

Social context

Amazon A–Z: Unions in Poland

Amazon's first Polish warehouses were opened in Poznań and Wrocław in 2014. In the first of these cities, the inter-company committee of the nationwide trade union "Inicjatywa Pracownicza" (Workers' Initiative) was officially established as early as December 16 (the same year). "By establishing the Workers' Initiative at Amazon, we stand for an independent and grassroots trade union, i.e. one that can do without bureaucracy and bosses receiving fat salaries. Our guiding principle is that we are all equal," the unionists wrote in its first appeal to workers. In another, they added: "[...] we sensed that we needed to organize. The 'honeymoon period' quickly passed – from January 2015, the pressure on performance grew, salaries disagreed, managers stopped being colleagues and started bringing feedbacks [rebukes]."

The union has since grown along with the network of logistics halls and today has disclosed members in Poznań, Szczecin, Wrocław, Sosnowiec and Gliwice – six warehouses out of the 10 currently operating in Poland (as of the end of 2021). The distinction between disclosed and undisclosed members is important, as the Workers' Initiative, as a rule, does not disclose the list of trade unionists to employers, giving them greater freedom of action and security. In total, it reports about 900 members from among permanent and temporary workers.

The other union operating at Amazon is the inter-company committee of the "Solidarity" Trade Union, a more traditional union with roots dating back to the 1980s and the anti-communist underground. It differs a lot from the Workers' Initiative, which originated in anarchist circles but also reached beyond them. At the beginning of Amazon's operations in Poland, this caused some friction between the unions, but for several years now, the will to cooperate, coordination of activities and joint actions has been clearly visible. "Solidarity" started its activities at Amazon near Wrocław and concentrates them in Lower and Upper Silesia. Both of these regions, with a strong share of heavy industry and mining, have a very deep tradition of workers' self-organization – so it is not surprising that even today they are a strong center of resistance against Amazon.

The activities of both unions were perceived as a threat by Amazon from the day one. According to their members, in the first years it was difficult to ask for such basic means of communication with the rest of the employees, such as an information board at all warehouses. Leaflets left in the employee cafeteria quickly disappeared, and disclosed activists were moved to inferior positions. Under the pressure of rapidly increasing demands, already in 2016 the Workers' Initiative organized a strike referendum – the vote “yes” was cast by as many as 97% of the voters, but with a turnout of about 30% of all permanent employees, it was not binding. Another referendum was organized in 2019, already jointly by Workers' Initiative and “Solidarity.” Despite a much more extensive campaign and the possibility to vote online, the 50% turnout requirement could not be met this time either.

This does not mean, however, that the labor unions have not been successful. It is thanks to their pressure, for example, that they managed to temporarily suspend the performance measurement system, prevent the introduction of unfavorable changes in work regulations or force the company to pay higher bonuses for work during the demanding holiday season. Several times, thanks to the legal support of employees by the unions, they have also managed to win against Amazon in the labour court, which ruled that the dismissals were unlawful.

sources:

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4. Michał Karbowski, *Strajk w Amazonie? 97 proc. głosujących pracowników opowiedziało się za*, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, 2016
5. “*Głos Załogi Amazona*” 2/2016
6. *W Amazon w Sosnowcu działa Solidarność*, strona internetowa związku NSZZ “Solidarność”, 2019
7. “*Głos Załogi Amazona*” 10/2021