



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN 50P SPRING 2024

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# amazons in coventry



**I**t was a bitter winter's night in the dead of January when the workers of Amazon Coventry made history. On 24 January, nearly midnight, 30 trade unionists, stand side by side, like foot soldiers for change, waiting for the first ever strike in an Amazon warehouse in the UK. The world press poised, waiting for midnight, and all their cameras pointed directly at Amazon Coventry, waiting for workers. But before I tell you what happens next, let's take you back...

Ten years in the making, I think it would be fair to say that the 'Amazon project' had been a labour of love for me and other organisers working at the GMB. I remember, my first-time gracing the gates of Amazon in 2012 like it was yesterday, standing with workers as they told me their stories. As they told me of the abhorrent conditions they were working under. As they told me of ambulance call outs, unfair dismissals, and Amazon's lack of humanity. Stories of workers who had accidents at work that could have been prevented.

It was on that first day back in 2012 that I knew, I couldn't just walk away. I left the Amazon site that day completely taken aback at how a multi-billion-pound company like Amazon, a household name that we knew and had trusted, could be subjecting its workers to slave like conditions. And more importantly, I was furious that our government was just letting them get away with it.

You see, at Amazon, targets aren't decided by human beings but instead set by an algorithm, designed to pitch worker against worker. Designed to create divi-

sion. These targets are random, they are not logical or fair, and all the time they are kept unknown to Amazon workers. One day you could hit your unknown target and the next you can shift the same number of units but still be in the bottom quarter, disciplined and out on your ear. We had workers afraid to take toilet breaks as that would mean having more idle time, because the warehouse was at least 12 football pitches long, and toilets were on one side only. Some workers had even confessed to me they had taken to urinating in plastic bottles out of fear of being penalised.

Amazon's track record on accidents was appalling, they were calling an excessive number of ambulances to site compared to a Tesco warehouse just down the road that was of a comparable size.

After encountering those first Amazon workers in 2012, me and my team had taken to using any method we could think of to rally forces inside of Amazon.

You name it, we'd tried it. Early starts hitchhiking on buses designed to take workers to the Amazon site in the hope of convincing workers to join. Late finishes standing outside of Amazon, placards and posters in hand, and cans of pop to try and entice workers to talk to us. We organised rallies, dressed up as Robots and even re-wrote the lyrics to Dolly Parton's '9 to 5' to get the attention of workers.

As much as we tried to organise the workforce, we were fighting a losing battle, Amazon deployed any union busting tactic they could. They put up trespass

signs, employed more security, took leaflets off people as they entered the building, they bought out the contracts of permanent staff and went as far as to threaten to close the site.

Those 10 years spent camped outside of Amazon were not easy ones, they were sometimes gruelling and in all honesty at times felt fruitless. We were told that organising Amazon was impossible. But with each year that passed, something inside me solidified, something kept on at me not to walk away. For that is what Amazon bosses were hoping for, that we would walk away. Turn our back on workers in need. That we would forget about them just like everybody else and I wasn't about to play into their hands. So, we stayed persistent, and bided our time. Then one day, in August 2022, the tide started to change, the perfect storm developed. After working all through the pandemic, in warehouses that allowed no social distancing (because they were increasing staff to cope with the increase in demand), with no extra pay. Then hitting the biggest cost of living crisis in decades. Workers felt sure that their employer, Amazon owned by the richest man on the planet, would support them and give them a decent increase of a few pounds. It was impossible to live on the current £9.50 an hour, with rent going up and energy bills going through the roof. Instead, they were offered only a 50p increase, even though Amazon had nearly tripled their net profits to 33 billion pounds during the pandemic.

The announcement was done in such a way that it seemed the managers thought



# wot no knitting?

the workers would be grateful. As though they were doing them a favour. This didn't go down well. Workers across the country started to organise themselves in walkouts and sit ins, to show their disgust but also their despair. They no longer had anything to lose. In work or out of work they would still be in poverty.

Being a staple on the gate for so many years meant that when the wild cat strikes hit Coventry it was GMB they called for help. We went to site to meet people that had walked out and listened to their stories, of evictions, food banks and fear. Workers wanted to be heard, they wanted change, and they knew they needed to fight for it but didn't know how. So, we stepped in and told them they needed to do the only thing that is left for workers to do when an employer isn't listening. Withdraw their labour and take industrial action. And so, the journey began.

We ran through the usual process; an online consultative ballot (that we absolutely smashed the threshold of) and onto the official ballot that is necessary under the anti-worker, anti-trade union legislation. However, this ballot requires a postal ballot and is where our problems started.

The thing we had underestimated during all this excitement was how hard it would be to get a workforce of workers, not indigenous to the UK, to understand how our postal system works, what a post-box is and how to post a letter. We lost the ballot by three votes. That's THREE votes. In any other country in the world, we wouldn't have lost, and our members would have been able to go on strike on Black Friday 2022. But with our anti worker, anti-trade union legislation, we didn't meet the threshold.

The true heroes of this story, the leaders we were working with and that had been whipping the vote from the inside, were devastated. However, it was their strength and determination that drove us straight into the second ballot.

They mapped out the whole of the warehouse floor by floor; "who can help us pass the message?", "what languages do they speak?", "who knows someone who will help translate the literature?". There were phone banking sessions and videos explaining what the envelope and ballot paper would look like, how you can post it and why you need to do it in the time provided. Leaders came in and rang everyone they knew on the list and, at last, we smashed the threshold.

The story ends where it began on 24 January 2023. 11.59pm.

Tensions were high to say the least. 10 years of hard work and dogged determination had taken us to this point, but would we fall at this next hurdle? Would this be where it all came crashing down.

12.00am: The clock struck midnight; silence fell over the gates of Amazon.

12.05am: A fog came down over the entrance of Amazon Coventry, and as it landed panic began to set in.

12.07am: It started to dawn on me the enormity of what we had asked workers



BY DEBBIE REAY, ASLEF WOMEN'S COMMITTEE AND CHAIR OF THIS YEAR'S TUC WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

I work in a very male dominated industry and have been asked in the past "What's the point of a women's conference, do you sit around swapping knitting patterns and recipes?" Yada, yada, yada!

Well boys, strap in for an education!

Where else will you find women from

to do, not just stay away from work but to walk off their stations, past managers, and security, exit the building and join the strike. Maybe it was too big of an ask, maybe the risk was too great.

12.10 am: And just like that, just when it felt like all hope was lost, the first few workers began to emerge from the fog. A few minutes later, a few more. A few moments after that, another lot. Before long, they were coming in their droves.

Seventy workers walked out that night, and before long GMB's membership grew from 200 to 300 members. Seventy people took that first step not just towards strike action, but for a better future.

12.15 am: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I officially declare this as a picket line" one GMB official roared, his declaration was met with an outpour of love, laughter, and cheers. For the lovers of Amazon Coventry had done it, they had made history as the first Amazon site in the UK to go out on strike against Amazon.

But this is not where our story ends, in some ways, that fateful night back in January of 2022 was just the beginning.

There has been 30 days of action since, the membership has grown from the starting 60 to over 1,000 now in Coventry. Two further warehouses have taken action, and we are so close to the very first recognition in an Amazon warehouse in the UK.

The members have fought to secure a 17% pay increase, £500 Christmas bonus and their dignity. I am so very proud to have been part of their journey. For me they are real working-class heroes.

BY AMANDA GEARING  
GMB SENIOR ORGANISER

48 different unions, from so many diverse industries and sectors who bring and debate motions on issues which are political, socio-economic, and environmental?

Where else would you find such an outward looking bunch, who see the problems women and girls in the UK face, but who also argue for women globally?

It is a kind conference, women encouraging other women and welcoming new delegates as if they are old friends and old friends cementing the camaraderie forged in previous years.

In recent history, we have seen what can be achieved by women when they work collaboratively, with the success of the #MeToo and #MeTU movements.

The global erosion of women's rights is of grave concern, violence against women, attacks on education, reproductive rights, and the abuse of women on social media is on the rise which is why it is so important that women come together to support and guide each other and fight the attack on our hard-won rights.

In the 14 years since the Tories took power, we have seen the UK lurch from one crisis to another.

The catastrophic referendum, the mis-handling of Covid, which led to thousands of unnecessary deaths, whilst Boris Johnson and his cronies partied away after locking down most of the population, to the near economic collapse of the UK at the hands of Liz '44 days' Truss which saw the pound spiralling to its lowest ever level against the dollar, only beginning to rise again after her resignation.

It all leaves me longing for a government run by grown-ups.

Post pandemic, we are now in recession, with this comes higher food prices, an increase in mortgage bills and a lack of affordable childcare. Many people were only just surviving with the help of foodbanks, this is yet another blow to those already struggling.

To add insult to injury, Brexit raises its very ugly head once more. From April, imports of cheese, dairy products, meat, and fish, will face physical checks at the UK border, raising concerns that this has the potential to create delays to the supply chain because of red tape and have an increased cost to consumers.

We desperately need a change of government, and with a general election on the horizon, I live in hope that a better more caring one is elected, one who puts the needs of working people high on its agenda.

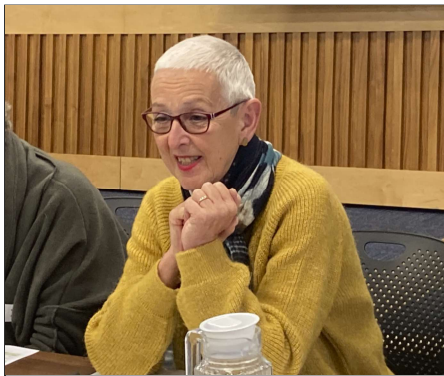
In a world where not one country has achieved gender equality, where rape is used as a weapon of war, and poverty disproportionately affects women, I am extremely proud to chair this important conference which highlights these and other injustices and retains the unique voices of women.

All of this and not a knitting pattern or recipe in sight!

# NAW seminar report

**T**HE 2024 NAW seminar was held at Hillscourt Conference Centre in Birmingham on Saturday 27 to Sunday 28 January. As ever it was well attended by delegates from trade unions including Unite, Unison and GMB and individual NAW members.

After a warm welcome from **Liz Payne**, NAW President, the seminar was opened by **Gail Cartmail** (below) formally Unite. Gail noted that, 50 years on from the Working Women's Charter, progress to bring about equality for women can be likened to 'snakes and ladders'. She quoted some examples of gains such as improvements won by the FBU in maternity/paternity leave, menopause and period poverty policies and the increased number of women at Unilever taking up STEM apprenticeships but reminded us of the persistent gender pay gap. Suggesting we should consider who our allies could include (eg WISE, Maternity



Action) she remained adamant that trade unions are key and equality should be integrated into the bargaining agenda.

Discussion following Gail's presentation supported the role of trade unions and emphasised the need for women to be 'in the room' in negotiations.

**Joanne Moorcroft** (above) Unison North West Regional Convenor led the next session and began by reflecting that we are seeing more industrial action by women workers being led by women. She reported on a current campaign in a North West health trust where members have spent 30 days on picket lines in a dispute about working above grade with no increase in pay and no formal training.

Joanne reminded us of the importance of gaining public support. Unison held a regional women's school and has a development programme for women.

The next session focussed on the Amazon dispute in the West Midlands, led by **Amanda Gearing**, GMB Senior Organiser and **Hayley Greaves** (both below). We heard shocking stories about working conditions and the tactics used by Amazon to avoid recognising trade unions as well as the huge success achieved by GMB members. Picket lines at Amazon have gained massive support from local trade unions.

**Rosie MacGregor** (bottom) from the National Pensioners' Convention led a session about the successful campaign to stop the closure of railway station ticket offices. She reminded us of some of the major actions where women have played a key role including the matchgirls, the New York garment workers



strike in 1909, Grunwick and Fords in Dagenham to name a few. She noted that the gender pay gap in employment is a key factor in leading to a gender pension gap and the contribution of older women to society is undervalued. She ended the session by singing 'Bread and Roses' resulting in applause from all!

The evening provided delegates with the opportunity to relax and share experiences over an excellent meal and be entertained by the witty and thoughtful after dinner speech provided by **Lynn**

**Collins** (bottom right next page) from the Royal College of Midwives.

**Annette Mansell-Green** (below) from the British Dietetic Association led the first Sunday session with the encouraging observation that women were growing in strength and playing a leading role in the health unions. She spoke about the negotiating meetings with Health Minister, Steve Barclay MP and his all-male team having to face the all-women union team. She noted that some male leaders in the trade unions are beginning to be educated and understand the importance of the fight for equality and the experience of women but the media only highlights the male "big hitters". We need to nurture and encourage our women members and capture the spirit of the pioneers that went before us to ensure the next generation follow us.

**Jane Maguire** (bottom) Unite member and London bus driver told us about pay



inequality in the transport sector. She noted the massive profits in the sector while women face barriers affecting work life balance. Jane reported a successful campaign where an initial offer of 12% on the base rate had resulted in 18%.

**Hannah David** (next page top) PCS Vice President and Chair of South West Region reported that PCS is engaged in a 'Living Hours Campaign' including calling for a four day working week of 28 hours. PCS has been engaged in a major campaign on pay, pensions and jobs





including strike action and it is notable that women members are leading on picket lines and introducing music/art/poetry to picket lines.

**Alison Spencer-Scragg** (above), Unite National Officer for Women led the final session on the 'Charter for Women'. She noted that 'women's work' is undervalued and we still have a gender pay gap which, combined with other factors in the lives of women, results in an even greater gender pension gap. Job roles mainly filled by women are shamefully still described as low skilled. Alison felt that there is a tendency for trade unions to focus on the needs of male members but was encouraged to see that a quarter

of trade unions are now led by women.

The final discussion included the observation that many disputes start in non-union recognised workplaces but draw people into union membership. The role of women, and our ability to work in a more nuanced way helps bring others into union membership and activity. Small

victories are also important and we should identify and share examples of good practice in workplaces, such as a workplace providing free sanitary products. In closing, **Liz Payne** thanked the amazing range of speakers and delegates for making this seminar such a success and inspiring us to carry on the fight.



# amazon south africa



**A**MAZON'S business strategy involves continuous expansion and exploration into new markets. Amazon already has a significant online retail presence in several countries, USA, UK, Germany, France, Canada, Japan, India, China, Italy, Spain, Australia, Brazil, Netherlands, Mexico and Singapore. This rapid expansion has seen Amazon enter the African market. It is good that Amazon is diversifying and exploiting new opportunities in African markets as it is likely to provide employment opportunities where unemployment levels are very high. With Amazon's record of poor conditions for its workers, one wonders how this would be in an area where there is no robust mechanisms to challenge the status quo. However, Amazon's entry into the African market has been clouded with a lot of controversy. Amazon has won a court battle to build its African headquarters in Cape Town, South Africa.

Amazon has chosen an "historically significant riverside site" to build its business complex. "We're in a situation where a terrain that is so sacred to the people of our country is not just under threat, but being damaged and destroyed as we speak", said Tauriq Jenkins, high commissioner of the Goringhaicona Khoi Khoi Indigenous Traditional Council, which is among the groups fighting the project.

Liesbeek Leisure Properties Trust own the site where Amazon is planning to build its complex. Cape Town Authorities approved the project in 2021. Construction work began on the site. However,

this was stopped when indigenous groups challenged this development in the courts. In November 2022, a High Court in Cape Town made a ruling that Amazon can continue with its plan of building on sacred land and greenfield site. A few individuals are prepared to destruct a cultural heritage for personal advancement and enrichment. Even though Amazon's presence in Cape Town would bring some benefits, however, I personally feel that the loss, destruction of a sacred land and greenfield site outweigh the benefits. Ethically, Amazon should have respected the indigenous people and their heritage and look for an alternative site for their business operations.

It is a disgrace that Amazon is having no regard for the heritage of the Khoisan people. Some Khoisan groups seem to have given Amazon their full support after promises that developers would build a heritage, cultural and media centre that will be operated by indigenous groups. However, what beggars belief is why destroy what is a beautiful cultural site and build something else. It shows a lack of value of a people's heritage and culture.

Despite having dismantled apartheid, South African justice systems remain structurally biased, racist and disadvantage smaller groups.

These actions will invoke the wrath of the ancestors and great misfortune will befall both Amazon and Liesbeek Leisure Properties Trust.

BY UNISON MEMBER MARIYA MULEYA

## women in poland urge Tusk to act on abortion promises

**W**IELDING placards that read "The Revolution has a uterus" and "My body, my choice", people poured onto the streets of Poland, defying coronavirus restrictions and sub-zero temperatures to join the country's largest protests since the fall of communism.

Three years on, the battle against Poland's draconian abortion measures has moved from the streets to the legislature, in what campaigners described as a crucial test of the new government.

"Women help the current government win", said Kamila Ferenc of the Foundation for Women and Family Planning.

"There were a lot of declarations, a lot of promises." Anything less than liberalisation of the laws would feel as though the government had "cheated" on the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets, she added. "It will be disgraceful and a disrespect towards a huge number of women in Poland."

In the lead-up to October's election, the Civic Coalition, led by Donald Tusk, vowed to do away with the country's near total ban on abortion within 100 days of being elected. As the days since Tusk's election as prime minister ticked down, campaigners say there has been little sign of change.

"It's very disappointing," said Marta Lempart of the Polish Women's Strike, a key player in organising the mass protests. "It's women and young people who won these elections."

Three draft bills, all aimed at liberalising Poland's abortion laws, have so far been announced.

EUROPEAN RESEARCH AND INFORMATION  
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**International Women's  
Day: Women and the  
struggle for peace**

**Saturday 9 March 18.45 to  
21.00, Ealing Green  
Church, Ealing Green W5  
5QT**

**Speeches by women activists  
from Bangladesh, Britain,  
Cyprus, Guyana, Greece,  
Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Spain  
and Sudan, plus live music**

**Free entry. All welcome**

**Organised by  
the Coordinating Committee of  
Communist Parties in Britain**

# stop the bloody assault



NAW PRESIDENT LIZ PAYNE REPORTS FROM OUR SISTER ORGANISATION IN ISRAEL

**F**ROM the very outset of the Israeli attack on Gaza, the Movement of Democratic Women in Israel (MDWI), spoke out. This affiliate of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), whose membership brings together progressive Jewish and Palestinian women, had no hesitation in calling the 7 October Hamas-coordinated attacks on civilians "a bloody assault". But they said it was nonetheless crucial to view what happened within the context of "the ongoing occupation, blockade on Gaza, and the daily transgressions of settlers in the West Bank and East

Jerusalem." Only the creation of an independent Palestinian state would ultimately secure peace.

Their statement, published in Britain by the National Assembly of Women, accused the "pro-fascist [Israeli] regime" of having led attacks on Palestinians "amounting to ethnic cleansing" with hundreds already dead and thousands injured in the first days of the conflict.

As with all wars, the attack on Gaza by air, land and sea has had a hugely disproportionate impact on women and children. UNICEF spokesperson, James Elder, addressing a press conference in Geneva on 19 December 2023, named Gaza as "the most dangerous place in the world to be a child."

In a press release on its report, *Gender alert: The gendered impact of the crisis in Gaza*, (19 January 2024), UN Women, which continues to operate on the ground in Gaza and the Occupied West Bank, stated: "The Gaza crisis is impacting women and girls at unprecedented levels, with loss of life and catastrophic levels of humanitarian needs." The evidence set out in the report – of death; bereavement and widowhood; horrific injury: multiple dislocation and flights; lack of access to safe shelter, healthcare, and food; lack of maternity and neonatal care; destitution and squalor – provides a devastating testimony to the sufferings of women of all ages. Now the Palestinian civilian death toll has reached 30,000 and 70% of those

who have lost their lives are women and children.

Nawal, not her real name, a Palestinian woman, spoke to *Sisters* from Gaza just before this edition went to print. She told us how very, very tired everyone is. Women need access to simple things "like food, water, clothes, and shoes" but also other items that are usually forgotten, like sanitary pads and other products to get them through the menstrual cycle. Some are trying to stop their periods because they can't keep clean. Women, she told us, have been forced to shave off their hair "because there is so little water, and they can't afford or don't have the resources to wash it."

The NAW is unequivocal in its view that the war on Gaza must end now, not in a temporary lull while the Israeli government prepares a deadly ground assault on Rafah, where 1.7 million Palestinians are "sheltering" with nowhere else to go. But an end can only happen if the US, Britain, and other allies stop crying crocodile tears while supporting Israel's war at every turn, including by supplying intelligence, fuel, and weaponry. There has to be a permanent ceasefire and negotiated peace, followed by an end of Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands.

As Nawal told us, the women of Gaza want "support from the world, all basic necessities to be let through to them and an end to the genocide".

**TUC Women's Conference fringe meeting – all delegates and visitors welcome!**

## Union women fighting back

**Unite fringe meeting, Congress House, Council Chamber**

**Come and join us in the Council Chamber at lunchtime on Thursday 7 March after conference adjourns. Refreshments available!**

**Connect and share ideas to include in your own activist strategy. Meet women from all across the union movement and create strong connections as we continue to strive for equality and fair treatment for all women.**

Speakers will cover the Charter for Women and the Get Me Home Safely campaign. We will also hear from women leading industrial action and taking union collectivism into community activism.

### *Speakers:*

**Mary Davis, National Assembly of Women – Charter for Women**  
**Irina Do Carmo – Get Me Home Safely**  
**Jane Maguire – Taking industrial action**  
**Cecile Wright – Community activism**





NAW EC MEMBERS  
LIZ PAYNE, MEGAN DOBNEY  
AND ANITA WRIGHT STAFFED  
THE STALL AT UNISON'S  
NATIONAL WOMEN'S  
CONFERENCE IN BRIGHTON  
LAST MONTH.  
WE HAD LOADS OF  
DISCUSSION WITH UNISON  
ACTIVISTS AND  
REPRESENTATIVES ABOUT  
THE NAW AND THE CAMPAIGN  
FOR A STATUE OF SYLVIA  
PANKHURST – OF WHICH NAW  
IS A FOUNDING SPONSOR.

**National Assembly of Women annual general meeting Saturday 15 June 2024 11am to 3pm**  
**venue: Unite the Union, 128 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8TN**  
**All members and affiliates' delegates welcome!**

what's on...

**NAW Executive Committee** meetings are open to *all* members.  
The next meeting is (online) Monday 18 March at 5.30pm.  
For more information about meetings please contact the Secretary, Sandra Durkin, on [naw@sisters.org.uk](mailto:naw@sisters.org.uk) or at NAW, 72 Beaconsfield Road Coventry CV2 4AR

**join the NAW now!**

*I would like to join the NAW. Here is £20 for the annual subscription (£10 unwaged) which includes my subscription to **sisters**, the journal of the NAW.*

*Our organisation would like to affiliate to the NAW. Enclosed is:*  
£20 (local organisation/NAW branch), £45 (regional organisation), £60 (national)

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