

Further suicides in French workplaces

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A new series of suicides has hit French workplaces. The latest deaths follow a number of others which occurred in the space of a few months at the Renault Technocentre at Guyancourt in the Yvelines, a research centre for the French automobile maker (see “Suicides en série chez Renault”).

At Peugeot-Citroën (PSA) there were four suicides within the space of fifteen days in April and May in the same workshop at Mulhouse (Haut-Rhin), which employs 10,500 workers. The workers were all between 30 and 40 years old and were permanent employees. These suicides were preceded in February by another suicide at PSA in Charleville-Mézières, in the Ardennes. This worker cited intolerable working conditions in the letter he left behind.

These self-killings are not restricted to the automobile industry. An employee at a nuclear power plant in Chinon operated by EDF (French Electricity) committed suicide February 27, 2007. The death became the focus of a good deal of attention because the Social Security Tribunal of Tours was asked to rule in May on a law suit launched by the family of one of the dead man’s colleagues, a 49-year-old technician from the same power plant who took his life in August 2004. The February death brought the total of known suicides related to the Chinon location to six in three years.

No official statistics exist on the number of suicides linked to working conditions. Such deaths are only rarely classified as work accidents, even when they happen at the workplace. They are even less likely to be recorded when they occur away from the job.

Christian Larose, vice president of the CGT union’s social and economic council and co-author of a book entitled *Violence at Work*, has estimated that between 300 and 400 people a year (approximately one person a day) commit suicide for reasons linked to bad working conditions, a figure which he estimates to be on the increase.

Families of suicide victims experience enormous difficulties in having their rights respected and recognized. This May the Social Security branch of the Haute-de-Seine classified a suicide at the Renault Technocentre in October 2006 as a work accident. Renault management announced on June 27 that it had lodged an appeal against the decision.

Not only do the families affected by these tragedies suffer the loss of a family member who is often the only breadwinner, but they must still fight their way through the courts if they want to establish that the employer and deteriorating working conditions played some role in the death. This is a huge undertaking involving legal proceedings against multinational companies with virtually unlimited financial resources. Given these conditions, it is fair to say that a wide gap likely exists between the total of officially recognised suicide cases due to working conditions and their actual number. The companies systematically refuse to recognize the contribution made by working conditions to these suicides, attributing them entirely to personal problems unrelated to work; so only the small tip of this iceberg is visible.

According to press reports, the PSA group has developed the practice in recent years of sending letters encouraging “feelings of guilt” to employees on sick leave. According to *Le Monde*, the CGT has collected about one hundred of these letters over the year. “They are standard letters” said Vincent Duse, a CGT representative. “They were sent to sick employees at the Mulhouse plant who had provided medical certificates.”

According to *Le Monde*, which obtained one of the letters, the head of personnel drew “attention to the high number and frequency of absences” of the worker by underlining that “personal absence is incompatible with industrial organisation and disrupts the functioning of the production unit in an unacceptable way.” In conclusion the sick worker was asked “to modify noticeably [his] behaviour for the long term.”

In the automobile factories where temporary workers work side by side with employees on permanent CDI contracts (Contract of Indeterminate Duration), it is not rare for the latter to be forced to adapt their work rate to that of the temporary workers whose situation is less stable and who, in the hope of permanent jobs, push themselves to the limit at considerable risk to their health.

Prior to the period when the most recent suicides occurred, the PSA group had also announced massive reductions in the workforce. It has been common knowledge since last

February that the group is aiming at 4,800 job cuts. On May 9 Peugeot-Citroën organized a company-wide trade union-employer negotiating committee meeting under the chairmanship of Christian Streiff, former CEO at Airbus, which confirmed the job cuts for 2007 in France, on the basis of voluntary redundancies.

At the same time, unlike Renault, which had announced a drop in its sales, sales at PSA were on the rise. The group announced a 6.5 percent sales increase, as well as a growth in its turnover compared to the first quarter of 2006 and an increase of 1.6 percent in its sales in Western Europe.

The job losses were supposed to take place without the company officially having recourse to firings. Jean-Luc Vergne, director of personnel, declared: “We chose not to bring in compulsory redundancies. The plan ... meant there were to be no replacements for those leaving.” The plan in question was implemented beginning June 1, 2007, and will extend over 6 months. It was developed through an agreement called the Management Forecasting of Jobs and Abilities (GPEC) and signed on April 6, 2007, by five of the six trade unions at the PSA group (CFDT, CFE-CGC, CFTC, FO and GSEA), the sole hold-out being the CGT.

This “management of abilities” is regulated by a piece of 2005 legislation. In effect, the law of “Planning for Social Cohesion,” enacted January 18, 2005, called the Borloo law, imposes on small companies of 300 or more employees negotiations between “social partners” (i.e. unions and employers’ organizations) over jobs.

The consequence of all this is to increase the pressure on the workers by intensifying their workload. Conditions are created where the pressure of work becomes intolerable for those who are supposedly keeping their jobs. The support for these measures by the trade unions leaves workers at the mercy of the employers and without any perspective to defend themselves. The PSA unions have put forward no plan for the defence of the 4,800 jobs under threat at Peugeot.

The union’s capitulation stands in contrast to the militancy of PSA workers. On April 10, 500 workers—out of a workforce of 3,400—at the PSA Peugeot-Citroën plant at Aulnay-sous-Bois ended their nearly six-week strike after the announcement of a deal for workers at Magnetto (a sub-contracting company sold by PSA three years ago).

The PSA strikers had demanded an increase of 300 euros a month for everyone, a starting salary of 1,525 euros net, retirement at 55 and the hiring on permanent contracts of temporary employees. The deal eventually struck at the end of the strike did not meet the workers’ demands and granted no salary increase.

Events at Airbus also illustrate in an exemplary way the role played by the unions and their refusal to organise any

systematic struggle against redundancies, allowing bosses to set one factory against another. The restructuring “Power 8” plan at Airbus involves the destruction of 10,000 jobs in Europe, the closure or the sale of five factories and the relocation of production to low-wage countries.

While workers at Airbus were determined to oppose the redundancy plan and many walked off the job when the job cuts were announced, the unions did all in their power to prevent a serious struggle from developing. They stifled the last strikes against the “power 8” plan at the Nantes and St. Nazaire Airbus sites in exchange for a management promise to restart negotiations at a future date. This was a few days prior to the meeting of the biggest union federations with Nicolas Sarkozy at the Elysée Palace—even before the latter had been officially installed as president.

The plan by the new prime minister, François Fillon, to introduce a so-called “electroshock” policy, to permit France to “maximise its capacities in order to be at the top in international competition” and satisfy French employers, is to be realised with the assistance of the trade union bureaucracies.

Earlier this year there were efforts made to widen and make more official this collaboration through a change in the law called “modernisation of social dialogue,” introduced at the end of January by the former right-wing prime minister Dominique de Villepin. This amendment to existing legislation cements collaboration between the government and the “social partners” on the opening of negotiations prior to any government reform dealing with relations at work, jobs and training.

Sarkozy will therefore be able to rely officially on the support of union leaders in September when “priority tasks” will figure on the agenda: i.e. the attack on the right to strike in the public services, the creation of a new job contract for all workers, the merger of the Job Centres with the Unemployment Benefit Fund and the “reform” of the social security and retirement benefit systems.

The hard reality of the consequences flowing from this complicity on the part of the trade unions is shown by the fact that, according to a World Health Organisation report, France is ranked third in the world behind Ukraine and the US, when it comes to cases of depression linked to the workplace.



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