

Amazon to Suspend Operations in France Over Coronavirus Dispute

Friday 17 April 2020, by [ALDERMAN Liz](#) (Date first published: 15 April 2020).

The move follows a French court order for the U.S. retailer to limit deliveries to essential goods amid controversy over virus safety measures.

Amazon said Wednesday 15 that it would temporarily halt its operations in France after a court ruled the company had failed to adequately protect warehouse workers against the threat of the coronavirus and that **it must restrict deliveries to only food, hygiene and medical products until it addressed the issue.**

Amazon contested the findings of the ruling, handed down Tuesday 14 by a civil court outside Paris, and said it would appeal. **The court had given the company a deadline of Wednesday 15 evening to carry out the order or face a fine of 1 million euros (nearly \$1.1 million) per day.**

"We have suspended activities in our distribution centers in France, despite the huge investment we have made to ensure and strengthen safety measures for our employees," Amazon said in a statement, adding that it was *"perplexed"* by the court's decision. The threatened fine was too steep to risk not complying, Amazon added.

The company lashed out at unions that had brought the court case despite what it said was *"concrete evidence"* that it had worked to strengthen safety measures at its six mammoth warehouses around France. The ruling *"is likely to have consequences for many people in our country,"* including thousands of employees, Amazon customers and French businesses that make sales on Amazon's platform, it added.

Laurent Degousée, a representative of SUD-Commerce, the main union that filed the lawsuit, said he had learned that Amazon was expected to halt its French operations as of Thursday 14 for five days to enhance safety measures and provide its 10,000 workers full pay during that time. Amazon did not provide details on the furloughs, but said it was asking employees to stay home this week, and that it would assess the implications for its French operations.

The ruling is a test for Amazon, which is also facing mounting scrutiny in the United States over the effectiveness of safety measures it has used to protect employees from the coronavirus, even as it grapples with a crushing demand for orders from millions of people working and learning from home.

Small groups of workers at Amazon's U.S. operations protested this month over sanitation conditions. In recent weeks, the company has raised wages there and allowed workers to take quarantine leave. It has added space between some workstations, doubled down on cleaning and provided masks and sanitizing gels.

French labor inspectors had visited several Amazon sites in early April and found that more action needed to be taken to ensure social distancing and to address lack of materials including hand

sanitizers and masks.

Amazon said it had provided temperature checks, sanitizing gels and masks, and enforced social distancing. On Wednesday 15, the company said in its statement that French health and safety officials had approved the actions.

But in France, companies are generally required to consult with workers' representatives when addressing workplace safety issues. The court ruled that Amazon had not consulted with them on its plans to prevent employees from being exposed to the virus.

Mr. Degousée, the union representative, said that some Amazon workers were worried that the court ruling could lead to a loss of their livelihood or eventual job cuts.

- At least a quarter of the 10,000 people employed at Amazon's six warehouses in France desperately need the work to make ends meet, he said.

- But another 20 percent of workers who feared for their health backed requiring Amazon to further reinforce safety measures — including the idea of delivering only food and essential health items while France is under quarantine.

People who have been under confinement since March 16 in France have been ordering everything from nail polish and children's toys to plumbing supplies from Amazon — as well as items like ergonomic chairs and printer cartridges needed for working from home. Under the court ruling, Amazon would be barred from fulfilling such orders until the company has fully satisfied health safety requirements.

In its statement, Amazon said that would mean restricting a service that had become "a lifeline" for millions of people across the country.

Labor representatives are pushing back. *"We shouldn't be risking the lives of workers for nonessential items that could wait a few weeks,"* Mr. Degousée said. *"We don't understand consumers who say, 'If I can't buy something, I'm unhappy.' They need to also understand the situation of workers in the warehouses."*

The feud over coronavirus prevention measures has been running since at least late March, when hundreds of employees walked off the job at Amazon warehouses, exercising a French labor rule that allows workers to withdraw from work without having their pay docked if they deem health safety risks to be too great.

Amazon rejected their claims, saying it had taken steps to reinforce workplace safety. Labor unions then accused Amazon of flouting the law by refusing to pay workers who stayed away because of fear of contracting the disease. Amazon drew a rebuke from the French finance minister, Bruno Le Maire, who accused the company of putting "unacceptable" pressure on employees.

Mr. Degousée of SUD-Commerce acknowledged that Amazon had "not stood idly by." Among other things, the company has assigned surveillance teams to ensure warehouse workers comply with its social distancing measures. But his union, and other labor representatives, said scores of workers still faced conditions that required them to work close to one another.

Even efforts to take employee temperatures, for instance, have been erratic because thermometer readings were sometimes inaccurate and caused lines outside of warehouses, exposing employees to the risk of possible infection, said Mr. Degousée.

"These are still just partial measures," he said. *"They need to work on preventive measures, but their plans so far are mainly reactive."*

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A version of this article appears in print on April 16, 2020, Section B, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Amazon Halts Operations In France Over Virus Ruling.

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