

# GMB halts bid for official Amazon union claiming firm skewed staff numbers

Publication Date: 2023-06-08

Author: Heather Stewart

Section: Technology

Tags: Amazon, Retail industry, GMB union, E-commerce, Trade unions, Coventry, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jun/08/gmb-halts-bid-for-official-amazon-union-claiming-firm-skewed-staff-numbers>



The GMB has reluctantly withdrawn its attempt to win formal union recognition at Amazon's Coventry warehouse, accusing the firm of drafting in more than 1,000 extra workers to skew the decision. GMB members at the site made a formal request for recognition to the independent central arbitration committee (CAC) last month after a concerted recruitment drive for members that it believed took it past the necessary threshold of support. Workers at the vast depot, known as BHX4, have held a series of strike days since January – the first at a UK Amazon facility – and the GMB says membership has more than quadrupled to 800. The union believed that comfortably represented more than half of the 1,400 staff it estimated to be working at the site, enough to prompt the CAC to grant statutory recognition. On the basis of evidence submitted by the firm, however, the Guardian understands the CAC has endorsed Amazon's statement that as many as 2,700 people are now employed there. The GMB could have pressed ahead, which might have prompted the CAC to call a ballot to gauge support from staff, but if it lost such a vote it could not make another request for recognition at the same site for three years. It has therefore opted to withdraw its application to the CAC, and to continue trying to build up its strength at BHX4 and nearby sites. The union will hold further strikes at the Coventry warehouse on 12, 13 and 14 of June. Stuart Richards, a regional organiser for the GMB in the West Midlands, said: "Amazon has refused to pay workers a decent wage, but are now paying an additional 1,300 workers to try and bust the union. "We estimate that's more than £300,000 a week, just to stop workers having a voice in their workplace. This is more than it would cost to pay the original workforce the £15 an hour they were asking for." Amazon firmly rejects the idea that it has been hiring staff to frustrate the GMB's effort to win recognition, but workers at the plant have reported seeing a large number of new colleagues arriving in recent weeks. One staff member told the Guardian: "We saw this happening, at breakneck speed. They usually have two [packing] lines for the new people. They've had to have four lines. They've never had four lines. ... They wear hi-vis so they stick out like a sore thumb." Another said: "Each instructor's given eight people to walk round, so you just count the instructors." Amazon insisted that any hiring that had taken place at BHX4 was the result of normal business requirements. A spokesperson said: "At Amazon, we regularly recruit new team members, across the country and across the year, providing great new career opportunities for thousands of people and to meet customer demand. This year is no different." News of the CAC's decision came two days after the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, backed the GMB's campaign at Amazon, calling it "fantastic" and urging the company to recognise the union. He also said a Labour government would impose conditions on public procurement contracts to ensure they create "unionised jobs," with good pay and conditions. He was responding to a question from Garfield Hylton, one of the

Amazon strikers who were celebrated at the Brighton gathering for their efforts in organising workers against a business well known to be reluctant to work with unions. Staff are currently being balloted for industrial action at two other Amazon depots, in Mansfield and Rugeley, though union membership there is lower. Action at Coventry began with a spontaneous walkout last summer after staff were awarded a 50p an hour pay rise. Amazon has since given staff another increase, and recently announced new rights for working parents. When the GMB initially requested recognition, the firm responded with a statement saying: "Amazon respects 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. "At Amazon, these benefits and opportunities come with the job, as does the ability to communicate directly with the leadership of the company."