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Labour unionist: Amazon turns warehouses into fortresses? We will not give up the struggle!

Wednesday 22 February 2023, by [KULBACZEWSKA-FIGAT Małgorzata](#), [OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza](#) (Date first published: 4 February 2023).

Earnings at Amazon are not 'competitive', like the company says. Two increases in the minimum hourly wage are planned this year in Poland and if Amazon's wages do not rise, the minimum wage will practically catch up with them. And we are talking about one of the largest and richest companies in the world, whose founder flies into space for fun - says Blanka Hasterok, an activist of Inicjatywa Pracownicza (Workers' Initiative) trade union.

By the end of January, trade unionists were not allowed to enter Amazon warehouses in Poland with the ballot box into which they intended to collect votes for or against strike action. The company claims that the voting has lasted too long and seems 'pointless'. Labour activists remind that Polish law sets no deadlines on workers' vote on industrial action, and that disrupting a labour dispute is a crime.

The industrial dispute at Amazon began in July last year. What are you fighting for as part of this dispute?

In fact, there is just one demande: a wage increase of six zlotys [1,28 EUR] per hour.

And how much do you earn now in Amazon?

That depends on whether employees go on overtime. "The 'base' salary without bonuses and without social security and health fees does not exceed 3300-3500 PLN. However, the payment is hourly, we are billed quarterly. This means that one month there is more money, the next month less. It all depends on the number of working days.

An industrial dispute, according to Polish law starts with negotiations between the employer and the unions, then there comes mediation. How did these stages look like in the case of your dispute with Amazon?

We went through these stages very quickly. The negotiations ended after the first meeting. The mediation, with a mediator appointed by the ministry, also ended after one meeting in August 2022.

It was then that we learned that our colleague Przemyslaw Wolnowski had been disciplinary dismissed. The day after, and the day before the mediation, Amazon announced that it was giving everyone a raise of 1.50 [0,32 EUR].

By the end of August, our union received a letter from Amazon intending to terminate Przemyslaw's contract, as he was a protected member of the union presidium and, additionally, a Social Labour

Inspector. The company was accusing him of allegedly breaching his duty to respect the rules of social coexistence and disobeying the manager's instructions. This was related to a situation where Przemek distributed union leaflets during a half-hour unpaid break. The manager started to collect them from the tables and did not want to give them back. An exchange of words between them followed and Przemek demanded that she stopped restricting the union activities.

At the beginning of September, in a letter to Amazon, the union did not agree to the termination of the employment contract, which it had the right to do under the Trade Union Act and the Social Labour Inspection Act. Despite the fact that in such a situation the company cannot terminate the employment contract, Amazon informed us of Przemyslaw's dismissal during the mediation, and he did not receive this dismissal in writing! Importantly, Przemyslaw Wolnowski was the union's designated person for the ongoing industrial dispute and was involved in negotiations with company representatives.

What was the reaction of the employees when Amazon announced a 1,5 zł [0,32 EUR] pay rise?

People were simply outraged. They thought it was a mockery, a joke.

In July, when the decision for this "generous increase" was announced, there are usually sales at Amazon. Employees started to organise themselves completely from the bottom up and sign up to donate blood, for which they are entitled to two days off. They created such an event, a Facebook group and wanted to protest in this way. I later found out that the people who actively participated in this had either been transferred to another department or were threatened with such a transfer.

So the negotiations and mediation did not lead to anything. When did the strike referendum start?

5 October.

Amazon suggests that these few months should be enough for you to gather enough votes. Polish labour law does not indicate within what time the referendum has to be completed. But what is the reason why this referendum is taking so long?

It is primarily about the number of Amazon employees. According to the data for the third quarter of 2022, 20,000 people worked in Amazon's Polish branches I am now talking about people employed directly by Amazon, not those working on temporary contracts, through agencies. At Amazon, work is 7 days a week, 24 hours a day.

When organising the referendum, i.e. arriving at a particular warehouse with a ballot box, we literally tried to 'catch' two shifts of workers. We would arrive before lunchtime and finish at night with the last meal for the later shift. In this way we were able to reach a lot of employees, but still not everyone. There are lots of different shifts at Amazon - there are part-time employees, people who only come in at weekends. And we work, too.

On top of that, we don't have the communication capabilities that Amazon has. The company obviously does not communicate the referendum through its channels. We can only rely on ourselves - to communicate with people who belong to the union. We have emails, we have social networks, and it must not be forgotten that some Amazon employees, those of elderly age, do not use the internet at all. For these people, the option to vote online is also unattainable, although we have collected a certain number this way, including from people who were afraid to vote the traditional way. I have the impression that roughly half of the staff only finds out about the referendum when

we arrive on site. That's why we have to be at each warehouse several times to get the message across.

Have you been in Okmiany and Lodz, where you have not been allowed into the warehouse area in recent days, before?

No. Amazon claims in its letters to us that we have been to each warehouse three times on average. That's right - on average! There are some places we have never been to before. There are three warehouses in Łódź, we have never been to two of them. We have not been to Szczecin or Świebodzin. In contrast, we could have been in other places more often. Amazon counted these visits, divided by the number of outlets and then it could actually come up with such an average. But this does not give the full picture.

In Łódź, you managed to stand with a ballot box in front of the plant. Some of the employees voted. How did they react to the whole situation?

At first the reactions were cautious, people were moved to see politicians and police, but we also started talking to them. However, the only people we really had access to were employees who had just gone out for a cigarette. Nevertheless, the voting went well from our point of view. At some points there were queues to the ballot boxes. Even after we had left, we were also receiving messages from employees via instant messaging, asking for the address where the referendum vote can be cast online.

On the other hand, at the WRO5 warehouse, we were not even able to stand with the ballot box in front of the warehouse. The company has turned the facility into a fortress.

What do you mean by 'fortress'?

We were there on 30 January. There are several gates leading into this facility. Normally you can drive a car behind them. A family comes to pick up a worker, you can get a taxi to the warehouse itself etc. Yesterday, these passages were blocked. There were two security people standing at each entrance, checking everyone, not allowing cars or journalists in.

You have announced that you will inform the prosecutor's office about what happened at the warehouses.

Yes, except that from Łódź we still lack the memo that the police should make after the intervention. It has not been given to us so far. In Okmiany, on the other hand, everything went very smoothly - I didn't notice any problems with the police officers preparing such a note and handing it over to us. The note will also be handed over to us from WRO5. I don't know why the police officers from Lodz were somehow reluctant about this.

The notice to the public prosecutor's office that we intend to file will be about obstructing an industrial dispute.

I will now read an excerpt from a comment that [Amazon gave to the Puls HR portal](#) regarding the industrial dispute that we are talking about. Among other things, the company says the following about itself: *Our goal is to offer competitive wages and benefits in all regions where we have a presence. Entry-level employees receive a starting salary of PLN 22.50 gross, which can increase by up to 15 per cent with bonuses awarded for, among other things, attendance at work. In addition, we offer a wide range of benefits, such as free transport to and from work, private medical care or meals for PLN 1. Every year we carry out a pay review process for all positions.* How do you react to this, as a labour

unionist?

From my perspective, this is a standard message from Amazon's PR department. When it comes to free commuting, Amazon would have a problem getting hands on if there was no company-established transport. Some employees travel to work 50, even 60 kilometres one way. This is part of the company's business model: to get workers from smaller (and poorer) towns. However, in this business model, people need to be provided with a bus to work.

A meal for 1 zloty? This is not a special benefit, but a so-called regeneration meal that employees should receive, given the kind of physical exertion that warehouse work requires.

As for the competitiveness of the wages... in my view, they are not competitive. They are close to the lowest national wage. This year in Poland we will have two increases in the minimum hourly rate and if Amazon's wages remain at the current level, the minimum wage will practically equal this 'competitive earning rate'. And we are talking about one of the largest and richest companies in the world, whose founder is flying into space for fun.

Last year, the company made billions in profits. These profits could not have been achieved without the employees. And we are convinced that the company should share the profits - provide decent wages.

I would also like to ask you about the case of Magda Malinowska, another labour activist who was dismissed from Amazon on disciplinary grounds. At what stage is the case in the labour court?

It is already in the final stages. A verdict should be announced in February, but Amazon will certainly appeal if a reinstatement ruling is made. We, on the other hand, very much hope that the court will actually rule in favour of Magda. We believe that too many provisions have been broken in Magda's dismissal case so that it cannot be otherwise.

Poland: "We're in court in the case of Malinowska vs. Amazon. The dismissed activist hasn't accepted a settlement & is demanding reinstatement. She's represented by Piotr Krzyżaniak, trade union lawyer from OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza. The media & supporters of Magda are present" <https://t.co/lcJjsZRAdt>

— Green Syndicalist Left ██████████\ \ \ (@GreenLibLeft) [June 7, 2022](#)

Małgorzata Kulbaczewska-Figat Cross-Border Talks co-founder and co-coordinator. Poland-based journalist reporting on political life and social changes in Central and Eastern Europe, with a particular focus on labour movements. Examining peripheral capitalism and people's self-organisation. Digging out forgotten history of Polish (and East-European) workers' struggles. Her texts were published by Dziennik Trybuna in Poland, Left.it in Italy, Avgi in Greece and other progressive outlets.

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