

‘We’re not going away’: UK strike trio bullish over battle for Amazon union

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Author: Heather Stewart

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“Jeff Bezos has got more money than he could spend in a hundred lifetimes. He built the company up, but we’ve kept it going.” On a sunny shingle beach in Brighton, Darren Westwood and his colleagues are reflecting on the yearlong battle to make their voices heard at Amazon. The three men have received a warm welcome here at the GMB’s annual congress, where they have shared their story with fellow activists – and won the support of the Labour leader, Keir Starmer. “That spaceship, that boat of his: he would have none of that if it weren’t for his workers,” says Westwood’s colleague, Garfield Hylton. Later this week, the GMB will concede defeat – for now – in its fight for formal union recognition at Amazon’s huge Coventry warehouse, known as BHX4. But in their black branded T-shirts, the three men – Westwood and Hylton, both 58, and their 27-year-old colleague Salar Kazim – are insistent that the momentum remains with them. “We’re not going away; we’re only going to grow,” says Westwood. “Sooner or later, we’ll have recognition in Coventry.” “From the time we started, and we grew like this, it is all the time a pleasure,” says Kazim, originally from Kurdistan, in northern Iraq. “The best time was during the strikes: we were together, we were talking, and it is really good being involved.” With chatting all but impossible on the packing lines, their campaign has built firm bonds – despite the wide range of languages spoken on site. Hylton says: “You’ve got Polish, Brazilian, Lithuanian, Estonian, Swahili. You need to have a map of the world!” The trio describe a high-pressure working environment inside BHX4, where every move is constantly monitored. Any anomaly – such as a few minutes without scanning an item – can bring a laptop-wielding manager to their workstation. “They can monitor you, per minute, per task – it’s micromanagement,” says Hylton. “It’s called ‘scanner adherence’ – you have to be scanning every minute, to show a constant, rapid scan.” Kazim previously enjoyed his job, known as “indirect”, which saw him moving around the site to perform a range of different tasks, free of minute-by-minute monitoring. “I did love that job actually; it was inspiring,” he says. But he became disillusioned when he had to switch to less physically demanding work after sustaining a knee injury. All three men talk of how physically demanding the job is: Westwood says he once clocked up 16km on a shift; Kazim says that on one occasion, he walked as far as 32km. Breaks are limited, and some roles involve lifting heavy loads. “When you do a concentrated job, you don’t realise how much your body is being punished,” says Kazim. Having worked intensively through the Covid crisis, when at-home shopping soared, staff in Coventry hoped for a generous pay rise when the pandemic abated. “We are the ones who worked through the pandemic. We risked our lives,” says Kazim. So when managers announced an increase of just 50p an hour last August, taking the basic rate to £10.50, some staff felt insulted – a reaction shared at some other Amazon sites, where spontaneous protests broke out. In Coventry, some workers walked off the packing lines and gathered in the canteen. Later, they arranged to meet and discuss their grievances at

an easy-to-find rendezvous point – outside Primark. Organisers from the GMB's West Midlands region had been painstakingly building up a presence at Amazon for more than a decade, mainly focusing on a site in Rugeley, 40 miles away. When they got wind of the protest in Coventry, they sped over. "We got to Primark, we got our hi-vis on, we just started chatting to people," recalls local GMB activist Rachel Fagan. "We just listened to what they wanted and what they wanted to do. And they were saying, 'These workers have had enough, and they want to tell their story.'" Westwood says he had previously felt no need for a union – but he and his colleagues turned to the GMB to help them channel their anger into organising. With Amazon well known worldwide as being sceptical about unions, there followed an intensive period of secretive recruitment. Messages appearing on screens inside the building in recent days and seen by the Guardian told staff: "The union wants you to pay £14.57 every month for them to speak for you. We believe having a voice shouldn't cost you anything". By word of mouth and WhatsApp, the organisers inside the warehouse built up their numbers from a few dozen to over a hundred – and by September, were balloting for strike action. That first ballot was lost, by just a handful of votes, but they staged a rerun a few weeks later, as membership continued to build. Just after midnight on 25 January, dozens of workers left the building before the end of their shifts and walked out into the freezing night, kicking off the first ever strike action against Amazon in the UK. "That first walkout was spectacular," says Westwood. "I didn't think it would work; not because I didn't trust what we were doing, but because of the pressure. It was only 50 or 60 people, but because they were coming out in dribs and drabs, it just felt awesome." They were demanding a pay rise, to £15 an hour; but Fagan, from the GMB, is frank about the fact that they were also using the industrial action to give the staff a platform to tell their stories. "People say, 'What's the point of having industrial action when you've only got 30, 40, 50 members in a workplace?' Well, we used it, we knew that the world's eyes would be on it," she says. They won the support of local Labour MP, Taiwo Owatemi, and US union activists who had recently secured recognition at an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island joined an online rally to show solidarity and exchange tips. Amazon awarded its staff another pay rise earlier this year, and has also recently improved conditions for working parents – something it has trumpeted in slick online ads. Over the course of the dispute, which most recently saw workers involved in two three-day stoppages, membership of the GMB has increased dramatically, to more than 800. The GMB believed that was enough to convince the independent Central Arbitration Committee, which has the power to order a company to recognise a union, that it had more than 50% support at the site. That hope was dashed on Thursday, however, after the committee agreed with Amazon that as many as 2,700 staff are employed at BHX4. The GMB suspects Amazon of going on a hiring spree to scupper its bid for recognition, something the company denies. "It happened at breakneck speed. We don't know where they found all these fresh faces," says Hylton. But the GMB has reluctantly admitted defeat for now, rather than risk losing a recognition ballot, which would bar it from reapplying for three years. A spokesperson for Amazon said: "We respect our employees' rights to join, or not to join, a union. We offer competitive pay, comprehensive benefits, opportunities for career growth, all while working in a safe, modern, work environment." Back in Brighton, Westwood, Kazim and Hylton, fresh from addressing hundreds of delegates about their experiences, say they've already achieved change, by working together. "By talking, you share things; you realise you're not in isolation," says Hylton. "It makes you feel a bit angry, to be honest. But now they're seeing that we're standing up."