France Télécom employee immolates himself

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On April 26 Rémi L, a France Télécom (FT) worker aged 57 and a father of four, burned himself to death in the parking lot of his former workplace in Mérignac, near Bordeaux, on April 26. According to the Stress Observatory set up by FT unions, his death brings to 60 the total of suicides of FT workers since 2008.

About 300 of Rémi L's colleagues, with his wife and children, gathered outside the regional head office of France Télécom in Bordeaux and held a minute's silence for him. His family told Brigitte Audy, the regional director of France Télécom, that she was not welcome there.

His son told the press: "The reason for the suicide is clearly the way in which France Télécom-Orange treated his career." His father had been transferred away working for 6 months as a work safety officer in an FT call center in Bordeaux, a job which he hated, involving constant surveillance of the workers.

An official of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labor) union explained that his post in Dordogne, near Gironde, had been eliminated in 2000: "For ten years he had no permanent job, and this had disturbed him a lot. He took the full brunt of the reorganization...He didn't want to leave [the region of] Gironde, so he was being given jobs which had nothing to do with his qualifications."

This tragedy is the result of FT management's deliberate policy of harassing employees in the hope of driving them to despair and forcing them to resign. This fundamentally criminal policy emerges from the circumstances of FT's partial privatization in the 1990s, first under the Socialist Party (PS) Prime Minister Michel Rocard in 1990 and then under the 1997-2002 Plural Left government—consisting of the PS, the Communist Party (PCF), and the Greens.

During the dot-com boom, the company pursued an ambitious acquisition policy and took on huge debt to buy other telecom firms—including Wanadoo, GlobalOne, Freeserve, and other firms. When the dot-com bubble burst and FT's debts had to be repaid starting in the early 2000s, however, the company found itself in a deep fiscal crisis.

FT is a corporate behemoth, with state backing and 2010 revenues of €45.5 billion and a customer base of 193 million people. Nonetheless, it sought to re-establish FT's balance sheets not with state assistance, but on the backs of the workers: its workforce went from 161,700 in 1996 to 103,000 in 2009. Under its NEXT plan adopted in 2005, FT aimed to raise productivity by 15 percent in 3 years and to eliminate 22,000 jobs.

Over two-thirds of FT workers had kept their status as public workers, however, protecting them from being fired. As France's labor code does not place restrictions on forced job transfers in the public sector as it does in the private sector, the company decided to harass workers with forced job transfers and other means to force them to resign.

According to company documents provided by a FT manager to *Les Inrockuptibles* last year, FT executives coldly mapped out six stages of anguish and depression they hoped their workers would feel, so they would ultimately decide to give up their jobs.

After the first stage where the job change was announced, the second stage ("refusal to understand") would be marked by "incomprehension, negation, total rejection." The third stage ("resistance") would see inertia, arguing, revolt, and sabotage. The fourth stage ("decompression") would be marked by "sadness, aimlessness, despair, and depression." The fifth stage ("resignation") would be "lack of enthusiasm or convictions, doubts, and nostalgia." At the sixth stage, FT executives hoped, workers would decide to quit.

In one training exercise under the NEXT plan, FT managers were trained to reach their downsizing quotas by transferring workers caring for children or sick, aged parents long distances from their homes. The goal was to "guilt-trip" workers and thus to force them to give up their jobs.

While imposing such psychological torture on their employees, FT officials downplayed the rising number of suicides by workers in the company.

Nonetheless, the issue became a public scandal. A state report on FT suicides published by work inspector Sylvie Catala in February 2010 concluded that increased stress due to "forced mobility" was responsible for the increased suicide rate.

Though Rémi L did not leave a suicide note, a protest letter he sent to FT management in 2009 leaves no doubt that his desperate gesture was in response to corporate policies.

His letter denounced the "cowardice, moral poverty, and lack of managerial responsibility" of FT, explaining: "People are thrown into positions without evaluation or assistance. People sink or they swim, without guard rails or support: it's a machine for making crazy people, then it's only a matter of shaking them a bit."

He concluded, "This situation is endemic because nothing is done to face it: suicide remains the only option."

That Rémi L ultimately took his own life underlines the utter bankruptcy of the existing organizations that claim to speak for the working class. While the unions have launched various lawsuits, there has been no attempt to organize industrial action to force an end to FT's barbarous policies.

Indeed, FT's corporate strategy has been based on the assumption that workers would be left atomized and in psychological anguish, unable to mount any collective response. It knew that in this, it enjoyed the support of the unions, the PS, and the PS's political satellites such as the PCF and the "far left." This was spelled out quite explicitly by Dominique Strauss-Kahn—a minister under the Plural Left government, the current director of the International Monetary Fund, and likely PS candidate in next year's presidential elections.

In his book *The Flame and the Cinder*, Strauss-Kahn boasts: "Every opening up to capital [i.e., privatization during the Plural Left government] took place on the foundations of an industrial alliance, European cooperation and—we must stress—with the agreement of the unions and all the partners in the Plural Left (notably the PCF and the Greens). What many saw as being simple 'privatizations' were the seeds of an ambitious industrial policy."

The tragic and desperate act of Rémi L comes only a few months after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia triggered mass protests that toppled the Tunisian dictator, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and his Egyptian counterpart Hosni Mubarak. Protests have since spread throughout the Middle East.

Rémi L's suicide highlights that, where conscious class cruelty against the workers is concerned, however, the French business elite have little to learn from the dictators like Ben Ali who protected their imperialist interests in France's former colonies.