

'I am not a robot': Why Amazon UK workers are striking on Prime Day

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"This is a picket line," says Rachel Fagan emphatically. The GMB union's Midlands regional organiser stands in front of a line of striking workers several rows deep at Amazon's vast BHX4 warehouse in Coventry, during industrial action designed to embarrass the online behemoth during a high-profile sales event. About 900 workers at the Coventry warehouse are taking three days of strike action from 11 July to 13 July, coinciding with its Prime Day sales event on Tuesday and Wednesday. Along the picket line, one worker holds up a placard carrying the union's familiar refrain: "I am not a robot." The latest industrial action will bring the total strike days at Amazon to 22 since January, when the first UK strikes in the history of the company took place. Meanwhile, strikes are also taking place this week in Germany, where the country's second largest union, ver.di, has organised action at 10 distribution centres. Here is what you need to know about the disagreement. What is the dispute about? Workers have launched strike action against Amazon in a standoff over pay, conditions and the company's failure to recognise union rights. Amazon employees are paid a minimum of £11 an hour and are requesting a pay rise to £15. The national minimum wage for people aged over 23 is £10.42 per-hour. The conflict was sparked by Amazon's offer of a 50p an hour increase in pay in the summer of 2022, which angered workers who have complained of a high-pressure working environment – exacerbated by online orders surging during the Covid pandemic. Speaking outside GMB's annual congress in Brighton last month, Garfield Hylton, who works at Coventry said: "They can monitor you, per minute, per task – it's micromanagement. "It's called 'scanner adherence' – you have to be scanning every minute, to show a constant, rapid scan." The union has been engaged in a battle to represent Amazon workers in Coventry and has slowly grown its membership at the site from a handful of people to about 900. GMB estimated there were about 1,400 workers at the depot – meaning its membership was above the statutory threshold of 50% for union recognition. But Amazon argued that there were closer to 2,700 employees at the site and the union reluctantly withdrew its attempt to win formal recognition, accusing the firm of drafting in more than 1,000 extra workers to skew the decision. The union accused the online retailer of "dirty tricks". Amazon said in response: "We regularly recruit new team members." Will Amazon recognise a union in the UK? The dispute between Coventry's workers and Amazon is a microcosm of a wider row engulfing the retail giant, which has long been hostile to labour representation and has faced calls for unionisation in continental Europe and the US. Although GMB does not have sufficient member numbers for union recognition at the Coventry site, unions across the Atlantic have made some progress. In a watershed moment in the US in April 2022, workers at a New Jersey warehouse won the first ever Amazon union election in the country. However Amazon has challenged the result and not

begun bargaining with the Amazon Labor Union, which won the vote. What has GMB said this week? Fagan says: "This strike action will have a huge impact on Amazon's Prime operation. It goes to show that even Amazon, the world's largest online retailer, is nothing without its workers." She claims that the Prime Day sales event could rake in £2bn (£1.55bn) in sales for Amazon. "It's grotesque that in this context they're denying low paid workers here in the UK the right to a wage that pays the bills ... you can't get human beings on the cheap," she says. What has Amazon said? Amazon has said that there will be no disruption for customers as a result of the strike action this week. A spokesperson for the business said: "We offer competitive pay, comprehensive benefits, opportunities for career growth, all while working in a safe, modern, work environment." It also said that workers could "communicate directly with the leadership of the company". How is Amazon performing? The retailer, started in its founder Jeff Bezos's garage in 1994, has bounced back this year after a punishing late 2022 for technology stocks. Strong financial results have sent the shares up 55% in the first half of 2023 to value the company at \$1.32tn. The business posted revenues for the first three months of the year of \$127.4bn, 9% higher than the \$116.4bn it reported during the same period last year. Meanwhile, it has been engaged in an aggressive cost-cutting exercise, laying off nearly 30,000 workers. The British star stock picker Terry Smith appears unimpressed, however. He said this week that his Fundsmith investment vehicle made its abrupt exit from Amazon earlier this year because it was concerned over "the tech giant's continued interest in growing its footprint in grocery retail" over its core business. • This article was amended on 12 July 2023. Amazon employees are currently paid a minimum of £11 an hour, not £10.50 an hour as a previous version said.