

Amazon strikes in Coventry and Birmingham, UK must break out of the GMB's corporatist straitjacket

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19 March 2024

Amazon workers who are members of the GMB union are walking out over the next fortnight at two sites in the West Midlands, England in their latest phase of industrial action demanding £15 per hour and the right to organise.

A two-day stoppage started today at the Amazon BHX4 warehouse in Coventry involving around 1,000 workers and saw mass picketing. It will be followed by a 48-hour strike next week from March 27 at its newly opened £500 million EMA4 fulfilment centre in Minworth, Sutton Coldfield near Birmingham.

Amazon has dismissed the pay demand pointing to an increase from a miserly £12.30 to £13 an hour from April stating this represents a pay rise of 20 percent over two years. This is in fact well below the RPI inflation rate increase of 27.7 percent between March 2021 and December 2023.

The tech giant and world's largest retailer reported in February it had generated revenue of \$170 billion in the last quarter to December, up by 14 percent on the same period for 2022, with a net income of \$10.6 billion squeezed out from the exploitation of its global workforce of 1.5 million, even as it slashed 27,000 jobs last year.

Workers face a 10-hour day under heavy surveillance designed to enforce maximum productivity. They work 50 to 60 hours a week just to keep up with the rising cost of living. The brutal management regime they face was underlined by a worker involved in the strike action at Coventry who reported being disciplined three years ago after returning to work for taking time off with cancer.

In a mark of their determination, strikes at the Coventry warehouse have already involved more than 30 days of action since January last year. Fourteen months into the struggle, a balance sheet of the GMB's leadership is required. The union has not provided a route to victory and cannot do so; the trade union bureaucracy is a hostile

social force to the working class, aimed at securing a comfortable partnership with the employers.

The GMB—the third largest union in Britain with 600,000 members—has not used its well-resourced apparatus to push for unified action against Amazon across its UK sites, employing around 75,000 workers. Instead, strike action has been limited to the Coventry warehouse, outside of a couple of days of action at the Rugeley fulfilment centre (now closed) in Staffordshire last August.

Its most recent actions in Coventry and Birmingham followed the same template of un-coordinated strikes: a three-day walk out in mid-February and a solitary one-day action on January 25 respectively.

The GMB confirmed the latest strike dates on March 12 in connection with an application for mandatory union recognition at Amazon to the government's Central Arbitration Committee (CAC). It withdrew its application last June after Amazon flooded new workers into the Coventry warehouse, an underhanded trick to counteract the fact that more than 50 percent (around 800) had signed up with the GMB, meeting the statutory threshold for recognition.

More than 1,100 workers have now reportedly joined the union in defiance of this campaign. Rather than build this militancy into a broader industrial fightback against Amazon, the union is urging workers to place their faith in the pro-corporate CAC, which sided with Amazon the first time around.

The narrow action sanctioned by the GMB is in total contrast to the unofficial strike wave at Amazon which erupted in August 2022 across at least 10 of the company's sites—around half of its UK total—in which Coventry workers participated.

Conditions in the first years of the COVID pandemic

served as a trigger for pent-up opposition among Amazon workers, subjected to an 18-month pay freeze while being kept on the job as “essential” staff. Crowded into their workplaces as the virus spread, they were then offered an insulting pay increase of between 35 and 50 pence an hour (varying by location).

The GMB leapt into the breach for Amazon amid this rebellion, with organizer Steve Garelick writing at the time that he had “been advised the daily cost per department at Amazon sites that have taken action over their pay offer is approximately £100,000 per department per day... Proof that the cost to the Amazon could have been mitigated if they had not imposed a such a miserable sum.”

In other words, rather than dealing blows against the company on behalf of workers to force an improvement in their conditions, the GMB is concerned with helping Amazon “mitigate” the costs of labour relations. Its limited and rigidly controlled industrial action is being used as leverage to appeal to Amazon to incorporate the union into the management of its business operations by policing the opposition from below.

The GMB’s actions at Amazon are part and parcel of the role it played together with the entire union bureaucracy to sabotage and demobilise the 2022-23 strike UK strike wave, enforcing a wave of sellouts.

Elsewhere in the delivery sector, over 100,000 postal workers at Royal Mail saw a year-long national dispute betrayed by the Communication Workers Union. The union enforced a pro-company agreement tearing up terms and conditions and using Amazon as its benchmark for a new level of exploitation. A central pillar of the sweatshop charter has been the implementation of a two-tier workforce, with 15,000 new entrants recruited last year on inferior pay and terms economy as thousands of long-term postal workers have been driven out.

As for the GMB, Amazon workers should heed the warning of British Gas (BG) workers posted on X/Twitter. When the GMB announced its latest Amazon strikes, one responded, “I wish you luck, but it’s likely the GMB will string out the strikes, cost you money & eventually just sell you out further down the track. That’s what they did with us at BG.”

After 42 days of national strike action at British Gas against fire and rehire, the GMB enforced inferior pay and terms on 7,000 engineers in July 2021 and left 500 who refused to sign the new contract to be sacked.

There is no red line the union bureaucracy is not prepared to cross to partner with the corporations. This

was fully confirmed by the sweetheart deal the GMB signed with Deliveroo in May 2022 over the heads of its workers, providing the union with sole recognition rights covering its 90,000 riders nationally via a “Voluntary Partnership Agreement.” The union accepted the company’s definition of riders as self-employed, completely undermining their fight for full employment rights, and pledged itself to the “sustainable business success” of the gig economy firm.

The GMB’s grubby agreement with Deliveroo was endorsed and glorified by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party, whose endorsement of the GMB’s recognition drive at Amazon should sound alarm bells for workers.

This Valentine’s Day, around 3,000 gig economy delivery riders participated in strike action organised through the independent Delivery Job UK against poverty pay and unsafe working conditions. Deliveroo cited its agreement with the GMB against riders who joined the unofficial action.

For workers to improve their wages and conditions, broad action independent of the union bureaucracy is required. But this action must be organised, by workers themselves, nationally and internationally.

Amazon workers seeking a means to extend their struggle and wage such an international fight should contact the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC), which was formed in opposition to the sellout at Royal Mail by the CWU and its brutal restructuring agenda. As part of the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and-File Committees, it is fighting to provide a strategy for postal and logistics workers, unified in a common struggle against the race to the bottom led by the pro-company union apparatus in every country.



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