

Amazon shuts down French distribution centers after court requires protection of employees from coronavirus

By Will Morrow
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Amazon is maintaining the closure of distribution hubs in France today, in retaliation against a court ruling last week requiring that it restrict deliveries to essential items and take measures to protect employees from the coronavirus pandemic.

On April 14, a court in Nanterre ruled in favor of the SUD trade union in its case against Amazon. It ordered the company to continue to distribute only essential items, including foods and medical products, and to complete formal policy guidelines together with SUD in conformity with social distancing and other protective requirements for the pandemic.

Amazon employs just over 10,000 employees across France, including 3,700 temporary workers. There has been a growing wave of opposition among Amazon workers in France, as internationally, in the past two months, against the maintenance of unsafe working conditions by the global logistics giant and its exposure of employees and their families to the deadly virus.

Rejecting any restriction on its operations, Amazon published an announcement on Thursday that it “remained perplexed by the ruling from the tribunal,” and that “we must temporarily suspend our activities in distribution centers in France.” Despite having previously pledged to restrict its operations to the provision of essential items, Amazon claimed that such a requirement was impossible to meet due to the “inherent complexity of our operations.”

In a barely veiled threat, Amazon added that the “court ruling will probably have consequences for many people in our country, notably our thousands of collaborators and clients who depend on us now more than ever,” and many small businesses “who depend on Amazon to grow.”

Amazon has already appealed the ruling, and its appeal was heard yesterday in the appeals court of Versailles.

The nationwide shutdown, which was initially to last until Monday, was extended until after the hearing to today, but Amazon announced that it could be extended indefinitely.

Approximately 8,000 employees have been told to remain at home. The company claims that it is continuing to pay them their full wages at least until today and has not yet required that they apply for state unemployment payments available for workers confined by the pandemic. At least some deliveries are continuing into France via Amazon’s international distribution network.

Amazon’s announcement is a naked act of economic blackmail, threatening to use its monopoly control over critical logistics infrastructure to sabotage distribution of goods in the midst of a deadly global pandemic. The corporation and its shareholders will accept no restriction on their “right” to generate billions of dollars in profits by exploiting its employees and placing their lives in grave danger.

The media and the Macron government have made no criticism of Amazon’s actions. When reports emerged last month that sanitary and other public administration workers may strike in protest at the lack of gloves and other essential sanitary equipment necessary to protect their lives, the government and media expressed their moral outrage that this would selfishly sabotaging the fight against the pandemic.

Countless statements by Amazon workers have been reported over the past month about the absence of basic protective measures.

Le Parisien cited an unnamed employee in the northern city of Lille on March 18: “We are stuck. There are no masks. The gel is not available everywhere and we receive only two pairs of gloves per month. On Thursday, we received an email that times for lunch at the canteen,

which normally holds 700 people, would be split up, but the boxes, carts and scanners continue to pass between hands without being disinfected.”

Another Amazon worker told France3, “Even if they say we are spread out, we are forced to cross each other, especially in the cloakrooms, and there is not a meter of separation. Everyone touches the lockers, without gloves, without anything. So there’s the possibility of propagating the virus and to already have caught it. And then when we go home, because we have crossed many people, we are at risk of infecting our families.”

Last week’s court ruling in Nanterre noted that there is no system in place to alert employees if they have come into contact with another employee who has contracted COVID-19. Because of the Macron administration’s policy of not testing anyone except the most at-risk groups, even when presenting clear symptoms of coronavirus, it is impossible for workers to know how many of their co-workers have been infected.

The ruling noted that between 150 and 450 employees have continued to arrive at the center at the same time, entering at the same turnstiles, where employees are forced to touch the door with their bare hands or to use their clothes to avoid direct contact. After Amazon placed restrictions on the locker rooms, employees were forced to leave their coats in piles, touching one another, and creating further risks of contamination.

The decision by SUD to launch a legal action was a rearguard response to avoid being completely overwhelmed by the already developing wildcat actions by Amazon employees. Its claims that the Nanterre ruling represents a major victory for the working class are cynical, however, as they aim to cover over the unions’ close collaboration with Macron to create conditions for a return to work on May 11 across numerous industries, including auto and aerospace, in the middle of the pandemic.

Strikes by Amazon workers have already spread at multiple logistics hubs across Italy, Spain, and in the United States. In France, more than 300 workers had already refused to turn up at work in Lille in late March, with similar actions at other hubs. Two temporary workers at Lille were tested positive for coronavirus two weeks ago and told the media they had caught the virus at work. An unknown number of Amazon employees are already carrying the virus.

While Amazon workers and their families are being placed in grave danger, Amazon and its shareholders are profiting handsomely from the coronavirus pandemic that

has already killed more than 170,000 people around the world, and over 20,200 in France. With other stores closed due to confinement orders and Amazon able to tighten its grip on sales, the company has seen its share prices surge.

CEO Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world, who owns an 11 percent stake in the company, has seen his wealth jump by \$24 billion since the beginning of the year due to the increase in share prices. Every day this year, on average, amid the greatest global pandemic in a century, has gifted Bezos another \$195 million.

Amazon’s response to the Nanterre ruling is just one expression of the capitalist class’ sabotage of the fight against the pandemic. For decades, social spending on healthcare infrastructure has served to funnel wealth to the pockets of the financial aristocracy, while critical medical equipment has been neglected. The ruling class has responded to the pandemic, not as a health crisis, but as a financial event requiring a massive infusion of wealth to the share markets. Now the Macron administration, and other governments across Europe are moving to push workers back to work in unsafe conditions.

As a direct and vital necessity for the fight against the pandemic, Amazon and other gigantic corporations must be taken out of private hands and taken under the direct control of the working class, and the critical infrastructure used to organize a rational and scientific response. The wealth of the financial oligarchy epitomized by Bezos must be confiscated and used to provide decent living conditions for the entire population.

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