Fighting for the factory, only to die for it
The exemplary fight of the former Givors glassworkers

French sociologist Pascal Marichalar recently published a noteworthy book on the mobilisation of former workers of a glassworks linked to Danone, the food giant. Several of them have developed work-related cancer. His investigation, which he accepted to resume for HesaMag, is much more than a university study. It is also a vibrant homage to a union activist, his family and the world of glassworkers.

Pascal Marichalar
Sociologist

Roland Sorbier worked in a glass factory for 38 years. He is in good health but his wife, Nicole, wants him to have medical checks because of the numerous toxic substances to which he was exposed.

Images: © Hugo Ribes (p. 39-42)
In 2001, the employees of a glassworks threatened with closure started their desperate fight to keep it open. Without success: its gates closed in January 2003. A few years later, the same people who had wanted to keep the gates open were back on the streets again, this time to have the deadly consequences of their past working conditions recognised. A contradiction? The mystery is at the heart of my book, a book resulting from an investigation conducted with (rather than on) the Givors glassworkers.

A collaborative investigation

I am a sociologist, specialised in work-related health issues. In January 2013, a colleague informed me that an association of glassworkers was seeking a collaboration with scientists to help them get the work-related cause of their diseases recognised. A few months later, I got off the train in Givors-Ville, a 20-minute ride from Lyon. In front of me I saw the tall brick chimney stack, all that remains of the Givors glassworks, established in 1749 by decree of Louis XV. Historical research presents it as the first industrial glassworks in France, as its furnaces were heated not by wood, but by coal. Smoke rose out of its chimneys for more than two-and-a-half centuries.

The reason for its closure in 2003 was the decision of the Danone Group to give up its glass-making activities, and to shift its business focus away from the container (glass) to the content (yoghurt and mineral water). The timing is explained by a leveraged buy-out opportunity which saw the group’s directors earning a lot of money by first restructuring the group and then selling it to the main competitor. The glassworkers fought the closure for one-and-a-half years. In vain.

I started by offering them a historical investigation. On the basis of interviews with former glassworkers and a lot of research in the archives I would be able to access, I suggested establishing a chronology of the working conditions to which they had been exposed and to compile a history of the action (or inaction) of the institutions responsible for protection. I originally saw this work as having two purposes: first it could help advance our “pure” knowledge – the main works on working conditions in industrial glassmaking, for example those of Joan Scott and Caroline Moriceau, relate solely to the 19th century; second, it could be used by the association in support of its action.

The glassworkers’ association accepted, despite the fact that they were looking mainly for support from doctors (luckily, they were also to gain it). I soon found myself conducting a series of long, deep-going and generally collective interviews, in which the former glassworkers remembered long-forgotten episodes of their work, both good and bad moments, trying to make sense of what had happened to them.

Working together with Laurent Gonon, a former printer and a prolific local activist, I discovered that the largest part of my work had already been done by the glassworkers and the people supporting them. They knew all about the diseases plaguing them. And they also identified the names of the toxic products to which they had been exposed. All that remained for me was to write this story, delving into the sociological mysteries running through it.

Portrait of a union representative: Christian Cervantes

Christian Cervantes is, or rather was, the key figure of my investigation. Alas, I never met him, because he died in 2012, one year before my arrival in Givors, the victim of two tumours. Throughout my investigation, his moustached and smiling face would look down on me from a picture-frame hanging on the walls of the premises occupied by the association of former Givors glassworkers.

Starting work at the glassworks in the early 1970s, Christian worked mainly on the production side. Standing in front of the machines dripping blobs of molten glass, holding a brush steeped in mineral oil, it was his job to grease the moulds – hard and very hot work, enveloped in a mist of oil and subject to incessant noise.

A CGT activist, Christian was sensitive to the question of working conditions, as his father had been killed by a machine in the neighbouring metalworking factory. Within the CHSCT, the mandatory committee for health and safety and working conditions in French companies with at least 50 employees, he and his comrades has issued warnings about the use of prohibited products, the risks associated with asbestos, the need to have spare work clothes. Repeatedly taking a stand for the union, he was sometimes punished by being given one of the most unpleasant jobs in the glassworks: taking a tractor down into the dark basement beneath the furnaces to pick up any fallen red-hot glass and bring it up to the raw materials depot.

Christian’s wife, Mercedes, had to tour the shops to find a shampoo able to get the mineral oil used for greasing out of his hair. She finally found one, in a chemist’s.

Though the glassworkers were aware of the dangerous character of their work, they were also glad to have a stable job, somewhat better paid than elsewhere, and to enjoy the dignity and prestige that went with working as a glassmaker. Above all, they were under the impression that everything had been done to minimise the risks, and that any remaining risks were unavoidable "risks of the trade".

2. The CGT is one of the three largest confederations, alongside CFDT and FO.

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she wanted to hand out a health questionnaire to the association’s members to put a figure on her intuition that something was wrong. But Christian was reticent. “You don’t bite the hand that feeds you”, he was wont to say. As one of his daughters told me, he had a strong feeling of loyalty towards the glassworks. The same was true for Laurent Gonon, the intellectual local activist who was asked by Mercedes to help her compile the questionnaire. Wasn’t this investigation going to go against all the efforts put into keeping the factory open? Nevertheless, the two ended up accepting the move. Of the 208 responses received, 98 reported cases of cancer, prompting them to move to the next stage: to identify the causes. This investigation was typical of what is called “popular epidemiology”. Without the backing of scientists or institutions, the victims themselves have to do all the research and correlation work.

Going through the archives and listening to the testimonials of former glassworkers, Laurent Gonon ended up identifying a number of carcinogenic products and work situations. Apart from the shift work, the asbestos, silica or nickel, there were other more insidious risk factors, for instance the mineral oils used for greasing the moulds. The safety factsheet of one of the products clearly stated that it was not dangerous when used correctly. But what did the usage instructions say? “Do not heat!” Unbelievably, the product was used to grease glass moulds onto which a blob of 800°C molten glass fell every second. On being heated, the oil decomposes into a mist of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), highly carcinogenic substances.

The glassworkers were indignant when they found out that certain products were known to be dangerous, but that they had not been informed. Becoming aware of all this ultimately converted them into ‘health crusaders’, spurred on by the surprise closure of the factory. After having given everything to keep the factory running and produce high-quality work, they found themselves confronted with the indifference of the bosses and their disdain towards the workers and what they did. A profitable business was sacrificed, as were many of its workers.

Managing the glassworkers’ feeling of injustice

In autumn 2009, the glassworkers’ association called for, and obtained, a meeting in Givors town hall with representatives of the State. “We want collective recognition of the occupational diseases”, they stated, under the impression that this would be the first step towards getting justice. But they were told that things were not that easy. In France, as elsewhere, recognition of an occupational disease, i.e. the granting of compensation by a state-run system providing insurance against occupational risks, is always on an individual basis, needing to be gone through by each individual worker.

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The procedure for obtaining compensation for occupational diseases is the main way used by the public institutions to channel the victims' feeling of injustice. The bottom line: justice is done when the victim receives a lump sum of money, in compensation for a disease listed in the relevant texts. As long as one is not "recognised", one cannot legitimately claim to be a victim. And when one finally gains recognition, one is no longer a victim, as the damage has been "repaired" (i.e. compensated).

The Givors glassworkers are very dissatisfied with these procedures, as evidenced by the fact that they have all done the same work and have developed the same diseases.

It is also a complex procedure, weighed down by bureaucratic hurdles and fraught with absurd decisions which in most cases have nothing at all to do with the scientific knowledge on the possible links between work and health. Again, Christian Cervantes' story is exemplary. After having initiated the procedure to have his cancer recognised as an occupational disease, he told his health insurance company about the complications arising from the second tumour. He was told that he would have to initiate a second recognition procedure, as this tumour was considered as a second disease, unconnected to the first. After a series of (non-justified) rejections, followed by appeals, expert reports and hearings in the social security court, Christian's two cancers were finally recognised in 2014 and 2015 (the first in the court of appeal, the second one level higher). Unfortunately, too late for Christian: he died in 2012.

I had the opportunity to visit a glassworks, at the invitation of the CHSCT secretary. I was stupefied to see production workers surrounded by the same oil mists as seen on the videos secretly made by the Givors glassworkers. In another glassworks, an employee showed me that they had just begun to use exactly the same oil as in Givors, the one decomposing into carcinogenic PAHs when heated. The same person also told me that the screen at the factory gates displaying "86 days without a work-related accident" was not telling the truth: a colleague had got a red-hot bottle in his face just a week before my visit. However, management had passed off the accident as being "en soins" (in care), i.e. suggesting that it had happened at home. "They're just out to break the record – 178 days without an accident, if I remember rightly."

New risks are appearing. The "environmental" filters installed on a number of chimneys to capture carcinogenic substances need to be regularly cleaned. This work is done by subcontractors. The workers put on overalls before going up to the small confined spaces containing the dangerous substances spewed up by the glassworks. Expert studies have shown that this type of work should have the same draconian requirements as asbestos removal. But that's not the way the employers see things.

On starting their fight for health at work, the Givors glassworkers clearly stated that prevention was one of their main objectives. One of the ways to give sense to the diseases that have carried away so many of them is to say to yourself that current and future generations will be able to enjoy their full retirement, in good health. In the glassworks, as elsewhere, the majority of the risks to which workers are exposed have been known for a long time and are avoidable. If there is one consolation, it is that your death will benefit others.

Vincent Rizzi worked in the Givors glass factory for 42 years. At work he was exposed to noise levels of up to 120 decibels. He is hard of hearing but considers himself "fortunate" as he has so far managed to avoid any more serious problems.

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