Corporate murder: Trial opens of France Télécom executives over worker suicides

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The trial that opened in Paris on Monday of seven former France Télécom executives on the spate of worker suicides at the company sheds a stark light on the brutality of the capitalist system.

Beginning in 2005, France Télécom (now Orange) management secretly implemented a policy of psychological torture. It transferred workers to branches in cities far from their children or ailing parents; set unachievable performance targets; or held repeated meetings to ritualistically denounce and humiliate staff. This was aimed at getting rid of 22,000 workers who were legally protected from sacking, or almost one fifth of the workforce, by pushing them to quit or commit suicide.

CEO Didier Lombard said management would get workers out "one way or another, by the door or through the window."

The nightmare they created plunged hundreds of workers into anxiety and depression; 57 workers committed suicide from 2008 to 2010 alone, with dozens more attempting suicide. Some took their own lives at work, in offices and parking lots, as their colleagues looked on in horror. Others left notes behind to their love ones, blaming management for their deaths.

Out of hundreds of cases, 39 victims have been included in the prosecution, including 19 suicide victims, and 12 who attempted suicide.

The seven executives standing trial are: Lombard, the former CEO; his number two, Louis-Pierre Wenes; and the former director of human resources, Olivier Barberot; and four others accused of complicity in their actions.

They are only charged, however, with "moral harassment." This carries a maximum sentence of a 15,000 euro ($US16,900) fine—or 789 euros per worker's suicide in the trial—and a year in jail.

Whatever the outcome of the trial, therefore, it will confirm that in 21st century France, class justice prevails. Having walked free for a decade, executives who consciously and sadistically destroyed the lives of workers and their families to boost France Télécom's profits and the portfolios of its shareholders will walk away with minimal penalties, or quite possibly none at all.

Testifying on Tuesday, Lombard brazenly defended all his actions as CEO from 2005 to 2010. "That the social transformations were not agreeable, it's like that," he declared. "I couldn't help it. If I wasn't there, someone else would have done the same, or worse."

Denying all responsibility for workers' deaths, he asserted that these events were not a "social crisis," but a "media crisis. … The newspapers said their company was awful, and that broke their morale." Asked by the prosecutor whether he regretted any of his actions, Lombard replied: "I will not answer this question." His statements reportedly provoked gasps of outrage among relatives and supporters of the workers in the courtroom.

But Lombard's role is well documented. In 2005 the company adopted business strategies, entitled ACT and NeXT, to raise productivity by 15 percent in three years and slash 22,000 jobs—in order, in the words of the plan, to "prepare France Télécom to become a global internet provider."

Though the Socialist Party had privatized the company in the 1990s, two-thirds of the workforce were still classified as public servants. To slash a workforce legally protected from sacking, executives adopted a covert policy of psychological torture designed to coerce workers to quit or commit suicide. They coldly mapped out a complex, six-stage process

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of growing mental anguish ("incomprehension," "revolt," "despair," "depression," "nostalgia" and so on) that they hoped workers would experience before taking drastic action.

In 2010, *Le Parisien* published an internal summary of the October 2006 directors' meeting at which Lombard, Wenes and Barberot discussed their plan. According to the newspaper, company officials later ordered the summary destroyed, but a secretary preserved a copy in her garage.

"We have to get away from this position of a mother hen," Lombard had said. "It will be a bit more authoritarian than in the past. It's our only chance to do the 22,000… In 2007, I will get the departures one way or another, through the door or through the window."

One of the workers who committed suicide, Nicolas Grenoville, was 28 years old. On August 10, 2009, he hung himself in his home in Besançon using a France Télécom cable. "My job makes me suffer," he said in his suicide note. "I cannot stand this job, and France Télécom doesn't care."

Nicolas' brother, Vincent, told *Le Parisien*, "For him, every day had become a hell to go to work. When you are alone, when no one helps you, when the hierarchy laughs at you…"

Vincent bitterly added that he does not expect the trial to result in justice for his brother: "These people who are untouchable, who went to school with the leaders of this country, are going to take a fine and make an appeal… My brother, he will not come back."

On September 9, 2009, Yonelle Dervin, a technician, who had just learned that his position was being changed, stood up in the middle of a meeting, apologized to his colleagues, took out a knife, and stabbed himself in the stomach.

Two days later, on September 11, 2009, 32-year-old Stéphanie threw herself out of the window at a France Télécom office. The day before, she sent a note to her father: "My boss of course has not been warned, but I will be the 23rd employee to commit suicide. I cannot accept the new reorganization of services… I would prefer to die."

On April 26, 2011, 56-year-old Rémy Louvradoux set himself on fire in a France Télécom branch parking lot, after having worked there since 1979. He left behind a wife and four children.

"The more he was overcome by the troubles of his work, the more we were overcome with him," his wife said, according to *Le Parisien*. "He killed himself to put an end to the infernal cycle that he was caught in and from which he saw no way out—but also to denounce the practices at the company he had given his life for."

The family had sought to press charges for involuntary homicide. Rémy's thirty-year-old son stated: "We believe that the judicial response, in addition to its slow pace, is not proportionate to the horror and the gravity of the acts. It comforts those responsible for what happened with impunity. Their mass plan aimed to push people to the edge. They knew that they could kill."

These crimes are an indictment not only of France Télécom management and the Socialist Party, but of the unions at the company. As in every industry and every country, the union bureaucracy functioned as an arm of corporate management, isolating the workers and smothering resistance. Workers who committed suicide saw no way to fight the company's reign of terror due above all to the role of these corporatized and corrupt bureaucracies, which did nothing to stop the company's ruthless offensive.

Events like the victimization of France Télécom workers have taken place, to varying extents, at countless workplaces internationally over the past 40 years, as the ruling elites have overseen a social counterrevolution against the social gains won by workers throughout the 20th century. All such workers are the victims of capitalism, that is, the subordination of society to the maniacal pursuit of profit by the financial elite.

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