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‘Amazon is feeling the pressure’

General Secretary of UNI Global Union, Christy Hoffman, sheds light on Amazon’s unionization battles worldwide

As the General Secretary of UNI Global Union, a global trade union federation that represents private services workers, and prominently includes workers at Amazon warehouses, where do you see the fight for decent working conditions at Amazon at?

The fight for better working conditions at Amazon – higher pay, safety on the job and an end to relentless pressure – is raging across the world. In fact, over the past five years, we have seen an enormous uptick in worker and union activity, alongside a growing awareness across the spectrum of civil society that, when Amazon arrives in town, degrading conditions follow.

The fight over working conditions has spread to regulators and into the political arena, where ‘regulatory good will’ towards the company is hard to find in many countries. The European Parliament even took the rare step of banning the company’s lobbyists because Amazon refused to participate in hearings to defend its unconscionable behaviour. US Senator Bernie Sanders led an investigation into Amazon’s safety practices in the United States. And several states in the US have adopted warehouse protection laws specifically targeted to address Amazon’s practices.

Amazon is feeling the pressure. Travellers to the UK or France immediately notice the company’s PR campaign, which includes television advertising in which Amazon boasts about its wonderful working conditions. Really? What other companies go to such lengths? When I meet with other employers, the first comment is often ‘We are not Amazon.’

But far too few Amazon workers collectively bargain, despite fighting tooth and nail for the right to be represented by a union.

In Canada, UNIFOR has won the right to vote for a union in British Colombia and is fighting Amazon’s anti-union campaign. The *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN) in Quebec won a union

certification election in May to represent 200 Amazon workers near Montreal, again, after a difficult campaign.

In the UK, the GMB Union and Amazon workers are pushing back against a brutal union-busting campaign. In Germany, mobilisation continues, but bargaining remains elusive. Indian workers continue to demand changes to improve their wages and working conditions.

We have also seen how in France and Italy, where there are sectoral bargaining agreements, workers have organised strikes and protests, leading to improved working conditions and negotiations for better terms, and even an agreement with the Italian unions.

To sum up, the continued efforts and solidarity have led to improved conditions in some areas, but Amazon's anti-worker policies show that we must continue to support organising as well as exposing the company's abuses of rights.

The United States is Amazon's first and biggest market. At the same time, working conditions – also because of the weakness of US labour law – are particularly harsh. Where is the Amazon struggle in the country at?

Amazon workers in the United States are standing up for their rights like never before. When workers in Bessemer, Alabama, started organising with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), it triggered an avalanche of organising at Amazon and beyond. The results of the workers' first election there in 2021 were so tainted by Amazon's unlawful anti-union tactics that the US government threw out the results. I have visited Bessemer and met worker leaders there, and I know from first-hand experience that even though the outcome of the second election is still unclear, workers will keep fighting until they win. A third election is possible.

More recently, the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) joined with the Teamsters Union. This partnership combines the ALU's grassroots energy with the Teamsters' extensive experience and resources, promising stronger organising and a powerful voice for Amazon workers.

Separately from the ALU, the Teamsters have been organising rolling strikes across the US to protest the treatment of delivery drivers.

In Coventry, United Kingdom, workers have built a massive presence at the warehouse with the GMB in the last two years. Now, they are fighting to finally be recognised by Amazon's management to negotiate a contract. But the company is responding with strong anti-union messaging, which GMB organiser Amanda Gearing has called

'out of control'. Why is Amazon so vehemently anti-union, in Coventry and elsewhere?

Unfortunately, union busting in the US is a deeply embedded and ideologically based practice — a multi-billion-dollar industry that relies on relentless psychological manipulation and pressure to persuade workers to vote 'NO' to a union. It is beyond horrible that Amazon has exported these practices to the UK. The kind of communication that might be allowed in the US is shocking and should not be tolerated anywhere.

Amazon's vehement anti-union stance in Coventry and around the globe is in line with this deep anti-union doctrine and taken to a new level by the company. It is firmly rooted in Amazon's obsession with exercising control over its workforce. Just think about how the company's constant monitoring and performance evaluation tools ratchet up pressure on workers.

Amazon has only negotiated with unions when forced by the power of the law or the power of the workers. Despite the recent setback in Coventry, we know that the power of workers will eventually bring Amazon to the table.

In India, many workers have recently suffered under the unimaginable temperatures during a heatwave. Can you tell us a little about the issues at Amazon India and the way workers are organising to fight back?

In India, Amazon warehouse and delivery workers face gruelling working conditions, including extreme heat, and are reporting restrictions on basic needs like water and bathroom breaks. Their fight for a safe, cool and healthy workplace has made national and international headlines. As a result of this coverage and the organising of Amazon India Workers Association, backed by UNI, Amazon has been forced to acknowledge its safety failures in its warehouse in Manesar, Haryana. Now, the e-commerce giant has pledged to allow workers to take their rightful breaks. The National Human Rights Commission of India is also acting after Amazon workers publicised gruelling, inhumane working conditions, including Amazon management at its Manesar warehouse making a 24-year-old worker pledge to not take toilet or water breaks during a record-breaking heat wave in May.

But there's more. According to UNI's new survey, thousands of Amazon workers in India are enduring intense pressure and unsafe conditions while struggling to support themselves with insufficient pay. It's clear that for conditions to improve at Amazon in India and beyond, workers need strong unions.

Recently, unions have also built power in Amazon's white-collar workforce, whether that's at its EU headquarters in Luxembourg or at its cloud computing arm, Amazon Web Services, in Belgium. How do you see these developments?

The increasing union power among Amazon's white-collar workforce, such as in Luxembourg and Belgium, shows that concerns over workplace conditions and job security are prevalent across all levels of Amazon's operations, highlighting that fair treatment for all employees will only come when employees are able to organise and collectively bargain. Workers can build real power by uniting across sectors and around the globe.

We know about Amazon's excessive surveillance at the workplace and the way algorithms and AI are used to discipline workers. How do unions engage with this issue? And what role does Amazon play in the global AI race?

Amazon engages in near-total surveillance, which, coupled with advanced algorithmic management tools, enables the company to monitor, squeeze and at times discipline its workers. It has taken the lead in developing these sophisticated tools, nicknamed 'Bossware', which are often adopted by other companies.

This is the top issue in most worksites and unions fight back with various demands. Regulation is under consideration in many jurisdictions to limit surveillance and related discipline. Several US states have passed warehouse protection laws to ensure that workers get their breaks. Many health and safety regulators have intervened to insist that Amazon address the physical and psycho-social harm caused by its brutal model. Some works councils have been able to dial back the daily quotas. And, ideally, collective bargaining could allow workers to determine conditions as well as enforce health and safety rules free from fear and retaliation.

The Germany trade union ver.di has been organising for over 10 years at Amazon and made significant advances already. However, Amazon still refuses to sign up to the sectoral collective bargaining agreement. What has to happen for Amazon to come to the table?

Ver.di's pressure on Amazon has shown real results. Pay has increased substantially; some warehouses now have works councils that union members control. Some works councils have raised successful challenges to the quota-driven pressures on the job. However, Amazon continues to refuse collective bargaining in line with its ideological opposition to unions in general and its fear of a domino effect in other countries.

For Amazon to come to the table, sustained pressure from ver.di, coupled with broader public, political and regulatory support, is essential. I am confident that the German workers will succeed in their efforts.



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