgiving and the start of the Christmas retail period. Amazon was struck by similar actions taking place in the US, Germany, and Italy in one of the largest walkouts in the three-decade history of the transnational corporation. According to the GMB union, some form of action took place in 30 countries.

In Coventry, 1,000 workers walked out. Approximately 800 workers were on picket lines or took part in protests outside Amazon’s warehouse on an industrial estate outside Coventry, in the Midlands.

Located on the site of the former Browns Lane Jaguar factory, approximately 2,700 workers are employed at the BHX4 fulfilment centre. Coventry is a “receive centre” and a key hub in Amazon’s UK operations, as it supplies goods to local warehouses that deliver to customers. It is part of an international logistics network that includes dozens of facilities across the continent.

Amazon brutally exploits its logistics staff by imposing low pay and onerous working conditions. Many workers live in poverty and take second jobs or rely on food banks to make ends meet. Rampant inflation is massively reducing workers’ spending power and standard of living. Amazon recently increased the hourly wage to £13 per hour.

While Amazon rakes in more profits than most of the

world’s corporations, it subjects its warehouse workers to 10-hour shifts of physically demanding labour. Employees were compelled to work the company’s crowded warehouses throughout the COVID pandemic.

The walkout followed another three-day strike at Coventry earlier this month. The Coventry workers have led the way in the movement of warehouse workers in Britain. The background to the strike was a series of spontaneous walkouts at several Amazon sites in August 2022 in reaction to insulting real terms pay cuts and harsh working conditions.

The GMB scrambled to contain this movement. Last Friday was the 28th day of industrial action since this phase of the dispute began. The first strike to be conducted under the aegis of the GMB was organised in January and involved several hundred warehouse operatives.

The GMB applied for official recognition at the Coventry warehouse in May. This was rejected by the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) a tribunal of the Department for Business and Trade because membership comprises less than 50 percent of the workforce. The GMB claims that the company hired extra workers to water down their membership figures.

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 strike wave that emerged in Britain over the past 18 months. The unions in the private and public sectors used their entire playbook of tactics to diffuse, misdirect, and sell-out the strike wave, which had the potential to bring down the widely hated Conservatives.

The unions did nothing to organise anything at

Amazon for year, meaning that fight by the firm's UK workers is largely restricted to a single warehouse. Another Amazon fulfilment centre in the Midlands at Rugeley returned a successful strike ballot in July, after 100 GMB members voted by 86 percent majority to take action. Yet since then, the GMB has only conducted two days of action at that site.

The GMB's strategy is to use limited industrial action as leverage to pressure Amazon to invite the bureaucrats to participate in the management of the business.

The GMB, which rakes in dues from over 600,000 members, has the resources to mobilise Amazon workers, but instead systematically works to prevent strikes in the sector. Despite describing the global nature of the Black Friday protests as "historic", the GMB, as with the unions in other countries including the Amazon Labor Union's (ALU) in the United States, put forward a parochial nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective.

The GMB has wound down struggles elsewhere in the logistics industry. Last year the union signed an agreement with the fast-food delivery company Deliveroo to represent its super-exploited delivery drivers. Behind their backs, the GMB accepted a rotten compromise to sit on strikes and support the "sustainable business success" of the gig economy firm.

The GMB is working closely with the Labour Party to advance its agenda to control the movement, in anticipation of the party's expected victory in a general election to be held next year. Sir Keir Starmer has personally called for Amazon to recognise the GMB. Starmer indicates concern within the bourgeoisie that unsustainable social tensions will produce an unstoppable social movement among this increasingly volatile section of the working class, many of whom are young. Labour has committed to enacting, in office, new laws to make it easier for the union bureaucracy to establish themselves and work with companies.

This corporatist agenda was spelled out by Justin Madders, Shadow Minister for Business, Employment Rights and Levelling Up, who stated in a social media video on November 23, "As a pro-worker and pro-business party, we in the Labour Party strongly believe that workplaces thrive when employers and unions work together... *Many employers recognise and enjoy*

the benefits that trade unions can bring from helping to settle disputes swiftly and effectively...

"So we will always strengthen the role of trade unions in our society. We want to see Amazon and businesses like it recognise and work together with trade unions."

He added that "This is vital for boosting the bottom line, increasing productivity, and creating the right conditions for growth in any modern economy."

Workers must learn the political lessons of the experiences of their colleagues working for logistics firms. The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) betrayed the determined, year-long industrial action waged by over 100,000 postal workers against Royal Mail. CWU members are paying for this betrayal with poverty pay, punitive victimisation of militants, and a bonfire of working conditions.

Strikes at Amazon warehouses have the potential to create a social movement of tremendous strength. The logistics sector is growing rapidly and employs millions of workers in supply chains spanning the globe. This means that the working class must also organise a fightback across national borders.

The key question is what political perspective this movement bases itself on. It requires a programme based on internationalism, class struggle, and the primacy of workers' needs over Amazon's profits. To achieve this, workers must build rank-and-file committees to lead a rebellion against the union bureaucracy that will seek to betray their interests.

Rank-and-file committees will coordinate the struggles of Amazon workers internationally, led by 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 participate in the political work required to resist big business, national states, and their union accomplices.



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