

Chapter 5

Hierarchical relationships and conflicts in skilled sectors: the case of managers in French industry

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1. Introduction

France has a specific socio-professional category of managers called *cadres*. These are qualified employees with experience (Desrosières and Thévenot 2000) and include, among others, lower management in private and public companies, as well as ‘experts’ working in such areas as marketing, quality assurance, communication, etc., or engineers in various technical and scientific areas. This category of employees is very heterogeneous. Strongly shaped by France’s socio-political history, the category is also structured and organised by different institutions including trade unions, non-profit professional associations and specific retirement funds which give this group a certain social unity (Boltanski 1982). Yet the status of *cadres* is greatly ambivalent. Symbolically, they are on the side of capital, given their ideological proximity to top management which in turn draws on *cadres* to keep companies running. But, objectively, *cadres* are on the side of labour, given that they are employees (Lordon 2010). This raises questions with respect to the ways in which hierarchical relationships and conflicts function within this group, especially given the way large companies have been operating in the turbulent globalised financial environment of recent decades.

The analysis is based on the empirical investigation of four large companies operating in the oil, nuclear, aerospace and electronics industries in France. Access to these companies was mainly gained through personal contacts with employees or with the assistance of trade unionists and consultants. This assistance facilitated contact with human resource managers and works councils with a view to gaining permission to conduct a survey within their organization. Fifty interviews were held during the first half of the 2000s with high-skilled employees such as line managers, different types of engineers (research, computer, sales, etc.), in addition to functional managers in communication and marketing. The sample included 19 women. As regards age, 36 *cadres* were between 25

and 44, and 16 over 45. Half of the sample had graduated from an engineering school, while the rest were from business schools and universities (various levels of tertiary education including Masters and PhD).

Based on this survey, the research illustrates how conflicts within the group tend to be neutralised, even though this does not prevent criticism from being expressed. To explore this observation, the chapter examines various socio-economic levels. It starts by presenting the overall economic context of neo-capitalism, before moving on to examine various strategies these companies have adopted for their *cadres*. Hierarchical relationships and union practices are then examined in the third and fourth sections of this chapter. Finally, a fifth section deals with informal criticism *cadres* have been able to express concerning the various dimensions of their work, their company and the globalised economy in general.

2. The emergence of neo-capitalism

Since the 1980s, global capitalism has embarked on a new era, characterised by profound changes in the ownership of companies, their internal management, and even their mutual relationships. High-qualified employees have been affected by this new situation. This era was preceded by several distinct economic and historical configurations, beginning with mercantilism through to the Industrial Revolution; followed by the Great Depression of the 19th century to the crisis years of the 1920s and 1930s; and ending with the exceptional prosperity of the post-war period. When the latter came to an end in the 1970s, the international economy entered an unprecedented phase which has been given many epithets by French economists: 'financial globalisation' (Chesnais 1996); 'financial capitalism' (Gréau 1998; Batsch 2002; Aglietta and Rebérioux 2004); 'globalisation' (Michalet 2002); 'total capitalism' (Peyrelevalde 2005); 'neoliberalism' (Duménil and Lévy, 2000), etc. Each of these designations has something to offer, though the expressions 'neo-capitalism' (Dockès 2002) and 'new capitalism' (Duménil and Lévy 2000) will be used in this chapter. They have the advantage of stressing the unprecedented developments of the global economy since the 1970s, without focusing on the single issue of 'financialisation'. Taken as a whole, three key trends appear to characterise this new type of capitalism.

To begin with, forms of company financing have changed in recent decades, shifting from a regime largely based on conventional bank loans

to a regime based on issuing securities, associated with bank disintermediation (Plihon 2004). To obtain capital, companies now issue predominantly two types of securities – shares and bonds – on financial markets, with the aim of finding investors expecting to increase their capital. As a result, the supply of securities has risen considerably, due both to the overall increase in the number of publicly listed companies and to the greater number of shares issued. The second way companies acquire capital is through self-financing, a method which has also increased substantially since the 1990s. This record rise is the result of both increased company profits, allowing substantial reserves to be accrued, and the slowdown in investment volumes. Overall, the significant rise in profits over the last twenty-five years has turned out to be a *sine qua non* for the accumulation of equity and bond finance by companies and their use as the primary sources of finance. Higher profits have made stocks more attractive in financial markets, providing investors with significant returns. They have also favoured self-financing by allowing companies to build up reserves.

The privatisation (of the capital) of large previously nationalised companies is a second trend typical of neo-capitalism. In France, and more generally in Europe, these transfers of property took place from the mid-1980s onwards. They occurred in many sectors ranging from energy to capital equipment, via transport, telecommunications, insurance and even banks. In most of these areas, large companies brought into public ownership in the various phases of nationalisation between 1935 and 1983 were subsequently transformed into private companies exposed to the constraints of international competition. In the early 1980s, the so-called economic policy of ‘competitive disinflation’ in France reshuffled the cards in terms of capitalistic appropriation (Lordon 1997). The subsequent privatisations took place in waves from 1986 onwards, reflecting successive changes in government, whatever their political persuasion. These upheavals did not spare the companies studied here, and provide an initial concrete illustration of manifestations of neo-capitalism at the level of production organisations.

As an example, the aerospace company researched here, whose majority shareholder is still the French state, transferred a portion of its assets to the private sector at the end of the 1990s. The oil company also saw the state selling off a large portion of its shareholding during the 1990s, reducing the government stake progressively before finally selling off all shares. The nuclear engineering company studied here benefitted greatly

from state support during the 1970s, which allowed it to expand, though subsequently saw government intervention decline sharply. As of the 1980s, the market became the main force driving the overall regulation of its operating framework: one of its main corporate shareholders had been the state-owned champion of France's electrical industry, today a private company. The nuclear engineering company has become a multinational, and the rationale of privatisation led to its stock market flotation in 2011. As regards the electronics company, its corporate progress has been marked by mergers and acquisitions as well as the sale of shares to competitors since the late 1970s. In fact, at the time of the survey, many of its current employees had actually spent time working for the state-owned electronics company. As of 1999, it was fully privatised, after having been part of a series of industrial consortia and shareholdings. Moreover, the nuclear engineering, electronics and aerospace companies studied here have also had to deal with the privatisation of their clients, such as France's leading electricity companies or telecommunications operators.

The private sector is therefore now seen as the sole driver of growth, in contrast to state intervention, which is seen as guilty of leading to major financial disequilibria. The privatisation of the economy is also associated with the growing competitiveness of national companies and the development of exports within the framework of globalisation. This opening up of previously nationalised companies has provided opportunities to invest in new activities that are deemed to be more profitable (Michalet 2002).

The advancing internationalisation of companies and stepped-up competition are the third characteristic of neo-capitalism. The companies investigated here have all been driven by expansion strategies and the internationalisation of their activities. These are both characteristics of contemporary capitalism. Three of them employ between 70,000 and 100,000 employees across the world. Their subsidiaries operate in 120 countries, and some are active on all five continents. These subsidiaries function as devolved and autonomous profit centres, allowing the groups to diversify into different sectors, as has been the case at the oil industry company surveyed. Its subsidiaries are active in three different areas: upstream in the exploration and production of energy; downstream in refining, as well as in marketing and sales; and finally in the petrochemicals sector, along with the processing of synthetic rubber. The aerospace company is smaller than its counterparts, with only 380

employees today. Yet it is still highly internationalised. More than 70 engineers are based permanently at the rocket-launching site in French Guyana, while the marketing department dispatches engineers throughout the world in search of launch contracts. To support international prospecting, the company has opened up offices in Washington, Singapore and Tokyo. Lastly, the international nature of the company is reflected in the way its shares are held by about 40 European firms based in Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium.

These examples of huge international corporations illustrate the trends analysed by Michalet (2002). According to this economist, there has been an unprecedented development of networked companies since the 1960s, within a context of the multinational configuration of globalisation. The model of 'extended companies' (Durand 2004: 34) is based on the principle of creating subsidiaries or production unit satellites orbiting around a parent company, often referred to as a holding company or investment company. Veltz (2000) goes as far as to talk about a 'smallisation' process emulating small- and medium-sized enterprises in terms of their externalisation practices and division into autonomous units directly targeting specific markets.

Increased competition and the imperative of competitiveness are corollaries of such a company's growth strategy, playing out along borders and cultures. Competitiveness has become a watchword drummed into the *cadres* of the four companies studied here. While previously they may have benefited from captive, national markets or been aided by state interventionism, these large groups are today increasingly faced with international competition from new Russian, American, Japanese or Chinese entrants to the market. These are highly competitive and will, without hesitation, cut prices for goods and services of equal – if not higher – quality. All four companies studied have decided to meet this challenge by conquering new markets, such as South Africa, South Korea or China.

3. Companies' neo-capitalist strategies

To this end, companies have implemented new and specifically adapted strategies. One of the most striking strategies concerns the power granted to shareholders. Paradoxically, though it is a well-known component of neo-capitalism, this strategy is also one of the least visible for employees,

as well as for outside observers. This is because identifying networks of atomised and distant shareholders is difficult. Whatever the case may be, within a few decades, the world's main economies have shed the *stakeholder* model, in which companies were seen as a community of interests including shareholders, senior executives and employees. In its place, the *shareholder* model gives precedence to the interests of shareholders (Plihon 2004). Their power has been further enhanced by the development of the collective management of funds linked to the rising power of institutional investors. Previously, financial assets were often distributed across a range of individual shareholders. Today they are concentrated in the hands of a minority of institutional investors. These include pension funds, mutual funds or investment firms, as well as insurance companies (Batsch 2002).

The shareholder model in turn has led to corporate governance emerging as a principle for orchestrating control, company behaviour and managerial practices (Pérez, 2003). It is largely geared to maximising the stock market value of companies or shareholder value (Lazonick and O'Sullivan 2000). The creation of shareholder value has had quite an impact on major companies in recent years, being formalised as economic value added (EVA) (Morin 2006). Despite the opacity of its many definitions (Lordon 2000), the ratio refers to the surplus left over once providers of capital – loans and equity – have been remunerated. The actual rhetoric and the real practices surrounding this indicator may not constitute a kind of implacable logic weighing on all firms. It nevertheless has a real influence. EVA is one of the criteria legitimating the existence of the stock market convention imposing double-digit returns on investment – the famous return on equity (ROE) (Plihon 2004). In a context of heightened international competition and under the influence of corporate governance, companies have been reduced to simple assets whose stock market value must be increased (Fligstein 1993).

The reign of shareholder capitalism assumes that companies can adopt policies and strategies that can overcome constraints on competitiveness and the profitability of capital. This has been observed in the companies studied here. For example, they have all been targets of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) activity, albeit to varying degrees. The aerospace company and more directly, the electronics company went through several mergers and acquisitions which led to the privatisation of a longstanding French industrial company which today belongs to a multinational company originally from Sweden. At the time the survey was

conducted, the oil company had just completed an important merger with another French company in the same sector, having teamed up with a Belgium company a few months earlier. Lastly, the nuclear engineering company experienced an identical trajectory, having merged with a large German firm at the end of the 1990s.

These examples bear out a strong trend marking global capitalism since the 1990s. In France, these practices concern many sectors, ranging from energy, to insurance, via chemicals, telecommunications, banking and large-scale retailing. The arguments put forward by policy-makers seem unstoppable in the face of the rationale instituted by shareholder capitalism: companies must achieve a critical mass, allowing them to conquer new markets and face up to international competition. Synergies have to be achieved through mergers and acquisitions (Coutinet and Sagot-Duvaurox 2003).

Restructuring and workforce cuts are further strategies commonly practiced by companies. For instance, in the early 2000s, the aerospace company shed 3,000 jobs to deal with a particularly difficult economic situation, according to its top management. A host of reasons were given to justify these deep cuts: the telecoms crisis and the slowdown in satellite orders, the extreme competitiveness of US and Russian manufacturers, along with cuts in French and European public investment in their space programmes. The nuclear engineering company, for its part, went through successive rationalisation programmes every two years during the 1990s and the 2000s. Here too, the company's top management put forward the same arguments: the company had incurred substantial losses in terms of replacement orders for generators. The choice had been made to cut the wage bill significantly in order to meet cut-throat international competition. Lastly, while the investigations for this study were being conducted with *cadres* and engineers of the electronics company, it announced 10,000 job cuts globally, including 5,000 in Sweden and 191 in France.

These restructuring measures are often accompanied by companies concentrating on their core business, and are in line with the goals of creating shareholder value, as well as the need to face up to international competition. Such refocusing usually concentrates on activities which offer a substantial competitive advantage. By contrast, activities facing deteriorating business conditions – falling demand and/or tougher competition – are simply abandoned (Palpacuer *et al.* 2007).

Following a similar logic, most companies resort to subcontracting, or re-engineering as it is sometimes called. The aerospace company, for example, cooperates with a myriad of European industrial companies, which the employees interviewed euphemistically referred to as 'partners'. These subcontractors are responsible for the design and development of space rockets, as well as the manufacture of some of their modules. Moreover, while the survey of the electronics company was being conducted, the latter was in the process of outsourcing services deemed to be non-strategic, such as purchasing, document management, and IT support and assistance. This strategy of subcontracting was overtly publicised and justified within the company. The explicitly communicated aim was to shed the company's 'hard' activities, in other words its physical production. Along similar lines, a US company took over the company's manufacturing of mobile telephones in the early 2000s, so that it could concentrate on its 'soft' business, including design and marketing, as well as the commercialisation of fixed-line and mobile telephone networks. Such production disengagement continues the processes of internationalisation by companies that began in the 1960s.

Sociologists and economists are unanimous in observing the shift from large company factories with large workforces, a feature characterising mass production with little diversification, towards major corporations with a plurality of small production units, broken down into subsidiaries and sub-contractors. Again, for capital holders, the advantages of resorting to subcontracting are far from being negligible. Resorting to supplier markets in which competition is strong helps cut costs substantially when it comes to carrying out key activities. Subcontracting does away with the need for production management structures and provides opportunities for adapting rapidly to fluctuating demand (Clerc 1999). Ginsbourger (1998) also recalls that outsourcing is used by companies to shed low-skilled and high-risk work. He points to the example of how dangerous work in the steel industry is subcontracted. Such practices engender a degree of opaqueness concerning casual labour, giving the impression that it no longer exists within the company, thus enhancing the latter's image. Lastly, subcontracting may also have a political objective in as far as it breaks up organised labour unions and associations, or helps companies rid themselves of difficult management activities. Specific hierarchical relationships are deployed in neo-capitalist companies within this economic and strategic framework.

4. The mutations of hierarchical authority

The hierarchical relationships between different *cadres* are characterised by relatively conciliatory cooperation, even if occasional conflicts may occur, along with individual tensions. In the past, *cadres* maintained a professional identity based on hierarchical authority. Often promoted in-house, they were imbued with a strong working-class culture. Though experienced, they were historically relatively low-qualified (Trouvé 1996). The spread of managerial ideology and its practices, the expansion of training and education and the increase in qualifications changed all this. Intermediate *cadres* have become younger, compensating their lack of experience with skills learned at university. This has favoured management based on technical competences rather than authority and traditions, a type of management deemed to better suit younger generations. Managerial competence complements technical competence, allowing *cadres* to manage the teams they are in charge of motivating (Pillon and Vatin 2003).

These mutations were well summarised by Francis (57 years old, section head, in the nuclear industry), who had worked for his company for 24 years. He explained that the large number of engineers and the transformation of their social characteristics no longer allow a command-chain style of operating, referring to persons who were 'so advanced'. Although clumsy, this expression conveys many meanings. Francis argued that 'people don't manage today as they used to several years or even several decades ago'. Nowadays, a manager is 'someone who listens, who tries to lead, and whose behaviour should not be arbitrary in any way'. Francis also emphasised the need for 'collegiate management', which 'includes putting issues on the table, listening and examining different possible solutions'.

The slow change in authority, driven by the spread of management principles, is reflected in the expression of everyday management practices. *Cadres* often find these satisfying. But interestingly and paradoxically they also frequently complain about the lack of direction they receive in their own work from higher management. They feel that their tasks are poorly defined. They deplore a certain absence of structure, as pointed out by Franck (26 years old, a design and development engineer in the nuclear industry):

‘There’s little management sometimes. I don’t really know how to define it. It’s a compromise between letting people be (*laissez faire*), but without really giving them, let’s say, the status ... they are given some responsibilities, but this is not properly officialised. It’s quite blurred. It is true that management is not strong, and in conclusion, we are not really managed. Finally, I don’t know whether it is because people believe us to be capable of steering ourselves or if it’s just the law of the strongest, or whatever. I don’t know. Personally, I believe there is a real job to be done in this area’.

Some people go as far as to regret this lack of definition, or even a precise description of what they should be doing during their working week. Or at least, they express a desire to have their own responsibilities more clearly managed. In practice, the responsibilities they have, together with the limited number of directives concerning their work, give them the impression of having a lot of control over their workflow, while being exposed to setbacks: such a form of organisation weakens the formal and official definition of their workload, exposing them to moments where they are overloaded with work. This observation illustrates the trend towards giving individuals greater responsibilities in industrial companies, obliging them to permanently take decisions to solve problems for which they are not prepared (Jorda 1999). Such increased responsibility may then become a real burden.

A design and development engineer in the nuclear industry, Véronique (43 years old) also admitted that the lack of precision concerning tasks and the blurred nature surrounding them led to difficulties. She admitted having been relatively lost when, during a meeting prior to drawing up an assessment of business in progress, new activities were decided without there being any hierarchical framework defining and allocating responsibilities between the various colleagues present. She also did not know whether it was up to her to take responsibility for one of the new activities – at the risk of suffering from overwork – or whether she should do it together with another engineer, so vague were the discussions on allocating responsibilities. She felt guilty about this and wondered if the problems were not of her own making. In such circumstances, where engineers are left to themselves to allocate their work, she questioned her capacity to take the initiative and appropriate the work of her own supervisor. Last but not least, Yves (45 years old), a section head in the nuclear industry, gave his own interpretation of the enhanced individual responsibilities *cadres* had in companies:

‘I think there was less pressure before. Indeed, there was... well I don’t know if there were filters, but in any case, there was no willingness to push forward, saying to everyone that: ‘you, as employees, are responsible for company profits at the end of the year’. Whereas now, there really have been operations – no banging on the table, because they prevail over time – aimed to get it into everybody’s heads that they are responsible. I think that has surely made it possible to make everyone more profitable, so to speak. Of course there is abuse, there always was and always will be, but overall I think that the message has been understood’.

Given such sanitised hierarchical relationships, *cadres* have adopted a particular view of union action.

5. An individualistic approach to unionism

French union membership has fallen substantially over the last forty years. Since the late 1990s, it has been at about 8% of the total workforce, compared to 25% in the 1950s (OECD).¹ In this context of de-unionisation, *cadres* are not laggards in union membership. In fact, they are more unionised today than employees or workers. In 2010, 13% of *cadres* were unionised, compared to 9% of workers and 11% of employees (Insee, 2010). Another decisive trend is that *cadres* are joining unions traditionally open to all employees (including workers), such as the CFDT² and the CGT.³ This is occurring at the expense of more corporatist unions, such as the CGC,⁴ which has been going through a crisis of representativeness in recent years (Béthoux *et al.* 2011). The studies for this research show that *cadres* join unions when they are directly confronted with working situations which they find difficult, such as a worsening of conditions or the fear of losing their jobs. This was the case with Jacques, a 52-year old department head in the aerospace industry, who explained why he joined the CGC:

1. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.
2. The Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail was created in 1919. This union is generally politically reformist, and defines itself as being neither ‘left-wing nor right-wing’. It seeks to represent all employees, whatever their socio-economic category.
3. The Confédération Générale du Travail was founded in 1895, and is one of France’s main union organisations. It too strives to cover all categories of employees, and is generally seen as being more confrontational.
4. The Confédération Générale des Cadres is a French union created in 1944, and which specifically represents the cadre category of employees.

‘I got a union card because I was 52, and you get to an age at which if something like restructuring takes place then you are not necessarily among those people who will be kept on as a priority. And the company did announce staff cuts here... So it is better to be protected and have serious discussions. If you get made redundant, it is better to have the support of a union. It’s easier’.

The extent of *cadre* unionisation compared to employees and workers, as well as their preference for unions covering all professional categories, are two of the symptoms of a crisis of confidence. These phenomena reveal the emergence of employee consciousness, ‘in other words, a feeling of closeness and solidarity with other employees’ (Bouffartigue 2001b: 65) and the opening up of a divide vis-à-vis top management. Indeed, researchers have identified sporadic cases of collective action by *cadres* challenging decisions taken by top management (Mispelblom Beyer 2006). Nevertheless, such mobilisation clearly remains unusual within this professional group, and does not have much impact, as indeed does strike action more generally. Care must therefore be taken in interpreting the importance of *cadre* unionisation and the industrial action *cadres* may resort to (Bouffartigue 2001a). Nothing so far suggests that they can be viewed as a ‘new working class’ (Bensoussan 2010).

In fact, there are many arguments qualifying the scope of protest resulting from the unionisation of *cadres*. First, the unions to which they belong do not confront corporate management head-on, in contrast to the image that non-unionised *cadres* may have. In the companies studied here, the CGC acts less in opposition and more as a mediator and discussion partner with top management. In some companies, the latter even encourages *cadres* to join unions. This lack of clear opposition between top management and the CGC can be explained by the ideological orientations of the union, which has an apolitical view of unionism. This stance supposedly poses very limited ideological demands, something that *cadres* often criticise other unions for. The CGC prefers to support professional unionism, oriented towards expertise and entrepreneurial humanism. It supports values that are similar to those put forward by management ideology, such as sustainable development, ethics, professionalism, responsibility and skill development (Delmas 2011).

Moreover, *cadre* membership of general unions should be considered with care. Rather than reflecting any proletarianisation of this group of employees, its recent rapprochement with unions may also reflect the way

the latter have become more attractive for *cadres* compared to others (Benguigui 2001). For example, the CFDT and CGT have expanded their services for *cadres* by supporting wage claims, the recognition of qualifications, and providing legal aid in the face of redundancy (Pech, 2008).

This new relationship to unionism reflects the more individualistic position of certain *cadres*, leaving aside exceptional cases of open conflict. The union representatives interviewed frequently complained about the difficulty they face in sensitising non-unionised colleagues and getting the latter to look to union support more often. According to these representatives, the main obstacle lies in the way *cadres* tend to solve their problems individually through contacting their own managers directly. Being a *cadre* dissuades them from looking to unions for help in settling individual disputes within a company, as explained by Michaël, a 31-year old engineer in the aerospace industry: 'I don't have any specific demands. And if I did have one, I wouldn't wait for the unions'. Gabrielle, a 39-year old IT engineer in the oil industry, mentioned her motives for union membership, stressing how little time she had to be involved, which again expresses a form of individualism:

'I have not properly asked myself the question. I suppose that like many people, it's a bit selfish. I mean as long as you haven't needed union support, you don't really think about it. That's one issue. By contrast, from an ideological point of view, I think it's very good. But I just don't take the time to do it because I know that if you want to do it properly, it takes time'.

While Gabrielle stressed the time-consuming nature of union action, many other *cadres* often deplored the strong ideological positions of unions, which they saw as 'extreme', as well as the links between unions and political parties whose political orientations they condemn. *Cadres* hold these to be generally incompatible with their status and with company goals. They rarely identify with the public discourse of union leaders, which they find 'a little outrageous' and often 'a bit quaint, hackneyed and harking back to another age' (unnamed interviewee). That said, they do not rule out union action. They recognise the undeniable usefulness of unions, especially in the way unions circulate information in companies. *Cadres* view the presence of unions as highly legitimate, and that every power should face some countervailing power – including the power of employers which *cadres* may see as excessive. There have to

be safeguards to support the democratic nature of companies. This view was very clearly put by Paul, a 49-year old head of department in the electronics industry. Though not a member of a union due to his senior management responsibilities ('it would be a political contradiction'), he nevertheless pleaded in favour of unionism:

'I think it is a dramatic problem that French unions are so weak. I regret that they are not more powerful. Not to grab things, but in terms of social dialogue, on a daily basis, they are essential. It's as if there were no longer any political parties. Whatever you think, and whatever they have done, if there are no more political parties in a country, then it's a dictatorship, it's no longer a democracy. I think it is the same thing in companies.'

Sporadic collective action by unionised *cadres* cannot be denied. But this is not synonymous with opposition to business rationale. Collective action and employee solidarity are relatively limited among *cadres*, a professional category which lives its relationship to work in an individualist manner. *Cadres* exhibit, for example, quasi-mercenary behaviour when it comes to switching companies to obtain higher pay. Such behaviour is encouraged by HRM policies and practices: compensation partly indexed to individual performance, individualised work assessment, career development increasingly dependent on an employee's visible commitment and availability, etc. Everything is done within the neo-capitalist company to dissuade them from uniting, from manifesting employee solidarity and subscribing to collective demands. That said, they are not unmoved by the transformation of their work, company strategies, top management practices or economic change.

6. The critical capacities of *cadres*

Outside their institutional, political and union contexts, *cadres* today express a multitude of informal criticisms, either as complaints or as condemnations. These reflect a way of reacting to the contradictions and difficulties they face in their work. One of their criticisms is the lack of time they have. A majority of *cadres* feel that they have too many functions, and that they are constantly being solicited by clients, suppliers or simply other colleagues (Dupuy 2005). Moreover, some *cadres* disapprove of managerial measures, such as training seminars regularly organised by top management and held by outside consultants. These

training sessions are aimed at promoting company products in the eyes of *cadres*, at boosting their motivation or even at providing them with tools to facilitate their own managerial work. They cannot but fail to view such seminars as communication tools, if not as manipulation orchestrated by top management. *Cadres* participate in these seminars, but with suspicion, believing they are not fooled by the real objectives of such sessions: reducing conflicts within the organisation, getting *cadres* to accept certain strategic decisions, or raising productivity.

These management techniques are also frequently criticised for being too costly, in terms of pay during the time spent attending seminars, as well as the high fees for specialist consultancy and seminar management. Such expenditure contrasts with the cost-cutting *cadres* face in their own work. On the one hand, *cadres* are required to respect departmental budgets, while on the other hand, companies spend supposedly astronomical sums of money on such training, which seems to be of little direct use for their work.

Another criticism concerns the lack of clear vision about long-term strategy. *Cadres* have the feeling of living day-to-day the decisions taken by top management. Some take a stand on their company's strategy. In doing so, they criticise the practices of today's large corporations, condemning the fact that top management, according to one interviewee, 'spends its time stepping on the accelerator and the brake in quick succession'. *Cadres* say that they are finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the alternation – within very short periods of time – between 'euphoric discourses' promising development (Paul, a 49-year old head of department in the electronics industry), and 'depressing discourses' demanding austerity and budget control. Given such swings of the pendulum, they get the feeling of being permanently wrong-footed when financial decisions sanction or block the growth of an activity that had been encouraged only a few months earlier. Such trends, which they contest, mean that *cadres* are faced with contradictory situations in which they, as departmental heads, have to apply measures (such as budget cuts or suspensions of temporary recruitment) in which they do not believe. They condemn the way certain corporate decisions are dropped onto them 'like fine rain', obliging them to suddenly scrap activities on which they are working, in favour of other tasks.

Furthermore, by often equating finance and speculation, *cadres* denounce the 'mimetism' characterising financial markets, as well as the fashion

trends affecting business strategies. They feel that the financial sector is disconnected from industry and nothing more than a threat. The interviewees were aware that their daily work was dependent on the sustainability of the industrial sector and not on financial marketplaces. For instance, 44-year old section head Michel (electronics) said that he had ‘reservations today about the financial shape of the planet’, worrying in particular that ‘the financial interests of shareholders’ will ‘outweigh the added value of labour’. Lastly, *cadres* castigate the top management of large companies who pay themselves astronomical salaries via bonuses, stock options and golden parachutes, etc. While these various criticisms were expressed verbally during confidential interviews, they may also lead to concrete measures within a company.

These criticisms show up first of all in isolated discussions between *cadres*, in silent protests, disengagement with work and their company, and even collective action, though this is rare. Criticisms are often voiced at coffee machines, or during lunch breaks or over a drink after work. They may seem banal and anecdotal, but that does not mean they are inconsequential. According to some of the *cadres* interviewed, senior executives and top management are not indifferent to collective disapproval, in particular if *cadres* hold a union position. The ruling strata are indeed concerned about maintaining social peace within a company, and the slightest sign of discontent, especially among *cadres*, triggers alerts. Collective discussions take place more frequently when measures or decisions leading to discontent are widely resented.

The survey also identified several occasions in which *cadres* adopted a stance of withdrawal in relation to work and a company. They may then decide to take the foot off the accelerator, and no longer be as fully committed as before. *Cadres* may also not wish to give such priority to their work and to the prospects of career promotion in which they previously believed on arriving at the company or at the start of a stimulating project. *Cadres* may then considerably rebalance their working and private lives, the latter having been neglected during the phases of intense engagement. They then feel themselves to be working normally, putting in the effort they believe matches their employment contract. Such readjustments take place when *cadres* are disappointed by insufficient rewards obtained from previous efforts, for example when they fail to get a bonus. A *cadre* may then decide to do less, to leave work earlier in the evening. This attitude was clearly observed in a young *cadre*, who had virtually broken completely with the company culture and who

had just had his first child. To take better care of his child, he asked his managers for a cut in working time and more flexible hours.

7. Conclusion

French salaried employees benefiting from the occupational status of a *cadre* (or manager) have not been spared the mutations of globalised capitalism. The latter began to emerge in the late 1970s, in the wake of a series of political and financial reforms, and changed the economic environment in which companies operate. In this context, the hierarchical relationships which existed within this specific category of the French labour market began to change, becoming more sanitised and consensual. Given these hierarchical relationships, the unionisation of *cadres* led to more individualised practices emerging in resolving work-place problems. Such individualist behaviour is not incompatible with the expression of informal criticisms, particularly concerning working conditions, how companies are managed or even the contemporary evolution of the economy, such as shareholder domination. But it needs to be asked whether such criticisms, often made *sotto voce* in private during interviews for this research, can find concrete outlets, especially via traditional collective forms of organisation. Moreover, such criticisms may themselves be subject to policies seeking to disarm and neutralise them, as for example when *cadres* feel themselves to be responsible for their own problems at work, rather than assigning responsibility to the organisation of work or the strategic decisions of top management. Lastly, *cadres'* feeling of powerlessness also needs further analysis: this results from overall economic forces whose mechanisms and issues *cadres* are not always able to decipher, given the complexity and remoteness of the forces at work. These questions merit attention in pursuing the analysis of relationships at work, as they are unfolding within the context of financial globalisation.

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