

Social context

Amazon A–Z: Unions in Europe

Unlike in the United States of America, Amazon's European warehouses have a number of trade unions. What differs, however, is the way workers are organized, as well as the legal framework that exists in each EU country. Amazon has warehouses in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Ireland and, outside the EU, the United Kingdom. Virtually every one of these countries has a union presence in the logistics centers, but not everywhere have they been able to establish official company union cells.

This is the case in the UK. Although unions report an overall number of “several hundred members” among the crews of Amazon's Fulfillment Centers (out of more than 22,000 employees), there is no employer-recognized union organization in any of them. As you can read in a 2019 report by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS), the GPMU union (now part of the trade union coalition Unite) tried to set up an official cell at Amazon's first UK warehouse as early as 2001, but after a brutal anti-union campaign by the company, efforts to unionize workers slowed down significantly. To officially recognize a union at a company, extremely restrictive British law requires not only membership of at least 10% of the workforce, but also the documented support (e.g. in the form of a signed petition or vote) of a majority of the facility's employees.

With high turnover, the inability to campaign on the shop floor, and, as the authors of the RLS report mentioned, the large number of immigrants employed in the warehouses (mainly people from Poland and Romania for whom English is not their first language), it is difficult to achieve the required support. In an attempt to deal with the language barrier, another of the unions involved in the Amazon case, GMB, is working alongside the Polish NSZZ “Solidarność”. According to the British media reports, the newly elected 2021 head of the Unite union coalition, Sharon Graham, on the rising tide of pro-union sentiment in Europe and the US, has decided to step up her efforts against Amazon. She publicly called on the company to sign a declaration of neutrality towards unions and to stop fighting them.

In mainland Europe, unions tend to operate within a more favorable legal framework. In France, labor law imposes mandatory worker representation in every large factory, and this consists of locally active union representatives and elected worker representatives. And while worker unionization is not high at French Amazon (2019 estimates put it at 5%, with the most important unions being the CGT and Solidaires), the organizations there have scored perhaps the biggest victory among similar organizations worldwide. In 2020, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, they succeeded in judicially forcing a work stoppage of Amazon's fulfillment centers due to insufficient protection for workers against the disease. Significantly, workers retained 100% of their wages for the duration of the lockdown, and Amazon had to negotiate the terms of their return to work with the unions.

The loudest activists are German warehouse workers affiliated with the Ver.di union. Since 2013, Ver.di has been conducting regular strikes, which usually involve Amazon's facilities in Bad Hersfeld, Leipzig, Werne, Rheinberg and Koblenz. Almost traditionally, the strikes take place on the occasion of Prime Day sales or other similar events (such as Black Friday) and are often coordinated with actions in other countries. As estimated by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Amazon workers protesting in Germany held off work for a total of 300 days between 2013 and 2019. Despite this, they failed to achieve their main goal of forcing the company to sign a collective agreement regulating wages in the logistics sector. It is said that one of the reasons for Amazon's expansion to Poland was the constant threat of strikes hanging over the warehouses in Germany. The sites in Wrocław, Poznań and Szczecin, perfectly connected to the largest German agglomerations, were located as a back-up for the company. However, the workers quickly recognized this as well, coordinating their activities across borders.

In 2015, a contract was successfully signed in Spain at the level of one of the logistics centers. Trade unionists at a warehouse in San Fernando de Henares near Madrid negotiated a deal, regulating wages and the division of labor. However, the agreement was only temporary and expired at the end of 2016. So far, it has not been possible to sign another one because, according to unionists from the UGT and CCOO, the conditions proposed by Amazon are worse than those currently in force. In 2018, a 48-hour strike was held in San Fernando de Henares,

which was very popular among workers, but it did not bring a systemic solution, but only a promise of a small wage raise from Amazon.

Similarly, in Italy, unionization of the first of the warehouses took a good few years and ended with a strike in 2017, after which the employer recognized unionized workers from CGIL, CISL and UI at the MXP5 warehouse in Piacenza and signed a collective agreement on working hours. Since then, unionization has accelerated, and another major strike was held in March 2021, after Amazon announced in negotiations that it would not take responsibility for outsourced suppliers and couriers. The strike organized in the aftermath was intended more as a show of force than to demand specific concessions from the company. And it can be said with high probability that it succeeded, because the representatives of both warehouse workers and suppliers joined the strike in solidarity, effectively blocking the work of the corporation at all levels. This was probably the first such case in the history of labor struggles at Amazon.

Compared to the rest of Europe, the case of Sweden looks interesting, where unionization is extremely high (up to 70% of workers), and every large company is obliged to sign a collective agreement for a given sector of the economy. Amazon, entering the Swedish market with all its services only at the end of 2020, would have to eventually adapt to these regulations, but for now it has chosen a different path. The operator of its only warehouse so far is the German logistics company Kuehne Nagel, which is already aligned with the Swedish system of labor rights. However, should Amazon expand further into the Swedish market, we could witness an interesting and important clash for the entire world of work between two radically different models of doing business and managing employees.

sources:

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