

Black Friday strikes hit Amazon in Europe

By our reporters
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Black Friday saw strikes and protests by thousands of Amazon warehouse workers across Europe. Action was taken to protest brutal working conditions on the biggest sales day of the year in Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland and France, as well as at UK distribution centres by off-shift workers.

Various national trade unions were involved, with demands focussed on union recognition at Amazon. The protests and strikes were therefore of a token character, often small and mounted by organisations whose real aim is official recognition by Amazon as an “industry partner,” i.e., a policeman over the workforce. Tim Roache, the general secretary of the GMB union in Britain, told *Business Insider*: “All we want is to get Amazon around the table”.

UNI Global, an international trade union federation that helped coordinate the walkout, said roughly 2,400 staff struck in Europe, with other reports citing larger figures. The bulk of this was accounted for by Germany and Spain, with German union Ver.di saying 1,000 workers walked out. Spanish unions cited 1,600 striking workers. There are no media accounts of action in either Italy or Poland.

The GMB’s publicity material for protests in the UK, outside distribution hubs in Rugeley, Swansea, Peterborough, Milton Keynes and Warrington, highlighted what it described as “frankly inhuman” working conditions. Freedom of Information requests showed that by June, ambulances had been called out 600 times to 14 UK Amazon warehouses over the past three years. This included a staggering 115 times at Amazon’s Rugeley depot. Incidents included electric shocks, bleeding, chest pain and major trauma. Ambulances were called out three times for “pregnancy/maternity.”

Anonymous interviews collected by the GMB cited one worker as stating: “I am pregnant and they put me to stand 10 hours without a chair... They are telling me to work hard even [though] they know I am pregnant. I am feeling depressed when I am at work.” Another described Amazon as “an awful place to work”, where people

“can’t breathe or voice an opinion” and are left feeling “like a trapped animal with lack of support and respect.”

“They are breaking bones, being knocked unconscious and being taken away in ambulances,” Roach told *Business Insider*. The GMB published a video of staff telling Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos “we are not robots” in five different languages.

An Amazon spokesman replied, “All of our sites are safe places to work and reports to the contrary are simply wrong.”

Outside the Warrington warehouse, the protest consisted of GMB union officials handing out leaflets. One worker starting his shift told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, “I’m from eastern Europe and am on £9.50 an hour here. There are many migrants working at the plant. I have only ever worked in warehouses. That’s the only work around. It’s hard. You have to be fit to do it.”

Another worker said he would read the *International Amazon Workers Voice* leaflet. “I need to clock on, but I have only one thing to say. I would really love to protest against Amazon. I really would.”

In Spain, yesterday’s 24-hour strike action, called by the CCOO union at Amazon’s Madrid depot at San Fernando de Henares, continues today. Further strikes are planned throughout the Christmas and New year sales period—on December 7, 9, 15, and 30, and January 3 and 4. The depot employs around 2,000 people. Reports on participation are highly contradictory, but the union says 80 percent of the first shift came out and that the depot was at a standstill. The CCOO says it is opposing a new contract already implemented in Barcelona, where strikes did not take place—allowing Amazon to shift work to minimise the impact of the Madrid action.

In France, the CGT and SUD trade unions called action in opposition to Black Friday and related peak-sale super-exploitation of workers at the Lauwin-Planque warehouse in Lille.

In Germany, workers at warehouses at Bad Hersfeld in Hesse, the company’s largest, and Rheinberg in North-Rhine Westphalia struck at the beginning of the

night shift on Thursday until the end of Friday. The action is part of a now four-year campaign by the Ver.di union seeking a collective bargaining agreement for the company's 12,000 German employees, including payment according to higher retail and mail order rates.

An Amazon dispatch worker from Leipzig, who wanted to remain anonymous, explained to the WSWS the dilemma facing his work colleagues. "Everyone is critical of the bad working conditions and low wages and most would take part in strikes," he said. "There is the fear that Amazon will take personal action against them and throw them out.

"But above all my colleagues are completely disillusioned with Ver.di. Nobody believes that the unions will achieve anything and organise a serious struggle."

The worker added: "The union always blames the workers. I blame the union. There are strikes in Bad Hersfeld and Rheinsberg, but here in Leipzig you don't notice anything! Why? And in Poland, in Breslau, which is just around the corner, the working conditions are supposed to be even worse. So why is there not a strike with the colleagues there?"

"The regulations governing the breaks are an absolute disgrace. I work a total of 8.5 hours at Amazon. But only 7.75 hours are paid. The rest is an unpaid break and is divided into two—one 20 minutes, the other 25 minutes long. Amazon considers the walk to the break rooms as a break. The bottom line is that you have a break of 10 minutes, because you need 5 minutes to get back!"

The worker said that employees are "constantly monitored" through "scanners and electronic devices" so that "management always knows exactly who does what and for how long." The company records "every single step, even when you are going to the toilet too often."

"Management is trying to systematically squeeze out the workers here and drive them to ever greater speed ups," he added. "There are bonus weeks, where you get €20 more per day, if you come to work for a whole week. If you're sick or just a minute late, the bonus for the day or week is completely gone. You have to show up at work even when you are sick. In a training course on 'ergonomic movement,' the presentation video showed workers performing certain movements, for example to protect their backs. One colleague said this is all well and good, but completely out of touch with reality. Nobody has the time to move so slowly. In the last 'rush hour' she was lucky that no forklift truck drove over her feet!"

Shannon Allen, an Amazon worker and whistleblower in Haslet, Texas, said she supported the struggle by

workers internationally. "I stand in solidarity with all workers who are fighting back against Amazon," she said. Responding to the video of workers declaring that "we are not robots," she commented: "It's true, they do treat people like robots. They don't treat you like a human being. They just see how much work they can get out of you before they are done with you. It's not just happening in the UK. It's happening here in the US, too, and more and more people are speaking out about it."

Shannon wanted to emphasize to workers who feel isolated and reluctant to come forward that "you are not the only one. People do not realize that it's not just happening at [fulfillment center] DFW-7 in Haslet, Texas. It is happening at DFW-6. It's happening around the world. It's happening everywhere."

Shannon has been reaching out to striking workers on social media and said, "It's important for Amazon workers to link up around the world."

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