Amazon workers in Minnesota walk off the job over parking issues

Enlarge / A protestor outside an Amazon warehouse in Shakopee, Minnesota on July 15, 2019.
Annabelle Marcovici/Bloomberg via Getty Images

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Around 80 Amazon warehouse workers in the Twin Cities suburb of Eagan, Minnesota staged a two-hour walkout on Thursday morning. It's the latest in a series of strikes and protests spearheaded by Amazon workers in the state.

Last month, a few dozen workers at another Amazon facility in Shakopee, Minnesota walked off the job on Prime Day—a massive sale that is one of Amazon's busiest days of the year. A December protest in Shakopee attracted 250 people.

Workers in Shakopee were demanding better pay and working conditions. The Eagan protests were more specific: workers were upset that Amazon wasn't providing enough parking for its workers. One worker told Gizmodo that some workers showed up more than an hour early in order to get a spot.

Workers were forced to double park in order to squeeze their cars in. This sometimes blocked Amazon delivery vehicles in the process. Amazon began towing worker vehicles, fining their owners as much as $350—which could be several days of pay for

a part-time warehouse worker.

Outrage over the parking situation finally sparked yesterday's walkout. And the protests worked. According to CNET, Amazon has promised to "repay employees for towing their cars, provide more parking, and recognize the upcoming Eid holiday for Muslim employees."

"We have been working to support the site, including providing onsite parking, offsite parking and shuttles," an Amazon spokesperson told Ars. "We're committed to listening to our teams."

Amazon has long resisted organizing efforts at its warehouses

The larger question looming over Amazon is whether its workers in Minnesota or elsewhere could form a union and collectively bargain with the company. Unsurprisingly, Amazon is not a fan of that idea.

"We are not anti-union, but we are not neutral either," Amazon says in a training video for managers that was leaked last year. "We will boldly defend our direct relationship with associates as best for the associates, the business, and our shareholders."

Earlier this year, Amazon fired a worker involved in efforts to organize an Amazon facility on New York's Staten Island—though Amazon says his firing was unrelated to his organizing efforts.

Amazon's efforts to discourage worker organizing have been effective. Strikes and other organized worker activities have been rare at most of Amazon's US facilities. But the Twin Cities is emerging as a hotbed of worker activism.

The Twin Cities are home to tens of thousands of Somali

immigrants who provide a significant portion of the workforce in Amazon’s Minnesota warehouses. A group called the Awood Center has been organizing Somali workers and encouraging them to challenge Amazon on its labor practices.

Beyond general pay and benefit concerns, Muslim workers have accused Amazon of doing too little to accommodate religious practices. A 2017 protest at a Seattle facility faulted Amazon for failing to provide Muslim workers with prayer space to use during work breaks.

The big question for Amazon is whether the Minnesota protests will inspire similar actions at other facilities around the country. Last year, Amazon set a new company-wide minimum wage of $15 an hour in a bid to improve worker morale.

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