Amazon's French warehouses fined over employee surveillance

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Amazon France Logistique monitored the performance of employees through scanners used by the staff to process packages, according to France's data protection watchdog.

France's data protection agency said Tuesday that it had fined Amazon's French warehouses unit 32 million euros ($34.9 million) for an

"excessively intrusive" surveillance system to keep track of staff performance.

Amazon France Logistique monitored the work of employees in particular through data from scanners used by the staff to process packages, according to the agency, known by its initials CNIL.

Scanners alerted management of inactivity exceeding 10 minutes or the handling of packages and parcels "right up to the second", the CNIL said in a statement.

One surveillance method targeted by CNIL was the use of so-called "stow machine guns" to note if an article was scanned "too fast", or in less than 1.25 seconds.

It said workers were under constant pressure and had to regularly justify absences. Even the time between the employees' entry into the warehouse and the start of work was monitored.

The agency added that they were not adequately informed about the surveillance, with the data kept for 31 days.

The surveillance was deemed in contravention with the EU's general data protection regulation (GDPR), which imposes strict rules on companies for obtaining consent on how personal information is used.

The fine was equivalent to about three percent of the annual revenue at Amazon France Logistique, which reached 1.1 billion euros in 2021, for a net profit of 58.9 million euros.

Several thousand employees were affected by the systems, said the CNIL, which had opened its inquiry in 2019 following media articles and complaints by workers.

The watchdog said the fine was "nearly unprecedented" and not far from the CNIL's maximum four percent of revenue.

'Quality and efficiency'

An Amazon spokesman said the company rejected the findings as "factually incorrect and we reserve the right to appeal", adding that such systems were needed "to guarantee security, quality and efficiency".

The company employs around 20,000 people overall on permanent contracts in France, with the warehouse workers spread over eight massive distribution centers.

David Lewkowitz, president of Amazon France Logistique, told AFP during a visit at its warehouse near Douai in northern France this month that the management tools were necessary for the precise handling of the tens of thousands of packages that move through the centers each day.

The "stow machine guns", for example, aim to ensure that employees are properly checking items for damage or other problems before they are scanned for shipping "in a manner that conforms with safety rules, in particular by ensuring proper postures", Amazon said in its statement.

Measuring "idle time", meanwhile, was not to control a worker's every movement but to ensure that any supply chain anomaly is quickly investigated and rectified.

But Amazon said that in response to the CNIL's findings it would deactivate the ability of the "stow machine guns" to signal handling speeds, and extend the "idle time" warnings to 30 minutes from 10.

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