

Duration of Amazon France closure 'unknown', boss says

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Amazon France says it does not know when it will reopen its distribution sites after a court ruled it must review health rules to protect workers during the coronavirus crisis while restricting deliveries to essential goods only

Amazon France said Thursday it doesn't know when it will reopen its

distribution centres, shuttered after a court ordered it to limit deliveries to essential goods pending a review of anti-coronavirus safety measures for its staff.

The online retailer closed its French centres Thursday in response to the ruling by a court outside Paris.

It initially said they would close for five days, during which period employees would be paid their full salaries.

The facilities are key in preparing orders submitted online for delivery to clients.

On Thursday, Amazon France director general Frederic Duval said: "We will try to reopen as soon as possible, but I cannot today confirm the date."

He told the RTL broadcaster the duration of the closure was "unknown".

At one Amazon depot, in Bretigny-sur-Orge south of Paris, workers said Thursday they were relieved at the closure.

"They (the company) took weeks to provide us with sanitising hand gel and masks... For a week we worked without gloves," a 23-year-old part-time worker who did not want to give his name told AFP.

"It is not very humane what they have done. We are more than 2,000 in the depot, the risks are higher than at an optician's where there are possibly three people in the shop. Yet those were closed."

France, like many other countries, has closed all non-essential businesses—only supermarkets and pharmacies are open in many areas.

Online retailers have continued to sell products now unavailable elsewhere, and in many countries Amazon has added thousands of staff to meet a surge in orders.

Amazon insists it distributed more than 127,000 packets of disinfectant wipes, 27,000 litres of sanitising gel, and 1.5 million masks for its staff.

Amazon France's biggest labour union, SUD, took the company to court saying workers were being forced to work in close proximity in contravention of strict social distancing measures announced by the government to slow the spread of the new coronavirus.

The court in Nanterre ruled that Amazon France had "failed to recognise its obligations regarding the security and health of its workers" and gave it a month to carry out an evaluation of the measures in place.

In the meantime, the company could continue only deliveries of food or hygiene and medical products, at the risk of a fine of one million euros (\$1.1 million) for each day of non-compliance.

'Big consequences'

Duval told the LCI channel Thursday that consumers can still order and have goods delivered from abroad, saying Amazon's "global network of distribution centres will continue to ship products".

Amazon has said it is "perplexed" by the ruling as it had given the court evidence about temperature checks, physical distancing orders and use of personal protective equipment.

On Wednesday, a company committee of employee union representatives voted to close the distribution centres to clean them and evaluate the health risks as ordered by the court.

"The labour action that led to this result will have big consequences for many people in France, for millions of clients who use our services to have products delivered to their homes during this confinement period, for our employees who will have to stay at home, for thousands of small and medium enterprises that use our services to do business by shipping via Amazon," Duval said.

He added Amazon was confused by the court ruling.

"I do not know exactly how to define a hygiene product: are nail clippers among them? Is a condom a medical product?"

"In these circumstances, taking into account the fine, we are compelled to close our sites," said Duval.

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