

France: Amazon back in business after virus deal with unions

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In this April 16, 2020 file photo, the Amazon logo is seen in Amazon, in Lauwin Planque, northern France. Amazon is gradually reopening its warehouses in France this week after consulting with unions on virus safety measures in an effort to end weeks of legal troubles that had sharply curtailed the company's business. Amazon shut the warehouses last month after French courts ruled that it hadn't done enough to protect workers from the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler)

Amazon is gradually reopening its warehouses in France after working out virus safety measures with unions, in an effort to end weeks of legal troubles that had sharply curtailed the company's French business and drawn worldwide attention.

In a victory for labor unions, French courts ruled last month that Amazon hadn't done enough to protect thousands of French workers from the coronavirus. The world's largest online retailer shut its six French warehouses as a result – just as global demand soared because stores were shuttered by virus restrictions.

After protracted negotiations, Amazon started a three-week reopening process Tuesday.

"It's a big victory for Amazon workers in France," as well as for others who have complained about poor virus protections, said Stephane Enjalran, national secretary of France's Sud Solidaire Union, which led the legal proceedings as the largest union at Amazon.

French unions have been in touch with Amazon workers in the U.S., Italy, Poland and beyond, Enjalran told The Associated Press. He expressed hope that the French court rulings could encourage them—or workers at other companies in France—to demand better virus safety.

Amazon said that all necessary measures had already been in place before the temporary shutdown, and that it has made no major changes since then. "Our sites are safe, and always have been safe," it said in a statement.

Unions dispute that, saying the company took weeks to supply masks and gel to workers, and flouted the stringent French union consultation process. They say Amazon didn't do enough to enforce social distancing, to ensure that turnstiles and personal storage areas were virus-free, or to

increase cleaning of its warehouses – and two French courts agreed.

New safety measures at the French warehouses include tougher social distancing rules, monitoring by a new independent expert and sweeping changes to the logistical chain to reduce the number of people allowed to work in the same place at the same time, Enjalran said.

"The most important thing is that there is a dialogue between management and workers that didn't happen before," he said.

Amazon is now holding training sessions for French warehouse staff, in one small group at a time, on the virus protection measures, its France director Frederic Duval said Tuesday on public broadcaster France-Info.

Duval called the reopening "excellent news" for workers, customers and French companies that sell via Amazon. He said the company is committed to "the security of our workers" and is adapting its practices based on guidance from government health authorities. Staffers were paid while the warehouses were closed.

Unions hailed the court rulings as a comeuppance for Amazon, arguing that the company placed profits above safety as the virus spread fast around France.

At least a dozen Amazon workers contracted the coronavirus before the warehouses closed, and one is still hospitalized, Enjalran said.

Amazon continued to carry out some business in France even when its warehouses were closed, notably serving as a platform for companies that sell on the site but handle delivery themselves.

The company threatened to take the case to France's top court but said Tuesday it would drop the case when the consultation with unions is

complete.

Amazon hasn't said how much money the company lost as a result of the closures. It dominates the online delivery market in France, with 431 million euros in sales in 2018 and 11,000 employees. The company's global sales soared in the first quarter of this year but profits sank because of the rising costs of delivery and virus protections.

Amazon became a lifeline to many shoppers as much of the globe went into lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic, but that has also led to delivery delays and mounting complaints from workers who worry about contagion while on the job.

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