



Amazon faces surveillance scrutiny from EU unions

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Josh Stephens, Reporter

A confederation of trade unions from 11 EU countries have called on Europe’s data protection watchdogs to investigate Amazon’s surveillance practices.

“Amazon’s relentless surveillance is not just about monitoring; it’s about control and intimidation,” said Christy Hoffman, general secretary of UNI Global Union, one of the groups behind the letter.

“Such draconian measures strip our workers of their dignity and rights under the guise of increased productivity. We demand immediate change and accountability,” she added.

The letter, seen by [Euronews](#), highlights other recent actions taken against Amazon in Europe, specifically the French Data Protection Authority’s (CNIL) January [decision](#) to fine the e-commerce giant €32m (£27.4m) for its “excessively intrusive” monitoring system.

“We ask you, the European data protection authorities, to follow France’s example by investigating the legality of Amazon’s use of worker data and taking steps to stop practices that are in breach of the law,” reads the letter.

“We ask that you ensure Amazon complies with European legislation that protects workers’ fundamental rights and freedoms, including privacy and control of their data.”

Under the system France fined Amazon for, an alert would be triggered if warehouse workers scanned an item less than 1.25 seconds after the last scan, with the system additionally flagging breaks more than ten minutes long, which workers would be expected to justify.

“The CNIL tends to sanction much more aggressively major players who have committed multiple breaches such as Google, Facebook, or Amazon,” Mayer Brown’s [Marine Hamon](#) told IEL at the time.

Amazon disputes CNIL's findings, arguing that the level of surveillance was industry standard and "necessary for ensuring the safety, quality, and efficiency of operations".

The letter from trade unions claims the use of hand scanners, activity monitoring software, video cameras, and GPS devices place a significant burden on the mental and physical health of workers, and that they highlight a "systemic disregard for our privacy laws".

"It's high time that we stand up and demand that these multinational companies respect workers' personal data and their right to a dignified workplace. We need robust action now to ensure that our laws are fully recognised," said Oliver Roethig, Regional Secretary of UNI Global Union in Europe.

The unions stress that other data protection authorities, such as in Austria, Germany, Ireland, and Spain, need to emulate France's proactive stance and implement measure to curtail any potentially unlawful activities.

Some movement has already been made in this regard when, last month, a group of social democrat lawmakers and trade union representatives visited Amazon facilities in Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands in a trip coordinated by UNI Europa.

The inspection came after 14 Amazon lobbyists were banned from entering the European Parliament in February after the company was accused of repeated failures to engage in discussions over working condition in its warehouses.

The Employment and Social Affairs Committee has condemned Amazon's refusal to attend a series of hearings and organise factory visits to help lawmakers verify media reports on the online retailer's workplace monitoring practices.

Trade unions have argued that the ban on lobbyists does not go far enough, and has urged lawmakers to also ban lobbying firms that work with Amazon. According to the EU's transparency register, Amazon spent between €2m and €3m last year on consultancy firms, such as FleishmanHillard, FTI Consulting, and Deloitte.

After the ban, Amazon said it would continue to engage with lawmakers, and that it has invited EU inspectors to its warehouses several times and that "the invitation still stands". Despite this, no new lobbying badges have been issued to the company since February.

"As workforces and unions become more familiar with GDPR rights, we are seeing more employee and union complaints and, in turn, increased interest and action from authorities," Lewis Silkin's [Benjamin Favaro](#) tells IEL.

"As new technologies become embedded within all kinds of workplaces, we expect to see EU regulators take a more proactive approach by issuing new and more prescriptive guidance and becoming more willing to require employers to demonstrate why their monitoring is lawful."

The delivery giant's surveillance systems have also come under scrutiny in the US, following an Oxfam [report](#) last month which found that three-quarters of employees felt pressured to work faster, leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Oxfam was particularly critical of Amazon's "Time Logged In" policy which, like the system in France, tracked the amount of time workers spent not actively performing work.

Amazon continues to stress its commitment to workplace safety. Following the opening of Amazon's Operations Innovation Lab in Italy, Global Workplace Health & Safety VP Sarah Rhoads declared that "employees are the heart and soul of our operations which is why the technology we deploy at our sites is always focused on serving our team and making our operations safer".

"Our continued investment in robotics helps reduce employees' physical workload and repetitive tasks that can cause injuries, while also helping them gain new skills that can advance their career," she added.

However, new technologies also mean the rise of new forms of surveillance. When treading into new waters, Favaro stresses the importance of restraint.

"Proportionality is key: just because your technology has monitoring capabilities, workplace monitoring should only be conducted to the extent it is necessary to achieve a legitimate purpose," he says.

"Genuine transparency with your workforce about the purposes, extent, and consequences of workplace monitoring is also essential and can help avoid the trust between the employer and workforce being put at risk as a result of the monitoring."

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