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Unions

How European Workers Coordinated Massive Amazon Strikeâ€™ And What Comes Next

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As Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos' net worth topped \$150 billion last week, making him the richest man in modern history, thousands of Amazon workers across Europe went on strike.

The work stoppage, which lasted three days at some facilities, was one of the largest labor actions against Amazon to date, and the first to receive widespread coverage in the U.S. media. But the strikes and protests in Spain, Germany and Poland were just the latest in an escalating series of actions against Amazon in Europe, where workers belonging to both conventional unions and militant workers' organizations are forging a transnational movement against the internet juggernaut.

In Germany, which is Amazon's second-biggest market after the United States, workers at the company's fulfillment centers waged the first-ever strike against Amazon in 2013. "In the beginning, it was purely about wages, about being able to pay for the cost of living," says Lena Widmann, a federal secretary and spokesperson for the German services union Verdi. "Now it's also about respect, and about being heard."

After the first strikes, Amazon began to give German workers regular raises. It also made improvements to ventilation and lighting in some of its warehouses, and, in response to worker complaints about the physical and psychological toll of on-the-job requirements, added a "fruit day" with company-furnished fruit baskets.

But Amazon has refused to codify even these modest changes through a collective bargaining agreement. The union estimates that approximately 2,400 workers at six of the company's fulfillment centers in Germany participated in last week's three-day strike, out of about 16,000 that Amazon employs in Germany. Organizers will continue pushing to incorporate more workers in shop-floor organization, to contact new facilities that Amazon has opened in the past year, and, ultimately, to win a union contract.

"We're talking about a long fight ahead – it's not going to be solved by Christmas, and our members are very aware of this," says Widmann. "But more and more people are joining the movement."

In a statement responding to the strikes, an Amazon spokesperson said, "Amazon is a fair and responsible employer and as such we are committed to dialogue, which is an inseparable part of our culture. We are committed to ensuring a fair cooperation with all our employees, including positive working conditions and a caring and inclusive environment."

In 2014, Amazon began to open warehouses in Poland, where wages are lower and labor laws are laxer. A chapter in the 2018 book *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupt the Global Supply Chain* describes working conditions in the Polish warehouses:

Most employees have to work standing or walking (some for several miles during one shift), and many jobs involve highly repetitive movements, lifting heavy goods and boxes, or pushing heavy carts. Amazon wants the warehouses running day and night. Therefore, workers in Poland have to work four 10-hour shifts per week, with an additional unpaid 30 minutes break. The shifts schedule changes every month from day shift. Such a shift system and shift rotation disturbs workers' sleeping rhythm and leads to serious health problems. In addition, it makes it difficult to organise a private life.

To bring down the sickness rate, Amazon Poland hired a company in spring 2017 which checks whether workers are

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at home during sick leave. A worker who was dismissed because of a sick leave wrote: "At Amazon we hear about safety every day, about health, but the reality is different. Not everyone can keep up the race at Amazon. People are treated like machines. But even machines fail and stand still. We are not allowed to do that."

Moreover, Amazon's expansion into Eastern Europe threatened to undercut the effectiveness of strikes being waged by German workers. So in 2015, rank-and-file activists Germany and Poland held the first of what became a series of cross-border meetings of Amazon workers. Polish workers have organized within Inicjatywa Pracownicza (Workers' Initiative), a radical trade union that uses the black sabo-tabby as its logo. [1]

The birth of Workers' Initiative in 2004 was a "reaction to the crisis of the Polish official union movement – to its bureaucracy, passivity and links with the anti-worker government," Magda Malinowska, a member of the group, tells *In These Times* over e-mail. Since then, Workers' Initiative has organized in the logistics industry as well as the healthcare, education and culture sectors.

Polish labor law imposes a restrictive bar on strike actions – more than half of an entire workforce must participate in a strike vote – but Polish Amazon workers have carried out a series of slowdowns to coincide with ongoing strikes in Germany. [2]

"We [did not want to be] used as scabs, with health and safety laws and our rights neglected, so that Amazon could ignore the strikes in other fulfillment centers," says Malinowska.

Through its "safe package" actions, Workers' Initiative has carried out what are effectively work-to-rule strikes, leafletting employees to remind them of the risk of injury from Amazon's speed-ups.

"We want to draw the attention of all employees to work above all safety, in accordance with health and safety regulations, and not under pressure from the employer to 'beat shipping records,' because they will not get any rewards for their dedication," says Malinowska. She adds that since warehouses opened in Poland, shipping targets have increased several times.

Coordination between Amazon workers in different countries – taking place through cross-border meetings of rank-and-file workers, as well as the labor federation UNI – has played an important role in ramping up strike action elsewhere in Europe. [3] [4] When Italian Amazon workers first went on strike in November 2017, they were joined by Verdi members for a two-day work stoppage during Black Friday. [5] Soon after, Amazon signed its first-ever collective bargaining agreement with Italian unions, which introduced new scheduling protections and wage increases for overnight shifts. [6]

The call for a Europe-wide strike during Prime Day was issued by Spanish Amazon workers, who first struck in March at the country's logistics center in Madrid. [7] The Spanish labor union Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (CCOO), which is the majority union for Amazon workers at a national level, declared the strike a "complete success," with a reported 98 percent of the 2,000-person workforce taking part. [8]

"We know that Amazon is using its logistic network in Europe to counter the effect of our respective strikes," wrote its authors. "We in Madrid believe that only if we struggle together will we gain recognition for our demands. Similarly, only with a joint action at a European level will workers organize in those places where there is no union representation yet."

In addition to strikes and slowdowns in Spain, Germany and Poland, Amazon workers in Great Britain marched over

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the weekend in a festival celebrating the birth of trade unionism, holding signs reading “We Are Humans, Not Robots.” An estimated 87 percent of U.K. Amazon workers have back or neck problems, according to a survey by the trade union GMB.

“Amazon is a global company and uses global tactics,” GMB official Mick Rix told El Pais. “We have to do the same.”
[9]

[July 28 2018)

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[1] <http://www.ozzip.pl/>

[2] <https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com/2016/07/27/amazon-poland-over-2000-people-want-to-go-on-strike-but-restrictive-polish-labor-laws-prohibit-it/>

[3] <https://amworkers.wordpress.com/2018/02/24/final-declaration-of-the-cross-border-meeting-of-amazon-workers-leipzig-january-26-28-2018/>

[4] <https://www.uniglobalunion.org/>

[5] <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-42111866>

[6] <http://www.uni-europa.org/2018/05/25/historic-agreement-between-amazon-and-sector-unions/>

[7] <https://amazonenlucha.wordpress.com/2018/05/16/llamamiento-a-una-huelga-europea-frente-a-amazon/>

[8] https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/03/21/inenglish/1521632646_173135.html [[

However, the strike also reportedly led to reprisals and firings of temporary workers, and in May a group of Madrid workers issued a call for a Europe-wide strike under the name “Amazon en Lucha.”[[

<https://amazonenlucha.wordpress.com/2018/05/16/llamamiento-a-una-huelga-europea-frente-a-amazon/>

[9] https://elpais.com/economia/2018/07/20/actualidad/1532105579_797649.html?id_externo_rsoc=TW_CC