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Joint Committee on Human Rights

Oral evidence: Human rights at work, [HC 1161](#)

Wednesday 14 June 2023

3 pm

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Members present: Joanna Cherry (Chair); Lord Dholakia; Lord Henley; Dr Caroline Johnson; Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws; Baroness Meyer; David Simmonds; Lord Alton of Liverpool

Questions 18 - 19

[II](#): Amanda Gearing, Senior Organiser, GMB Trade Union; Bruce Robin, Legal Officer, UNISON; Henry Chango Lopez, General Secretary, Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB).



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Examination of witnesses

Amanda Gearing, Bruce Robin and Henry Chango Lopez.

Q18 Chair: Thank you very much to our second panel of witnesses for joining us. Some of you have been able to hear our first panel, and you will know that we are very much looking forward to hearing from trade union officials and organisers who actually work at the coalface, whether it is employers, workers or people in employment relationships.

Our first witness is Amanda Gearing, who is a senior organiser at the GMB Union in the Birmingham and the West Midlands region. She is currently working with Amazon workers in Coventry, who are participating in an industrial action. Good afternoon, Amanda, you are very welcome, and thank you for joining us.

Next, we have Henry Chango Lopez, who is general secretary of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain. He joined the union in 2013 and played a key role in its campaigns and growth from 300 to 5,400 members. The IWGB was originally founded in 2012 by Latin American cleaners organising for better working conditions. Good afternoon, Mr Lopez, you are very welcome.

Last, but most certainly not least, we have Bruce Robin, who is a legal officer at UNISON. Bruce was called to the Bar in 2005 and qualified as a solicitor in 2013. The main focus of his work at UNISON involves identifying and pursuing strategic litigation that changes or creates employment law. We are very grateful for your being here as well.

I remind our witnesses and our panel that, owing to the sub judice laws in Parliament, we cannot talk about any current cases, as much as we might be fascinated to hear more about them, but we have general questions and perhaps some more focused questions about your work.

I want to start with Amanda. As I said, Amanda, you are currently working with Amazon workers in Coventry, who are striking. Can you tell us a bit about that dispute? We all have a bit of knowledge about Amazon, we hear a lot about Amazon, but could you tell us a bit about the concerns of the workers you are organising with and their disputes?

Amanda Gearing: Thank you for inviting me. It is a real honour to be able to speak on behalf of our members down in Coventry.

It would help to give a bit of background, if that is okay. The GMB has been trying to organise and support Amazon workers for about 10 years now, mainly because of the conditions in those fulfilment centres. There is a complete disregard for health and safety. There is an algorithm that decides what the targets are and that changes from day to day. It pitches worker against worker, so if you are working with people who are much fitter than you and can work much faster than you, you could find yourself on a disciplinary.

One of the workers described it to me as being at the gym for an hour and then times that by 10, because they do 10-hour shifts and their



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performance has to be the same at the end of the day as it is at the start of day. You never really know what your target is, so you are just pushing on that. It creates a real toxic environment within there, which is how we first got involved. Amazon had an excessive number of ambulances going to site—something like 143 ambulances over a three-year period—in comparison to seven ambulances down the road at a Tesco fulfilment centre, so you can see the difference. A lot of those ambulances were going to site for things that were connected to that kind of environment.

We never managed to get a recognition agreement or even a collective dispute because of the fear in those centres about organising themselves into a union. There was a lot of anti-trade union rhetoric and a lot of stories about what would happen if a union was to get recognition in those sites. That changed in August last year due to a number of things that brought workers to the position where they felt that they had no other choice but to take action.

The first was the pandemic. As other union officials would probably be able to tell you, during the pandemic we were all asked to talk to employers and look at what safety measures we could put in place to ensure that workers were either furloughed or able to go back into work safely, socially distancing and following all the government guidelines. Amazon completely refused to speak to us and instead started to pack people into those fulfilment centres in the thousands. It declared itself to be essential, even though a lot of the goods that were going out during that period were not essential, and our workers were frightened to go to work. Inevitably, we had outbreaks, and some of our members ended up in serious conditions in hospital.

After coming through that, they were faced with the worst cost of living crisis in decades. They were on £10 an hour, which in my opinion is poverty pay for such a multi-billion pound company. When they went through that, they thought that their employer might well help them at this stage. They were ready for a pay review, and they were expecting that their employer would add a couple more pounds on to that £10 to enable them just to survive, because they were already using food banks and having to pawn goods in order to be able to keep their head above water, plus they were looking at food and energy prices going up.

As a result, Amazon briefed that they would be getting a 50p pay increase, and briefed it like it was a gift. That was probably the worst thing it could have done. Workers were really angry about that, because they knew that back in 2018 they had been forced to give up shares that would have been worth a lot of money in order to have what Amazon now claims was a massive pay raise, but, actually, our members are 13% worse off than they were in 2018. I just have to pop my glasses on so that I can make sure I am getting the facts and figures right.

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws: Amanda, what percentage was that? Could you say it again?



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Amanda Gearing: They originally had shares taken away from them in 2018 in a pay increase.

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws: So they are now down by how much? You mentioned it.

Amanda Gearing: They are worse off by 13%. If I can put that in real terms, it is £60 a week, thereabouts. You can imagine that that perhaps goes towards the food bill for most of our members on a 40-hour week.

To add to that, during the pandemic Amazon had been on the hiring spree that was virtually unprecedented in human history. By late 2020, they were employing 1,400 workers a day globally. This was amid record demand for home delivery. We can all probably say that at some point during that pandemic we ordered something to our homes. This helped Amazon to harvest eye-watering riches; their profits nearly tripled to £33 billion during 2019 and 2021 in their global operations. To add insult to injury, their founder Jeff Bezos then brought a rather strangely shaped rocket and flew into space and back. When he came back, the message he gave workers and the public was to thank them for paying for that. Down at Coventry, our members were pawning goods to keep their head above water, and now they were being offered pennies on top of the poverty wage they were already on.

When you get to a stage where workers feel like they have nothing to lose, that is when you see them looking to fight back, and that is what they did. Across the country, we saw unofficial strike action—people walking out of those centres, people sitting in those centres. Because the GMB has been a staple in the lives of Amazon workers for the last 10 years, it was us they contacted for help. When we spoke to them, we looked at what they wanted. They wanted a decent wage that they could live on; not survive on, but live on.

We decided that £15 an hour would go forward in the pay claim. This was not beyond the realms, because in America they were paying \$18 plus for Amazon workers, which meant that it would have been thereabouts. The pay claim went in. We were not listened to at all and there was no response, so we started a consultative ballot for industrial action. It was an online ballot that 75% of our members voted in, 99% of whom voted in favour of strike action. Again, we were not surprised, but we had no response at all from Amazon.

At that stage, we had to go to the official strike ballot, which has to be done by post and we have to use a third party to do that. We did not meet the 50% threshold; we missed it by three votes. It was our feeling that, in other countries across Europe, had we turned out at the percentage that we did, which was lower than 50% but almost there, we would have been taking industrial action. The industrial action was meant to be on Black Friday, as it was quite symbolic of the profits that Amazon was making. We reran the ballot for a second time, which we won, and we were able to take our first day of action on 25 January, two months



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after Black Friday. The workers wanted to strike on Black Friday for a number of reasons, one being that there was a surge of 50% in ambulance call-outs in the lead-up to Black Friday. That just cemented what the workers were telling us about how hard they were pushed at these times.

Chair: Why are ambulances being called to the fulfilment centre? What sort of conditions are causing the ambulances to be called?

Amanda Gearing: There are all sorts of things they were called for: breathing issues, heart attacks, miscarriages, things falling on people—a whole array of things. But everything could be mapped back to the toxic environment there—the pressure that people are put under, the injuries they have.

Chair: You clearly have statistics comparing ambulance call-outs to the Amazon fulfilment centre and a Tesco fulfilment centre down the road. Can you let us have those? This is really very shocking.

Amanda Gearing: Absolutely. It was very important from that point of view and from the point of view of the vast amount of profit that would have been made on Black Friday, but due to having to do a postal ballot we were not able to achieve that. You can see the difference between that and when we did the online ballot. Today will be their 19th day of strike action, so that is continuing down there, and it has continued to gain momentum. We have just had to re-ballot for the next six months, and we have managed to achieve the threshold for that now.

Chair: Are negotiations ongoing?

Amanda Gearing: No, there are no negotiations.

Chair: No-one has come to the negotiating table? Presumably, that is what you are trying to get.

Amanda Gearing: Absolutely. We have made approaches directly and via ACAS so that we can get around the table and talk pay with Amazon, but it is almost as if it refuses to accept that we exist.

Chair: You are looking for an increase for the workers you are organising with from £10 an hour to £15 an hour. That is a 50% increase, but against a background of an “employer” who has recently tripled their profits as a result of the pandemic.

Amanda Gearing: Absolutely. They are now at £11 an hour, actually, because of the 50p that was imposed on them when they decided to take the unofficial strike action. Since then, another 50p has been imposed this March, but it has not had any negotiations at all. It has not even spoken to its workers. In fact, it has what it calls all-hands meetings, which is when everybody gets called to talk about issues in the centres, and they have been banned from talking about pay.



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David Simmonds: Point of order, Chair. I think you have made it very clear on previous occasions that this committee does not deal with individual cases.

Chair: Absolutely.

David Simmonds: It takes evidence on general points of principle, and I appreciate that this is covered by parliamentary provision, so all witnesses are free to say whatever they wish to say about anybody and are protected by that. But clearly we have heard a great deal about one side of a specific case. It seems to me that it would be appropriate, certainly in this example, to ensure that whoever is on the other side of that gets the opportunity to submit their evidence.

Chair: You can rest assured that I will be writing to Amazon to get its response to this, because I find what Amanda, who is a senior organiser at the GMB union, is telling us in evidence deeply shocking and immoral, and I am appalled that it is going on in the United Kingdom. I am sure that many of us around this table are customers of Amazon, so I shall certainly be writing to get its comments on Amanda's evidence. Thank you for raising the point. It is important that we do that.

Amanda Gearing: Yes, absolutely, we would welcome that.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Can I just raise a point of order as well? I would like to concur with what David has said. We have essentially heard one side of a case being given not in front of the media but under parliamentary privilege, where you can say what you like without fear of legal redress. I do not think that to do so without the other party present and able to give their side, or able to come to the committee and take the same advantage of parliamentary privilege, is a reasonable thing to do.

Chair: I hear what you are saying as a point of order, but I respectfully disagree with you. This is not a court of law. We are simply hearing evidence.

Dr Caroline Johnson: We are hearing an opinion.

Chair: We are hearing evidence from somebody of their experience as a senior organiser at the union. As I say, Conservative members can rest assured that I will write to Amazon putting all these points to it to check their accuracy and to have Amazon's comments on them. I would quite like to get on with the witness' evidence, so I hope that satisfies people.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Can you confirm that you will invite them back to give them the same opportunity?

Chair: I would be delighted to have Amazon in front of this committee, so, yes, I will certainly add that to the end of the letter, and I know our clerks are taking a note of my undertaking to write to Amazon and to ask Amazon to come and tell us whether this is true—with all due respect to



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you, Amanda—and its comment on it and how it justifies it.

David Simmonds: Sorry, Chair, one further point of order. I just request that perhaps you can make it clear that this does not set a precedent, because I know that we have had requests to discuss matters in detail in this way on a number of occasions and we have refused those requests on the basis that it is not an appropriate way for this committee to proceed.

Chair: These are discussions that we will take offline to a private meeting, David, which we will be having later this afternoon. I am satisfied that it is appropriate for us to proceed at this stage.

Q19 **Lord Dholakia:** My question is directed to Amanda. The GMB represents the interest of people who work in private sector and public sector. Is it easier to organise strikes in public sector than it is in private sector?

Amanda Gearing: I would not say that it was easier to arrange strikes in either area, in all honesty. Each provides its own set of issues. In the public sector, we have higher densities of trade union membership, probably from years of organising, and obviously we have the national—

Chair: I am really sorry, Amanda, but I will have to suspend the committee because there is a Division in the House of Commons, but we should come back in about 10 or 15 minutes.

The committee suspended for a Division in the House of Commons, and adjourned on resuming after becoming inquorate.