

# A third Renault worker commits suicide in France

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On February 20, the Versailles public prosecutor's office opened an investigation "to check on the working conditions" of a Renault employee who, aged only 38, killed himself at his home four days earlier, leaving a suicide note referring to the pressures on the job. The death came almost a year to the day after Carlos Ghosn, Renault's new boss, launched the "Renault Contract 2009" revival plan.

It was the third suicide in four months of an employee working at the Technocentre Renault research centre at Guyancourt in the Yvelines department near Paris. It occurred barely three weeks after a silent march by workers at the company in honour of the two employees who had previously taken their own lives (in October and January, respectively).

Since the announcement of the third death, spouses of workers at the Technocentre have contacted the unions fearing that their husbands might do the same. The CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union representative Vincent Neveu reports: "Their husbands have similar characteristics to those of our colleagues who committed suicide: coming home from work after 10 p.m., the feeling of being overwhelmed by their work load. One of the wives ended up bursting into tears. She had not dared tell her husband that she was contacting a union."

The worries of the wives are well founded, as Pascal Bahnweg of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) union confirmed on *LCI.fr*: "For two years the pressure on staff has been much greater. The reorganisation distressed some of the workers, whose condition is often difficult to detect."

The Guyancourt Renault Technocentre, in the Paris region, was opened in 1998 to bring research, engineering, purchasing and project leadership under one roof. More than 12,000 people work in this

ultramodern centre (including service providers, subcontractors and employees of affiliated Renault companies) in a 400,000-square-metre area.

One of the stated goals of the centre is to reduce the assembly time of any Renault model to 15 hours. For example, the present assembly time of a Volkswagen Golf is 47 hours in Wolfsburg in Germany against only 17 hours for a Renault Mégane in Palencia in Spain. The relentless drive for productivity is not limited to workers in the assembly plants; it also subjects the technical staff to immense pressures.

On February 9, at a time when the world automobile market is in a slump and factory closures and sackings are the order of the day, Carlos Ghosn published some figures for 2006 that were supposed to be reassuring. A year before, he had unveiled the "Renault Contract 2009" revival plan, which proposed the launching of 26 models by 2009, of which 13 would be new versions of current models and 13 would be entirely new—the aim being to become the most profitable European across-the-range car maker with an operating margin of 6 per cent by 2009 as against 2.5 per cent in 2006.

According to an official statement, Renault envisages, amongst other things, an 80 percent increase of sales outside Europe. After having notched net profits of 1.6 billion euros (US\$2.1 billion) for the first half of 2006, in spite of a drop in sales, the Ghosn plan would mean an increase in dividends for shareholders from today's 1.8 euros per share to 4.5 euros per share by 2009.

Taking into account the accumulating pressures at work, it seems clear that "Contract 2009" has had dire consequences for the work force. The effects of the decline in working conditions will not only be felt by Renault and subcontract workers in France, but also internationally. French Renault workers are being blackmailed with threats of their jobs leaving the

country. According to CGT representative Neveu, “When he presents his plan, Ghosn says that if we do not achieve its goals then it will be bad for Renault’s future and bad therefore for jobs.”

Romanian news sources report that the Renault group, which has more than 30 plants all over the world, plans to invest 100 million euros setting up a centre to design, develop and test cars, in Dâmbovită near Bucharest, staffed by Romanian engineers. Two other identical centres will be built in South Korea and in Brazil.

As far as the deaths at their Technocentre are concerned, Renault officials claim, on the one hand, that “suicide is always the result of a complex personal situation”—i.e., that the deaths have no generalised significance—and, on the other hand, argue that everyone is to blame. Antoine Lepinteur of Renault’s management at the Technocentre told the press that the deaths represent “a collective failure, for us, the management of the centre, but also for the trade unions and all the workers.”

The unions, notably the CGT (close to the Communist Party) and the CFDT (close to the Socialist Party), do share no small part of the blame for these tragedies, but not in the way that Lepinteur has in mind. The unions bear responsibility because of their nationalist outlook and their *complicity* with management in accepting speed-up and the logic of cutthroat competition in the globalised world market.

The union bureaucracies are currently engaged in damage control. They are making the face-saving demand that an independent psychosocial evaluation be made to “get to the bottom of the causes of the distress at the Technocentre.” Other Renault workers are not even included in the demand, let alone fundamental improvements in working conditions.

The plight of these workers, whatever management and the unions may say, is in fact the consequence of the ceaseless struggle of giant corporations to capture a greater market share, at the expense of the international working class.

The logic of the situation is brutal. The *Financial Times* summed it up in this comment: “While it is impossible to make a direct link between these tragedies and pressure at work, the unions have inevitably called into question the tougher management introduced by Carlos Ghosn since the famous cost-

cutter took charge two years ago. There has certainly been a change of culture at Renault since Mr. Ghosn arrived. But then, times have changed and Renault needs to become more competitive.” In other words, there will be no let-up.



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