

Amazon workers internationally protest against conditions on Prime Day

By Kayla Costa
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Thousands of warehouse and tech workers in the United States, the UK, Germany, Poland and Spain are engaged in strikes and demonstrations on Amazon “Prime Day,” a shopping holiday created by the online retail giant to promote sales through discounts to subscribers of its Amazon Prime membership.

This year, Amazon extended Prime Day from 36 to 48 hours. The one-trillion-dollar corporation headed by CEO Jeff Bezos expects to rake in more than \$5 billion in sales over the two days, a new record for the company’s annual promotion.

The sales bonanza is carried out on the backs of the workers, who are forced to move faster and process higher volumes of orders with no increase in their poverty-level compensation.

Since last year’s Prime Day, when workers carried out strikes in the US and Europe, conditions have only worsened. Amazon representatives boasted to the media yesterday that “our wages are at the upper end of what is paid in comparable jobs.” They claimed that the protesting workers were “misinformed,” since the company had raised its minimum US wage to \$15 an hour. They were silent on the fact that Bezos had at the same time eliminated bonus payments, actually reducing take-home pay for some workers.

Workers continue to report health and safety violations, speedup, increased quotas, harassment and injuries. This is the reality that has propelled Amazon workers in many parts of the world to protest against dangerous working conditions, inadequate compensation and grotesque inequality between employees and corporate executives. Amazon workers are also solidarizing themselves with immigrants being scapegoated and persecuted by the Trump administration and governments across Europe. They are denouncing Amazon’s ties to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the midst of immigrant raids launched Sunday and Trump’s latest attack on the right to asylum.

Two thousand German workers participated in strikes at warehouses in Werne, Rheinberg, Leipzig, Graben, Koblenz and Bad Hersfeld. The strikes, organized by the Verdi union, were held under the slogan “No more discount on our incomes,” though rank-and-file workers raised a number of issues beyond pay.

In the United Kingdom, hundreds of workers will join protests across the country throughout the week to voice their opposition. The GMB union has not called for a strike or boycott, with bureaucrat Mick Rix explicitly declaring in a statement that union officials do not want to cause “economic damage for Amazon.”

Workers in Spain and Poland will also participate in

demonstrations throughout the week.

In the United States, some 1,500 full-time workers at a fulfillment center near Minneapolis, Minnesota are holding a six-hour strike between the day and night shifts. This is the second major action workers have carried out at the facility since a group of East African Muslim workers began speaking out 18 months ago, and it is the first major strike by Amazon workers in North America.

On top of the usual harassment, speedup and on-the-job injuries that all warehouse workers face, immigrant workers were initially denied adequate time for prayer breaks. Even after the company agreed to the breaks, workers were still required to meet the quota of 230 items per hour, heightening the risk of being arbitrarily fired or injured. Immigrant workers began organizing themselves alongside native-born workers, with the support of a local immigrant rights organization, the Awood Center.

Amazon workers and supporters are also protesting the ties of Amazon Web Services (AWS) to ICE, as well as the poor conditions facing AWS workers. Demonstrations were attended by hundreds in San Francisco, Portland and New York, in addition to a protest at the headquarters building in Seattle, Washington. Activists associated with Jobs with Justice plan to turn in a petition at Bezos’s Manhattan mansion and the company’s San Francisco office demanding an end to the use of AWS facial recognition technology by ICE. The petition has 270,000 signatures.

Tech workers published an open letter to Bezos in June of 2018 opposing the contract between AWS and ICE after Google and Microsoft employees drafted similar letters in opposition to their companies’ ties to US militarism. More recently in Boston, hundreds of Wayfair workers walked off their jobs at the online furniture retailer to protest the company’s decision to profit from sales to immigrant detention centers.

The protests this week are an indication of the power that can be unleashed by Amazon workers internationally. Within the global logistics and technology supply chain, the workers constitute an international force at the heart of the world economy. It is especially significant that American workers are protesting not just poor compensation and working conditions, but also the role of the company in aiding the US government in its savage crackdown on immigrants.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several Amazon workers about the Prime Day events. Michelle, an injured

warehouse worker from Texas, sent a message via the WSWS to the striking Amazon workers. She wrote: “Don’t give in, because what Jeff Bezos doesn’t understand is that the people hold the power, not the company. There is strength in numbers... the workers don’t need Amazon; Amazon needs its workers.”

She pointed to “a small problem” in the current strikes—that they were too short and isolated to “make a dent” in such a giant corporation. But, she continued, “If they lasted longer and there were even delivery drivers and pilots refusing to work a few days...now that would be something.”

Michelle reflected on the common interests of different sections of the working class—for example, Amazon workers and autoworkers, where “the employees are struggling and sacrificing so much while the company is making so much profit off of their suffering.”

Beyond the initial steps taken to protest on Prime Day, Amazon workers must develop their struggle on the basis of their international strength. Company leaders boasted that isolated, short-term strikes in a few scattered hubs would barely impact the massive profits made during the online frenzy, but this must only stir workers to counter the global strategy of Amazon to maximize the exploitation of workers with a globally coordinated strategy for workers to fight back and assert their interests in opposition to the profit drive of the company.

It is within this context that the treacherous role of the trade unions and supposedly “pro-worker” and “progressive” politicians must be understood. With Amazon workers growing more radical and militant, the unions are seeking to gain control in order to isolate, limit and suppress their resistance while obtaining new sources of dues revenue.

Many European warehouse employees are already unionized by Verdi in Germany and the GMB union in the UK, where actions were deliberately limited to short strikes or scattered demonstrations in order to prevent any threat to Amazon’s profits. In Poland and Spain, the protests are barely being publicized by the unions. The actions of the unions this year are similar to their role in strangling strike efforts last year.

Amazon workers in the United States are nonunion, though “progressive” Democrats, pseudo-left organizations and union organizations have ramped up their campaign to channel growing discontent into the confines of the unions and the Democratic Party.

A number of unions issued statements of support for the striking workers. “Amazon workers are sending a powerful message to Jeff Bezos this Prime Day: It’s time to stop putting profits ahead of people,” United Food and Commercial Workers International Union President Marc Perrone said in a statement. “With the recent move to one-day Prime shipping, Amazon workers are being forced to meet impossible demands at increasingly unsafe speeds,” he added.

Though it is not clear which union will emerge from the scramble of competing bureaucracies to win the Amazon franchise, it seems that the Teamsters union is in the lead.

Democratic Party presidential candidates—who have backed every betrayal of workers’ struggles carried out by the unions—used the strikes as an opportunity to con workers into

believing they were on the employees’ side. Elizabeth Warren tweeted: “I fully support Amazon workers’ Prime Day strike. Their fight for safe and reliable jobs is another reminder that we must come together to hold big corporations accountable.”

Soon after, Bernie Sanders, who praised Bezos for “doing the right thing” by paying workers a paltry \$15 an hour, tweeted, “I stand in solidarity with the courageous Amazon workers engaging in a work stoppage against unconscionable working conditions in their warehouses.”

Shannon Allen, a former Amazon worker who attracted a large online following after sharing her story of becoming homeless after a workplace injury, had a sharp message in response to Senator Warren. “You are a capitalist,” she wrote. “You are one of the rich millionaires out here... What are you going to do for these people besides voice your opinion and get more votes? These are real people’s lives.”

Though the verbal support of politicians comes and goes, “This is an epidemic that has been going on a long time” Allen said. “Only over the last few years have people started to speak out.”

If workers want to really fight the rampant exploitation and abuse, “All these workers need to band together and strike at one time,” Allen declared. “Hit them where it hurts.”

In order to wage an effective struggle, workers need to create new organizations independent of the trade unions and all the capitalist political parties. They need to establish rank-and-file committees to link up every tech center and fulfillment center and develop a program of demands that bases itself on the workers’ interests, not what the company says it can afford: for decent and safe full-time jobs, adequate break time, steep increases to wages and benefits, workers’ control over line speed and production, among other demands.

Such committees established at Amazon facilities around the world will make possible an internationally coordinated struggle to unite the workers against the transnational company and link up with the struggles of other logistics workers, autoworkers, service workers, nurses, teachers and other sections of the international working class.

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