



Book review



La raison des plus forts, chroniques du procès France Télécom

(The reason of the strongest: A chronicle of the France Télécom trial)

Work coordinated by **Éric Beynel**, with illustrations by **Claire Robert**

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A chronicle of toxic management at France Télécom

Tony Musu
ETUI

“I’ll get them out one way or another, either through the window or out of the door,” said Didier Lombard in 2006 when he was CEO at France Télécom. In the following three years, there were over 60 suicides and some 40 attempted suicides among employees of the telecommunications company that was formerly the public service provider Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphones (PTT). Many cases of depression and burnout must be added to this gruesome toll, with the lives of hundreds of colleagues being blighted forever.

This tragedy arose out of the “NExT” restructuring plan, which sought

to bring about 22 000 departures and 10 000 transfers within three years, out of a labour force of over 100 000. Competition was tough in the deregulated telecoms sector, and the organisation had to be brought up to date and made more competitive and profitable. The management of France Télécom implemented a particularly brutal policy to undermine its personnel and force them either to accept internal mobility or leave voluntarily. Managers were trained to increase the pressure on their teams, reduce their freedom of action, impose changes of jobs or professions, demote the oldest and, ultimately, encourage workers “to accept or resign”. A variable proportion of the salaries of these managerial staff was even linked to their exceeding the mobility and downsizing targets set.

Following a 41-day trial between May and July 2019, the High Court in Paris delivered a landmark decision in criminal labour law.¹ Didier Lombard, his assistant Louis-Pierre Wenès and the head of human resources Olivier Barberot were each found guilty of “moral harassment” and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment, with eight months suspended, plus a fine of 15 000 euros. France Télécom, rebranded as Orange in 2013, was ordered to pay the maximum penalty for a legal entity – a fine of 75 000 euros. The civil parties (43 individual victims or beneficiaries) and the trade unions that brought the case received compensation ranging from 15 000 to 45 000 euros for non-material damage.

In *La raison des plus forts, chroniques du procès France Télécom* (*The reason of the strongest: A chronicle of the France Telecom trial*), Éric Beynel, spokesperson for the trade union Solidaires, delves into the very core of this historic case. Beyond being just a legal issue, it provided an opportunity for profound collective reflection on managerial violence. Éric Beynel asked novelists, researchers and artists to compile a narrative of the proceedings. These texts were posted online on a daily basis, allowing the case to be followed live. From the perspective of these observers, who became journalists for a day, readers can revisit the many statements, discussions and submissions that marked the proceedings, and gain an understanding

of the workings of a business strategy that deliberately sought to create “a threatening atmosphere” and “to impair working conditions”. Employees were mercilessly ground down to ensure France Télécom’s rapid modernisation and increase the value of its shares.

This was a groundbreaking case because a court acknowledged, for the first time, the notion of “institutional moral harassment”, and attributed responsibility for such behaviour to the highest level of the company. The decision also showed that such moral harassment “may be deeply rooted in the organisation of work and forms of management”.

On reading this book, the suffering at work brought about by toxic management becomes painfully clear: a downward spiral of men and women who were proud of their jobs and proud to be members of a public service, and who, because of a toxic work environment, gradually began to doubt their skills and the very meaning of their labour until it made them ill. It is impossible to remain unmoved by the experience of 32-year-old Stéphanie Moison, who threw herself from the fifth floor into the courtyard of a France Télécom building in Paris, or 56-year-old Rémy Louvradoux, who set himself on fire outside a company site in Bordeaux.

It is also impossible not to be sickened and revolted by the cynicism of these captains of industry when they declared, for example, that “this suicide trend has to end”, and by their disdain for the victims and their families. “Not one of them has offered condolences to the family of the young woman who threw herself out of the window in front of her colleagues,” notes an observer.

This is a work that should be given to everyone who fights in our neoliberal society for better working conditions which are more humane and more respectful of people’s dignity. Understanding is always essential for those who want to take action.

¹ For an analysis of this judgment, see Fabienne Scandella (2020) How France Télécom broke the law, *Hesamag* No. 21, p. 47.