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## After the Social Crisis: The Transformation of Employment Relations at France Télécom

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# After the Social Crisis: The Transformation of Employment Relations at France Télécom

## Abstract

This article contributes to debates on the conditions for strengthening collective worker voice in financialized organizations. It examines change in employment relations at France Télécom/Orange (FT) following a social crisis associated with employee suicides in 2007-2009. FT's labor unions developed creative approaches to study and publicize the negative effects of employment restructuring on workers' psychosocial health. The common framing they developed became a source of 'communicative power', used to influence how the suicides were interpreted both within the firm and in the media. This power was deployed to encourage substantive social dialogue that institutionalized worker participation in management decision-making. Findings demonstrate the potentially transformative role of discursive strategies that assert the legitimacy of worker well-being as both a measure of and input to organizational performance.

## Keywords

employment relations, employee suicides, mental health

## Disciplines

International and Comparative Labor Relations | Mental and Social Health | Unions

## Comments

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# After the social crisis: The transformation of employment relations at France Télécom

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## **Abstract**

This article contributes to debates on the conditions for strengthening collective worker voice in financialized organizations. It examines change in employment relations at France Télécom/Orange (FT) following a social crisis associated with employee suicides in 2007-2009. FT's labor unions developed creative approaches to study and publicize the negative effects of employment restructuring on workers' psychosocial health. The common framing they developed became a source of 'communicative power', used to influence how the suicides were interpreted both within the firm and in the media. This power was deployed to encourage substantive social dialogue that institutionalized worker participation in management decision-making. Findings demonstrate the potentially transformative role of discursive strategies that assert the legitimacy of worker well-being as both a measure of and input to organizational performance.

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## **1. Introduction**

France is known for having highly centralized and bureaucratic organizations (Crozier, 1964), as well as weak and divided labor unions (Laroche, 2015). State-led decentralization of collective bargaining has sought to encourage expanded social dialogue at company and workplace level (Béthoux and Mias, 2019). However, the practical impact of these social dialogue institutions on management practice has been uneven, due to French unions’ weak formal bargaining rights, low membership density, and internal ideological divisions (Amable, 2016).

France Télécom (FT) long appeared to fit the stereotype of the low-trust, hierarchical French organization. In the mid-2000s, following liberalization and partial privatization of the formerly state-owned company, management implemented restructuring measures aimed at downsizing, centralizing decision-making, and reorganizing work via consolidation and increased specialization. These measures became the focus of negative media attention and state intervention following a wave of employee suicides in 2007-2009. Management responded by negotiating a series of social accords with FT’s labor unions, which launched initiatives aimed at reducing worker stress and improving psychosocial health. This led to ongoing, institutionalized social dialogue about restructuring policies and work organization practices, reversing a trend toward increasing marginalization of worker voice.

In this article, we ask how union actions and campaigns in the period preceding and immediately following the social crisis contributed to this significant change in FT’s approach to employment relations. Findings are based on 100 interviews with union representatives, managers, and workers at FT, carried out between 2010 and 2018; as well as a review of documents, secondary literature, and media coverage of the crisis. Based on our analysis, we argue that union initiatives to study and publicize the negative effects of restructuring on worker stress prior to and following the suicides played a crucial role in encouraging a shift from labor exclusion to more meaningful social dialogue. At the time of the social crisis, the unions were able to draw on their

past research and mobilization efforts to influence how the causes of the suicides were interpreted or framed, both within the firm and among the broader public. These initiatives became a source of communicative power, allowing worker representatives to successfully assert the value and legitimacy of worker well-being as a central concern in decision-making.

The ongoing focus on joint monitoring and overseeing efforts to reduce psychosocial stress provided a platform for the gradual development of social dialogue, backed by threats that unions would bring any workplace problems or conflicts to the attention of the media. The social crisis also contributed to broader institutional change in France, in the form of a national collective agreement on harassment and violence at work. In a landmark ruling by the French courts in December 2019, members of FT's former top management team were found guilty of 'moral harassment' connected with the suicides, and sentenced to jail time and fines. It is thus a particularly interesting case for its lessons on how labor can successfully challenge 'financialized' management and institutionalize worker voice in management decisions.

This article makes several contributions. First, we contribute to a growing body of research demonstrating that labor's power resources are a critical factor explaining variation in management's commitment to social dialogue; particularly in the outcomes it delivers for workers (Wagner and Refslund, 2016; Benassi et al. 2018; Doellgast et al. 2018). While most of this past research has been based on matched case comparisons, our study examines a shift over time from labor exclusion to inclusive social dialogue within a significantly financialized firm (Chabrak et al. 2016) in a liberalizing economy (Baccaro and Howell, 2017). An alternative argument holds that social dialogue depends on employer interests in economic returns from coordination with unions (Hall and Soskice, 2001), often rooted in productivity coalitions between export-oriented firms and core worker representatives (Hassel, 2014). Our findings suggest that unions can mobilize new power resources to strengthen institutional support for worker voice, even where there is a weak initial perceived alignment of economic interests or where that alignment is breaking down due to changes in markets and ownership structures.

Second, our findings contribute to debates concerning the conditions for unions to develop and mobilize new power resources. Here we draw on the comparative political economy literature on

discursive or ideational forms of power (Schmidt, 2008; Kinderman, 2017; Rothstein, 2018), as well as employment relations research on communicative power (Müller and Platzer, 2017; Geelan, 2013) and narrative resources (Lévesque and Murray, 2013). We show that FT's unions succeeded in overcoming declining institutional power through developing new forms of 'communicative power', which we define as the capacity to communicate the value of a group's interests and concerns in a way that increases their legitimacy within a decision-making field. Our analysis is original in evaluating the relationship between two forms of communication that are typically studied and theorized separately: internal communication aimed at building a coherent narrative or interpretive frame among the workforce; and external communication with the public, customers, and the state.

## **2. Labor power and social dialogue**

According to the comparative capitalisms literature circa the early 2000s, employers in most western European 'coordinated' models of capitalism viewed social dialogue as a support for or complement to economic competitiveness (Hall and Soskice, 2001). However, it is becoming a truth universally acknowledged that these employers are no longer in want of strong and independent unions (if they ever were). European employers' move away from a public commitment to social partnership has been well documented at the national policy level (Kinderman 2017). At the organizational level, individual employers have sought (and gained) greater control 'over wage determination, hiring and firing and the organization of the workplace' (Baccaro and Howell, 2017:1). This increasingly takes the form of institutional avoidance. For example, Behrens and Dribbusch (2018) find that growing numbers of German employers are opposing works council elections and intimidating works council candidates.

At the same time that employers' discretion has increased, they also face growing pressures and incentives to pursue short-term profits and share price maximization. The financialization of organizational objectives has been argued to drive a host of management practices that shift risks onto workers, including work intensification, job and pay insecurity, and suppression of worker voice (Cushen and Thompson 2016). These practices replace a logic of voice with a logic of exit, whereby employers secure worker effort through market-based incentives and fear of job loss,

rather than through high commitment practices emphasizing employee involvement, skill development, and job security (Doellgast et al. 2018: 18-19).

In this more hostile environment, labor unions have sought to develop and access new power resources to strengthen worker voice (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). One important battleground concerns how the workforce, the wider public, and policy makers perceive the legitimacy of union demands for management strategies that balance profit-based objectives with worker well-being -- which we define here as encompassing psychosocial health and economic security. Worker representatives typically frame these demands in two ways. First, worker well-being can be valued as an end in itself, based on the idea that the firm is a social institution with responsibilities to its employees as critical stakeholders (Frege 2005). Second, worker well-being can be valued as contributing to organizational performance via increased worker motivation, commitment, and knowledge-sharing (Guest, 2017) or reduced burn-out and absenteeism (Pfeffer, 2018). Both framings can be viewed as ‘counter-hegemonic’ where the prevailing discourse privileges shareholder rights and ties organizational performance to cost minimization and management-directed flexibility.

In this article, we argue that social dialogue is likely to be strengthened where worker representatives succeed in communicating the legitimacy of worker well-being through one or both of these framings: as a measure of, and/or as or a contributing factor to, organizational performance. Through influencing discourse, labor builds communicative power, which we define as the capacity to assert or communicate the value of a group’s interests and concerns in a way that increases their legitimacy within a decision-making ‘field’ (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). In the context of labor dynamics, unions can use communicative power to shape the field in which organizational practices are decided, as well as the broader regulatory framework that constrains or enables these decisions.

In the employment relations literature, the term ‘communicative power’ is often used to describe power gained through successful outward communication with the public or the workforce; or the ability to reach diverse constituencies through multimedia networks (Geelan, 2013; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). This term traditionally has a broader meaning,

however: it was used by Arendt (1969) to describe power that is not exercised by individuals employing force to pursue their own objectives or self-interest, but instead grounded in ‘the potential of a common will formed in noncoercive communication’ or based on reaching a mutual understanding. It is a necessary component of ‘agenda setting’ power, whereby actors are able to exert power over the range of acceptable practices or policies considered in a decision-making arena (Lukes, 2005).

Our conceptualization of communicative power has both an internal and an external component, and so builds on two sets of literature. The first focuses on what we call ‘internal communicative power’, or worker representatives’ capacity to shape organization- or sector-level discourse concerning organizational objectives and management policies. This draws on Lévesque and Murray’s (2013, pp.777-778) concept of narrative resources, which unions use to successfully frame conflicts and mobilize workers and other stakeholders. They argue that these resources are central to unions’ strategic capacity, to affect change at workplace level, through their discursive ability to set an autonomous agenda that is different from the prevalent managerial perspective (Lévesque and Murray, 2005).

Unions can challenge management narratives concerning the necessity of cutting costs or increasing flexibility through establishing a counter-narrative that resonates with the workforce. Rothstein (2018, pp.2-3) shows, for example, that works councils in German high-tech firms had most success in resisting employers’ discursive strategies where they framed collective action in a way that resonated with workers’ occupational identity. Tapia et al. (2017) argue that recent campaigns to organize low-wage workers in the US succeeded where they adopted intersectional strategies organizing around workers’ multiple and intersecting identities. This research suggests that unions’ discursive framing via internal communication with its members and the workforce can be crucial to mobilizing workers, through establishing a shared understanding of problems and their root causes.

A second stream of literature has analyzed labor’s capacity to represent its own grievances and mobilize support from the public through effective external communication strategies. Where successful, these strategies build what can be termed ‘external communicative power’. This is

consistent with Müller and Platzer's (2017: p.292) definition of communicative power as 'the ability of trade unions to engage in public debate and to (ideally) win the battle of ideas by successfully influencing public opinion and discourse and by ensuring the long-term presence and effectiveness of trade union ideas in social and public space'. For example, the California Farm Workers transformed their dispute into a civil rights struggle through using an original pilgrimage-style march to attract media attention and gain public support (Ganz, 2009). Similarly, in a recent campaign to insource cleaning work at a London University, the union used visible public actions to draw media attention to the disparity between the cleaners' poor working conditions and the university's reputation as a progressive institution (Pannini, 2018)

These examples show how countervailing power can be built through articulating a message that resonates with the public. This strategy of external communication has proven particularly effective when the targeted organization is heavily reliant on its brand reputation and sensitive to consumers' choices. However, while fear of customer reprisals can be a powerful incentive for a short-term change in management practice, it can be limited without a more substantive change in industrial relations and regulatory institutions (Jackson and Rathert, 2017). External communicative power is thus likely to be most effective where it also strengthens the formal institutional or legal framework supporting worker voice.

Past research has typically analyzed these two forms of power separately. On the one hand, successful internal communication with members and the workforce develops a shared framework that promotes worker mobilization and internal solidarity. On the other hand, successful external communication frames workers' grievances in a way that resonates with the public and gives broader legitimacy to union demands. In this article, we argue that internal and external communicative power can be particularly effective in increasing the legitimacy of workers' concerns within a decision-making field where they are part of a joint strategy to build a coherent counter-narrative to that presented by management. In the remainder of the article, we examine the case of France Télécom, in which these two spheres were strategically and practically linked; resulting in significant strengthening of social dialogue within the company as well as increased institutional support for social dialogue on psychosocial health in France.

### **3. Methods and case selection**

Our analysis is based on two studies carried out at France Télécom between 2010-17. The first was a comparative study of organizational restructuring and job quality in 10 US and European incumbent telecommunications firms. In France, 30 interviews were carried out with labor and management representatives between 2010 and 2012, at the beginning of the changes discussed.

The second study focused on field technicians within FT's technical units. In 2011, 54 interviews were carried out in three technical units with field technicians and managers, with a focus on the experience of this group of employees with changes in work organization in the mid-2000s (Bellego, 2013). In 2013, the challenges associated with implementing multi-skilled teams in this group of field technicians were evaluated through several focus groups and 12 interviews. In 2016-17 we interviewed two union officials, a field technician, and an FT department manager to update information on the progress of work reorganization and the union's role. In total, we conducted 100 interviews.

Our case selection allows us to examine what Seawright and Gerring (2008: p.303) refer to as an 'influential case' within France that might 'affect the overall set of findings for the whole population'. The social crisis (and its resolution) at FT is both representative of a broader trend in France toward intensifying social dialogue over psychosocial working conditions and has been an important driver of this intensified social dialogue. In international comparison, FT can also be seen as representing an 'extreme case', with an outcome that 'lies far away from the mean of a given distribution' (Seawright and Gerring 2008: p.301). It provides an unusual example of a firm undergoing a dramatic shift from labor exclusion to social dialogue in a short period of time. Findings thus provide insights into a distinctive process of institutional change within France while also contributing to theory development concerning the conditions for strengthening worker voice in other contexts.

France has long been viewed as a paradoxical case in regard to worker power and voice. On the one hand, France is a 'social European country' with institutionalized collective bargaining at national and sectoral level, strong union capacity to mobilize strikes in key sectors (Bérout et al., 2008), and a 'dense network' of social dialogue institutions (Howell, 2009, p.230). On the other

hand, these institutions have uneven impact on management practice, hindered by low membership density (around 8%), weak formal bargaining rights, and significant internal divisions in the French labor movement (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2006).

The counterparts to weak and divided labor unions are strong and hierarchical employers. France's culture of 'managerial unilateralism' has persisted (Goyer and Hanké, 2004), as employers continue a pattern of marginalizing or opposing efforts to strengthen social dialogue (Chatriot, 2012). Schmidt (2003, p.541) observed that French CEOs increased their autonomy over time, in part though using the discourse of 'shareholder value' to avoid demands by labor and subcontractors on the one hand; and to by-pass government intervention on the other. This is particularly evident in companies like FT where the government still holds shares (Alvarez, 2015).

Unions have adopted a range of strategies to contest restructuring and regain voice under these challenging conditions. Case studies in France have shown evidence of union success in mobilizing power resources to gain favorable results in cases of major organizational restructuring and downsizing (Dupuis, 2018); most visibly in the case of tactics relying on 'Bossnapping' to achieve short-term gains (Parsons, 2013). Survey and case study findings suggest that French unions may be changing their 'repertoire of collective action' toward intensified participation, via 'strategic workforce management' and 'method agreements' (Didry 2013: p.533), with particular emphasis on psychosocial issues (Béthoux et al. 2015). At the same time, Béthoux and Mias (2019) find that these social dialogue practices and outcomes vary significantly at the local level, due to differences in how local management and unions react to similar legal requirements.

The French context is thus particularly well suited for investigating the conditions under which unions are able to challenge management practices that harm worker well-being, in an institutional setting characterized by moderate formal support for social dialogue. Our case study France Télécom (rebranded as 'Orange' in 2013) is in many ways typical of the hierarchical, unilaterally managed (and increasingly shareholder-oriented) French company. FT is France's largest telecommunications firm, with over 100,000 employees across its mobile, landline,

internet, and IPTV service market segments. It held a monopoly in landline services until privatization and liberalization began in 1996-1998. The French government held around 27% of shares in the company at the time of our research.

Due to its public sector legacy, a large proportion of employees have a special employment status as *fonctionnaires* whose working conditions are determined by centralized civil service negotiations. In 1995, they made up 97% of the workforce; falling to 60% in 2013 and to less than 40% in 2019. The first collective agreement for private law employees at FT was negotiated in 1991 by four unions: CGT, CFDT, FO, CFTC and CFE-CGC. During our research, CGT and CFDT, together with the more radical SUD, had the highest membership at FT, followed by FO and CFE-CGC.

Typical of large French companies, FT has a complicated system of workplace representation. In the late 2000s, there was a central works council, 21 works councils for FT's central business unit, and additional ones for subsidiaries. There were also many workforce and union delegates, and around 300 local health and safety councils. Union members have a priority to be candidates in these elections; and thus they are an important measure of support for each union. The most successful were CGT, SUD and CFDT (in this order). Participation in these elections has traditionally been over 70% (Du Roy, 2009, p.219).

In the following sections, we describe the restructuring measures pursued by FT in the mid-2000s; the unions' response in the period before and during the social crisis; and the changes that occurred in labor relations after the social crisis.

#### **4. Restructuring, social crisis, and social partnership**

##### ***4.1. Restructuring, deskilling, and the 'social crisis' (2000-2008)***

France Télécom made its initial public offering in 1997, retaining majority State ownership until 2004. FT took on debts of 70 billion Euros to make acquisitions in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as the mobile group Orange. This crippling debt, combined with declining market

share due to liberalization and the bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2001, led to a plummeting share price and significant financial problems.

In 2006, CEO Didier Lombard presented the 3-year NExT (*Nouvelle Experience des Télécommunications*) plan, which included downsizing 22,000 employees and encouraging 14,000 job changes. ‘From 2006, everyone was really oriented towards the question: am I going to be one of the 22,000 or not?’ (FT CCUES rep, 18/05/12). Management also launched a plan for restructuring human resources called ‘ACT’: *Accompagner ou Adapter les Compétences*.

‘The unions dubbed this *Allez Casse Toi* [Get lost] [...] They set up structures called “spaces for development”. In fact, these were spaces for pushing people to either leave or change their jobs. They eliminated your job, and put you in this cell – a kind of reclassification cell.’ (FT CFDT representative, 12/05/10)

There was a policy at this time called ‘Time to Move’, requiring employees to change jobs every three years. One manager described the motivation as:

‘To create chaos – to create movement. To encourage people to move, that can be necessary, but that is not how it was done [...] Managers had quantified objectives to move people out of the company. For example, a manager of a team would have 20-25 people, he could have the goal over the year to get rid of 3 people [...] Regardless of how you do that, to push out people who are civil servants through making them want to leave. When you start to give people goals, telling them they have to push out two in a year, etc. that ends in a catastrophe.’ (FT manager, 30/06/10)

Managers were given special training on how to meet these objectives, often based on ethically questionable methods (Diehl and Doublet, 2010, pp.89-90). In some cases, employees were required to relocate on short notice, to force them into retirement or to quit their job.

A longer-term trend within FT was increased centralization of control, based on a narrower division of labor and intensified monitoring. Within the technician units we studied, this was

widely viewed as impinging on traditions of professionalism and trust, as well as generating significant inefficiencies.

‘They tried at the highest level of management to organize everything mathematically [...] And so they began to manage more and more tightly, without necessarily always understanding what is done at the level of work organization for the people and how they did their work in practice.’ (FT CFDT representative, 30/06/10)

In the past, technicians had been the *‘fer de lance’* (spearhead) of the company, with a high level of broad skills that allowed them to independently manage their daily work and technical projects. Restructuring was aimed at constraining this autonomy, via breaking up tasks, centralizing and professionalizing scheduling, and substituting technology for skills.

Between 2008 and 2010, more than 40 FT employees committed suicide, out of a workforce of around 100,000 (Saltmarsh, 2010). This was widely reported in the French and international media beginning in 2009 as a ‘wave of suicides’. Many of those committing or attempting suicide left notes or made statements blaming stress associated with draconian management practices or forced relocations and downsizing (Waters, 2014). In one graphic example, a technician stabbed himself during a management meeting after being told his job was going to be cut (Chrisafis, 2009). Top managers initially dismissed the concerns of critics. However, negative press coverage and pressure from the French government eventually led FT to acknowledge the ‘social crisis’, resulting in the resignation of the deputy CEO who had been in charge of restructuring.

#### ***4.2 Mobilizing communicative power before and after the suicides (2007-2010)***

FT’s unions initially faced steep challenges in responding to the growing emphasis on shareholder value and management’s draconian restructuring policies. Chabrak et al. (2016) describe the restructuring measures that FT adopted from the mid-2000s as ‘financialization policies’ associated with both embracing an ideology of shareholder value and materially redistributing cash flow toward shareholders. Between 2003 and 2009, dividends increased by

460%; while employees' share of earned revenue fell by 21.5% in roughly the same time period (Chabrak et al. 2016: p.7). Palpacuer and Seignour (2019: p.8) cite a union representative who expressed incredulity that '*our* leaders would start acting like minions of Wall Street.' Unions' negotiating capacity was further weakened by a move from public to private labor law (and thus new social dialogue institutions) in 2004, when the French state gave up majority share ownership (Palpacuer and Seignour 2019: p.8).

From this initial position of weakness, the unions at FT established more effective social dialogue institutions based on reestablishing the value and legitimacy of worker well-being in organizational decision-making. Below, we discuss the role of two sets of union actions that we argue together built communicative power toward this end: first, a set of initiatives to develop a shared internal discourse concerning the link between management practices and worker stress; and, second, a campaign in the media and French courts that extended this discourse into the public sphere.

*4.2.1 Laying the groundwork: Building internal communicative power.* FT's unions built internal communicative power through two major initiatives based on union coalitions, both started in 2007, to study and publicize the impact of work restructuring on employee stress.

The first initiative was the Observatory of Stress and Forced Mobility, which was set up jointly by the CFE-CGC (representing mostly managers and engineers) and SUD-PTT (representing mostly blue-collar workers and civil servants). A small scientific committee made up of researchers, practitioners, and consultants met regularly with around 20 union activists to discuss research methods and results. The two largest unions, the CGT and the CFDT, did not participate – though they did eventually support the work of the Observatory and use its findings. The aim, as stated by Patrick Ackermann, a SUD representative who co-founded the Observatory, was to promote 'an external structure in debate with public opinion, academics, but also journalists who can, on the one hand, give employees the feeling that someone is paying attention to them, or at least that their voice has not been extinguished [...] and in addition, to build pressure on management' (Interview, 10/4/10. Cited in: Delmas, 2012, pp.161-162).

The Observatory carried out and commissioned a series of studies examining the effects of management practice on worker stress and well-being, including extensive workplace interviews and a survey answered by more than 3000 employees. This survey showed that 66% were under stress and 15% were ‘distressed’ (Palpacuer and Seignour, 2011, p.11). A book was published by journalist Du Roy (2009) reporting on the results, titled ‘Orange Stressé’. The Observatory also built relationships with workplace committees and organized annual meetings, each attended by 2-300 worker representatives as well as journalists and employees from other large companies.

A separate creative initiative was spearheaded by SUD and the CGT, also in 2007. Both unions jointly commissioned the development of a play by the theater company NAJE (*Nous n’Abandonnerons Jamais l’Espoir*). NAJE followed an approach called the ‘theater of the oppressed’ where exploitative situations are presented to the people experiencing that exploitation – and then they are called to come on stage ‘to replay it but by changing the course of action’ (Palpacuer and Seignour, 2011, p.12). The play’s directors read FT documents and interviewed employees to develop the script, and NAJE then performed the play at works council meetings between 2007 and 2010 and distributed DVDs across the company. The play was also shown at one of the Observatory’s annual meetings and publicized on its website, demonstrating ‘a form of mutual support between converging, if different, forms of action’ (Palpacuer and Seignour, 2011, p.13). This was a particularly innovative strategy, financed through cultural budgets of the works councils (and thus indirectly by FT itself) – but used to mobilize the workforce around a critique of management practices. An important aspect of the plays was also to present the dilemmas union representatives faced in challenging management practices and representing workers within the company.

These different initiatives started from a critique of management practices based on maximizing shareholder value and cutting short-term costs. Unions took different views on ideological positions and tactics. However, they came to frame the psychosocial problems facing the FT workforce in a similar way: first (and primarily), as a failure to value worker well-being as part of the company’s broader social responsibilities; and second, as a failure to value workers’ contribution to organizational performance. The below two quotes from representatives of the more conservative CGC and the leftist CGT both emphasize this dual framing:

‘By choosing only the financial position, [FT] made cuts, a lot of cuts, and therefore the customers were not necessarily very happy and the employees even less. What we have done in the last five years is that we have analyzed all these processes and created, for example, the Observatory of Stress for three years [...] we focused on two things: the organization of work and the suffering at work on the one hand, and the strategy of the company and the financial strategy on the other. And it is on these two aspects that we tried to focus our action. [...] we said: the staff is in a difficult situation, and the real cause is the absence of strategy and the financial conditions that make us always distribute more dividends.’ (FT CGC representative, 1/7/10)

‘Our analysis of the evolution of FT, including the movement in the private sphere, says that they undertook financial adventures that have virtually driven FT to bankruptcy. [...] Where the staff has agreed to make an effort, it was made and they fixed the debts. However the feeling is that instead of giving flexibility to employees, it has been given to shareholders and the workforce is suffering.’ (CGT official, 11/3/10)

*4.2.2. Interpreting the causes of the suicides: Mobilizing external communicative power.* As the number of suicides increased between 2008 and 2010, the unions sought to influence public discourse concerning the causes. FT management sought to frame the suicides as a private matter, and thus not linked to workplace concerns. However, the unions were prepared to counter this:

‘Findings [from the Observatory of Stress] were publicized, some say over-mediatized, and largely and decisively contributed to raising awareness beyond the walls [...] We described the multi causality of suicides: just because they have taken place at home, their cause doesn’t just fall within the private sphere and not the professional sphere.’ (FT CGC representative, 8/12/11)

Delmas (2012) observes that the unions were able to use their work in the Observatory to shift the media's approach to reporting on the suicides from an emotional to a more rational, scientifically grounded perspective: 'Scientists, members of the Council of the Observatory [...] Each one took their turn in participating in explaining [the causes of the suicides] in the media.' (Interview with Pierre Gojat, 14/11/12; cited in Delmas, 2012, p.165)

The unions also mobilized mass demonstrations, with actions focusing on cities and workplaces where the suicides had occurred. One union representative described how these mobilizations had been crucial in encouraging a shift in management approach to social dialogue:

'In the month of September, when the first suicides happened, I think that I've never seen anything like that since I've been at FT – in many locations, at the same time, thousands of employees left. That is to say that the employees walked out, and the unions were often all together... and it was then that FT said: we are opening negotiations in five areas [...] Unfortunately, they reacted because the employees said 'stop' to this wave of suicides. And I think that if we hadn't reacted like that, FT wouldn't have opened these negotiations.' (FT CGT representative, 19/05/10)

The work of the Observatory, the NAJE theatre project, and the worker mobilizations pushed FT management to commission its own survey, which initially was intended to counter what the company had been dismissing as biased, and thus 'unscientific', union-based research. In 2009, FT set up a tripartite committee to oversee a survey of worker stress made up of representatives from management, the consultancy firm Technologia, and the trade unions – including members from the Observatory. Patrick Ackermann (SUD) noted: "It [the survey] gives legitimacy to trade union voice. That is, everything that was said before, that was suspected of being union propaganda, now ... They really pointed out things that we did not even dare to talk about" (Interview, cited in Henry 2012, pp.59-61). Technologia surveyed 110,000 FT employees, gaining close to an 80% response rate; and carried out thousands of interviews across the company. The findings revealed 'strong concerns' for the surveyed employees, resulting in the loss of the 'pride of belonging to France Télécom' and a 'general feeling of depression' (Le

Figaro, 2009). The survey identified particular concerns in the technician units with stress associated with task fragmentation and loss of professional identity.

The FT case was not only meaningful in bringing negative public attention to the company, but also because it encouraged intervention by the state, including government pressure on the deputy CEO to resign. Palpacuer and Seignour (2019: p.9-10) point out that the Minister of Labor played a central role in pushing for action by FT on worker stress and for strengthened national regulation in this area -- including setting a 2010 target for implementation of a national collective agreement on harassment and violence at work, which established a legal requirement on employers to evaluate psychosocial risks.

The unions also directly appealed for state intervention through the courts. SUD, eventually joined by the other FT unions, filed a formal complaint to the Paris prosecutor's office concerning FT's abusive practices. In response, an inquiry was opened in 2010 to examine FT's human resource policies.

'We filed a complaint against the company and against its managers for their responsibility for the development of the ACT Plan and 22,000 job cuts and all the consequences, including the death of our colleagues. [...] it seems to us complementary to the creation of a balance of power in favor of employees to use the law through judges *to remind employers of their responsibilities not only to the stock market and shareholders but also for the health of employees.* That practice is extremely important and relatively new for our union, because this legal activity is done fairly regularly when we judge that there is likely to be litigation – but now we are attacking on a theme that was quite innovative, which is *the responsibility of employers to the health of workers.*' [emphasis added] (FT SUD representative, 28/06/10)

This quote illustrates again the unions' framing of the crisis as following from a single-minded focus on shareholder value, at the expense of workers' well-being – as well as the intentional way in which they sought to influence public discourse concerning employers' broader social responsibilities.

The inquiry concluded in 2016, with the Paris prosecutor recommending that former FT executives be put on trial for ‘destabilizing’ employees and ‘workplace harassment’. Management policies at the time were accused of creating a ‘professional climate that provoked anxiety’ at the time of a ‘delicate restructuring’ of the company (BBC, 2016). The trial then took place over the summer of 2019, leading to further press coverage and extensive public debate. Management’s focus on shareholder value to the detriment of worker well-being again was a central theme in the media and public fora debating the causes of the suicides (e.g. Radio Parleur 2019). A song titled ‘Le Blues des Telecom’ was released in May 2019, with the refrain: ‘Louis-Pierre Wenes [*former Deputy CEO*] sounds the end of the recess as/ the shareholders demand to maximize returns/ when desperate employees kill themselves’ (L’Inconsolable, 2019). The verdict was announced in December 2019: the courts found the former CEO, Deputy CEO, and Head of HR guilty of ‘moral harassment’, giving each one-year sentences (with eight months suspended) and fines of €15,000. Four other members of the management team were given suspended sentences, and FT/Orange was ordered to pay fines and damages of around €3.5 million.

These initiatives and actions helped to accomplish two goals: first, to bolster the unions’ framing of the suicides as connected to management restructuring policies that privileged shareholder interests over worker well-being; and, second, to keep public attention focused on the company and its employment policies.

#### ***4.3. Integrating unions into decision-making (2009-2018)***

The different tactics described above contributed to the perception among France Télécom management that it was necessary to partner with the unions to win back public trust and reverse their negative image. As a result, the status of company and workplace-level consultation bodies significantly increased. Union representatives were able to position themselves as key stakeholders within the firm, but also as potential veto players who could damage the company’s

public image. In the period following the social crisis, unions used this communicative power to institutionalize their role in decision-making within the firm.

In September 2009, FT opened up negotiations with the unions on a series of social accords, aimed at addressing the problems behind the social crisis. They reached five agreements, including one on voluntary mobility; a commitment to survey employees every 2-3 years on stress; and agreements on breaks, holidays, and work life balance. The unions differed in their willingness to sign specific agreements, with the CGT only signing those on mobility and monitoring of stress, and SUD refusing to sign any of them. A Monitoring Committee was attached to every agreement, but traditionally only unions that signed an agreement had seats on the committee.

One union representative involved in the negotiations described a change in the willingness of management to take the negotiations seriously:

‘When they received the first conclusions of Technologia, that was a shock and then attitudes changed a little, and we returned to negotiations, advancing very slowly, but advancing nonetheless. And most notably on questions of mobility: that was a very important point. [...] France Télécom wanted to be able to move its employees wherever it wanted at its discretion and without paying, either. So in January or February, management agreed that mobility is no longer necessary, except in exceptional cases. That was the big advance in the negotiation.’ (FT CFDT representative, 4/05/10)

Meanwhile, management invested considerable resources and time in social dialogue. The formal negotiations with the unions involved more than 60 full-time staff on the management side, with a plenary session and five working group meetings over a year. A member of the top management team responsible for employment relations explained the development of this process:

‘the very dense process we had for the year was very important in that sense, because it creates a kind of solidarity. It's a process of the group dynamics, because we have been in

the same room for hours, for days. So and when I come back to this, I can see that the atmosphere of the meetings changed. At the beginning it was very tense, very, very tense; so they ask for recess, and we don't know if we were able to come back to the room and we don't know if they will say: OK, [Interviewee], Barberot [HR Director] we don't want to discuss with you. We didn't know that, so for the questions we had to create this, and at the end sometimes we had some love.' (FT Director, 29/6/10)

Union representatives from both CGT and CFDT reflected on how difficult it was for both management and the unions to negotiate over work organization:

'This national plan, it is an exception in France... it is FT who opened negotiations on work organization – and normally, this is the private domain of the employer. [...] Management methods, that is a bit of a new thing, but on work organization, that is very difficult, because on the one hand, management isn't used to talking with unions about work organization... and the unions are a little bit surprised that they are speaking to them about this.' (FT CGT representative, 19/05/10)

'We were not prepared to discuss work organization. And I believe that all unions have found it extremely difficult to know what to ask. It was very difficult, and we didn't have enough time or employees who were sufficiently educated or equipped to ask the employees what they need.' (FT CFDT representative, 4/05/10)

Although union participation in social dialogue over restructuring remained challenging, the social accords were significant in putting in place structures and mechanisms for this to occur.

The public visibility of the social crisis at FT ensured that unions' communicative power was sustained to some degree over time. Both union and management representatives observed that the public still refers to 'France Télécom syndrome' as a term for stress related to work restructuring; and thus management is strongly motivated to prevent concerns with stress from getting into the media. The unions can threaten to '*re-mediatise*' work organization issues if management excludes them from decision-making. Regular surveys and new requirements that management practices be subjected to a psychosocial-impact analysis were both tools that

integrated the unions into decision-making in areas such as restructuring, working time policy, and work organization. A union member of the Observatory on Stress stated: ‘We really have seen a change in approach; our expertise is now always necessary, not to evangelize the direction but to ... redirect what is not working and then after, when the questionnaire will be analyzed, we will not leave it to the leisure and the pleasure of management to be the only one to interpret the results’ (Pierre Gojat, 14/11/12 – cited in Delmas 2013, p.169).

In the technician units that we studied, the strengthening of social dialogue institutions contributed to a gradual but significant change in the culture and practice of employment relations. Unions were seriously consulted on changes and many of their suggestions were implemented. Local unions and management showed greater willingness to work together, with the development of a more partnership-based culture.

Concretely, strengthened social dialogue led to changes in work organization aimed at returning discretion to frontline workers. In one example, a new initiative to create multi-skilled teams brought together technicians from four major specializations. Managers in FT’s technician unit described the multi-skilled team initiative as part of a broader effort to improve the working environment and rebuild trust:

‘We are really in the process of changing the social contract, the business model. We were following a very prescriptive model, very top down; and then there is the model we are building now [...] The modes of operation we started to put in place with these team meetings... to share the difficulties in the field and give teams the means to deal with the difficulties they see or improve them, these are the means for us to reclaim (*reconquérir*) the men and women [of FT]. And restore their pride, responsibility, the ability to develop in their profession.’ (FT Director UI, 23/2/12)

Local union representatives were consulted over the decision to adopt the teams in different regions, and then involved in their implementation. The union representatives we interviewed observed that technicians valued improvements in discretion, communication, and problem solving. But they were still fighting on two fronts: first, to make sure workers were paid for extra

skill and time; and second, that the changes did not drive up work intensity and stress (FT CFDT and CGT representatives, 17/06/15). By 2017, technicians had secured a small wage increase associated with participation in the teams. In addition, all new technicians were recruited under a single job title, without a specialization, allowing them to move on to other skills; which the unions were evaluating for possible risks.

Work reorganization around multi-skilled teams was guided by multiple objectives – including improved coordination and problem-solving. However, this model gained influence because it was viewed by different stakeholders as meeting shared objectives of workers and management. As work reorganization now had to be evaluated in terms of its impact on worker stress and psychosocial health, they developed a ‘co-designed’ model relying on polyvalent skills and worker discretion that reversed a decade of deskilling and attempts at centralization of management control over technicians’ work. According to the managers we interviewed, this model had also contributed to increased ‘global productivity’ and reduced variation in productivity.

#### ***4.4 Evaluating distinctiveness and impact***

In our analysis above, we have sought to link the development of social dialogue at France Télécom to union actions to study and publicize the negative effects of restructuring on workers. A possible alternative argument is that the suicides presented a high salience event that would have attracted media attention and state intervention even in the absence of these union campaigns– resulting in the strengthening of worker voice that we observe.

We draw on two further sources of evidence to try to address this concern: first, a content analysis of press coverage in major newspapers; and second, a comparison between FT and similar cases. Epstein and Segal (2010) propose the method of media coverage analysis to determine the salience of specific issues in public discourse. We use evidence from French newspapers to establish the relevance of union actions and narrative in the discourse surrounding the FT crisis (see also Rabatel, 2010).

First, we carried out an analysis of press coverage of the FT suicide crisis using the Lexis-Nexis database. Following Culpepper (2010), we included the two most important French Newspapers - Le Monde (center-left), and Le Figaro (center-right). We analyzed 247 articles published between January 2008 and July 2019, using the keywords ‘suicide’ and ‘France Télécom’ to retrieve articles and then screening them for their relevance to the FT suicide crises. Figure 1 illustrates change over time in this coverage, as well as frequency of key words associated with unions’ framing of the causes of the suicides.

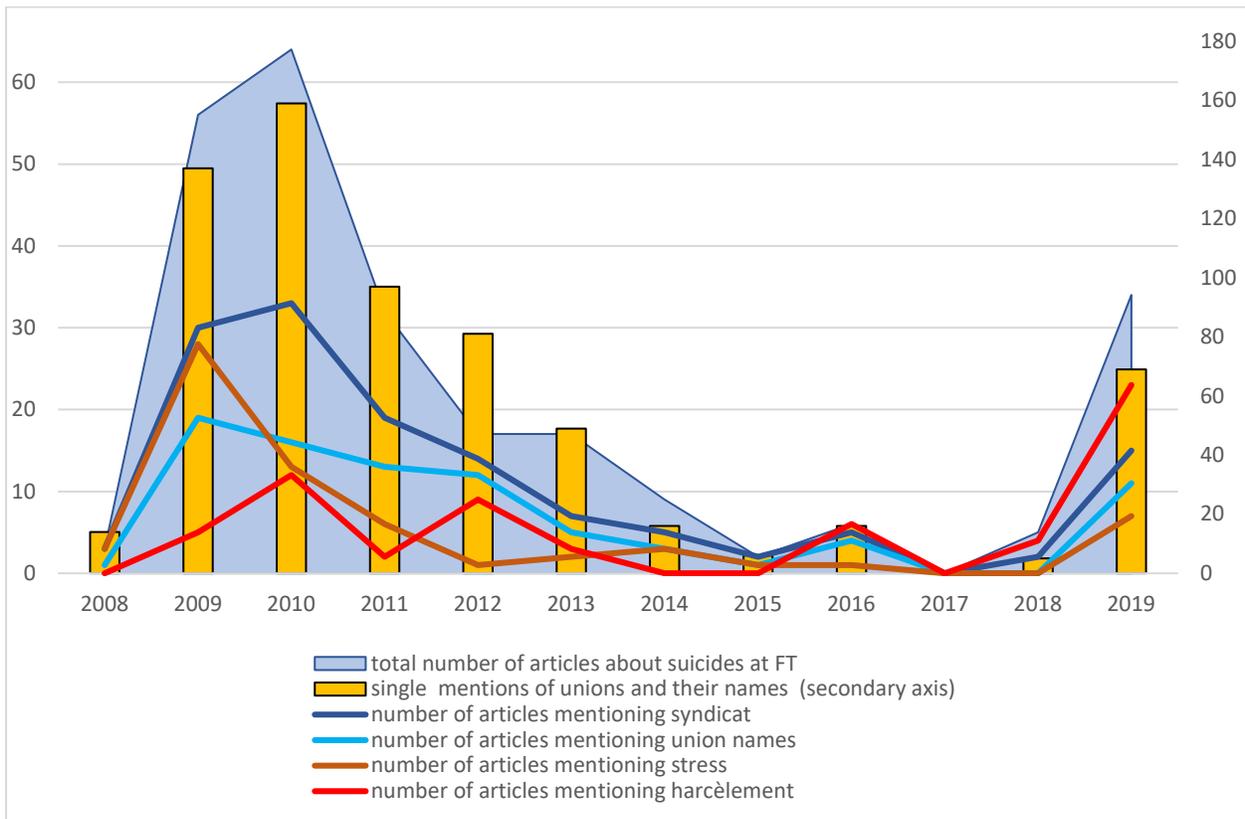


Figure 1 Media coverage of FT Suicides and references to Unions and their activities in Le Figaro and Le Monde, years 2008-2019 (Source Lexis-Nexis)

In the period of observation, Le Monde published 170 articles related to suicides at FT, and Le Figaro 77. The most intense coverage was in 2009-10, during the acute phase of the crisis. Renewed interest arose in 2019 during the trial involving FT managers. Le Monde mentions or quotes unions (*syndicat/s/l* or specific union names) in 67% of its articles, and a union-friendly narrative emerges very soon during the crisis years. In Le Figaro, 48% of articles mention

unions, and they more often use a management-led frame – for example, emphasizing the potential individual causes of the suicides and encouraging the reader not to fall in the rhetorical trap of ‘*l’entreprise tue*’ – the company kills (Perez, 2009). The Observatory (*Observatoire du Stress*) is mentioned in 25 articles; but nearly all of these are in Le Monde.

In discussing the causes of the suicides, ‘stress’ is included in Le Monde articles from March 2008 and ‘harassment’ (*harcèlement*) from August 2009. The first mention of harassment in Le Figaro was in 2010, when management conceded that organizational and HR strategies could be among the causes of the crisis (Landré, 2010). Figure 1 also shows how the media focused on the concept of stress at the beginning of the crisis, but then shifted attention towards harassment. This change is apparent from 2010 onward, after SUD-CGT filed a charge against FT for harassment, and consolidated in 2019 during the trial against management.

Despite the greater inclination of the center-left press to frame the suicides as linked to workplace stress and harassment, this analysis shows that more management-friendly media spaces like Le Figaro eventually also engaged with this union-led framing. This was not necessarily in agreement with the unions, but often in reporting FT management’s reactions, especially when pushed by formal complaints and trials.

Second, the high suicide rate at FT was not unique to that company. From the early 2000s, the French and international press reported on work-related suicides in a range of companies across sectors, including the car manufacturers Renault and Peugeot; Air France; and the French police – where suicides were recently reported to outnumber deaths in the line of duty (New York Post, 2019). Several of these cases also involved legal or state intervention. For example, in 2012 Renault was found guilty of gross negligence relating to three suicides from the mid-2000s (Waters, 2017: p.3). According to our analysis, however, the Renault and Peugeot crises did not receive half of the media attention dedicated to FT case in Le Monde and Le Figaro. In addition, there is no evidence that these suicides, or media attention to them, led to significant changes in management strategy at these companies. Brygo (2019) notes that organizations such as the French Railway and the Police that experienced negative publicity around suicides were investing in superficial measures such as yoga and meditation seminars, instead of confronting

the kinds of structural and organizational concerns that have been the focus of social dialogue at FT.

In order to compare FT with another ‘most similar’ case, we carried out a more detailed analysis of press coverage of suicides at La Poste. Similar to FT, La Poste carried out radical employment restructuring in the early 2000s, leading to the closure of 1/3 of postal offices. A stream of suicides was then reported in the press since 2010. Two reports, one commissioned by La Poste’s CEO in 2012 after the first notable suicides, and one carried out in 2014 by 60 occupational experts, did not lead to changes in restructuring practices. The media coverage of these suicides in *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* peaked in 2012 (total of 24); compared to FT, which had a peak of 64 articles in 2010.

A more aggressive restructuring plan, ‘*La Poste 2020: Conquérir l’Avenir*’ - comparable to FT’s *NExT* plan – was then launched in 2014. This led to tightened surveillance over workers and a push towards cost reduction (Waters, 2018). In 2016, CGT and SUD reported to the press that 50 employees had committed suicide, blaming causes similar to those at FT (Lanez, 2016). Only 8 articles that year covered these suicides. However, La Poste eventually decided to suspend the restructuring to allow talks with unions, following publication of an open letter by a group of independent medical experts urging a shift in management approach (Baujard, 2016; Waters, 2018). Thus, social dialogue was eventually initiated at La Poste, following union actions that followed a superficially similar trajectory to those at FT, and with a similar framing by unions – but with less media coverage. One could say that the La Poste case occurred ‘in the shadow’ of FT’s social crisis, and unions benefited from existing public discourse and state intervention holding employers accountable for workers’ well-being.

This comparison of similar cases demonstrates that FT was not unique in France: other large companies experienced suicides, with some media coverage. However, FT unions’ success in attracting significant media attention, encouraging state intervention, and then pushing managers to reassess their restructuring strategy and engage with worker representatives appears to be both distinctive and transformative. The FT case remains the touchstone in public discussion of extreme reactions by workers aggravated by their firms’ managerial practices, and has shaped

current discourse on trade-offs between short-term profits and worker well-being. Articles discussing crises in other companies often cite FT either as a reference for the public to contextualize the case ('France Télécom syndrome'), or as a term of comparison of causes, consequences and remedies (Rodier, 2016).

Finally, the ongoing media coverage of the 2019 trial of FT management, based on a complaint to the courts by the unions, illustrates the importance of the unions' multi-pronged strategy to communicate the social value of worker well-being. During the first three months of the trial (May-July 2019), Le Monde and Le Figaro published 34 articles covering the suicides at FT, which is more than other similar crises obtained at the peak of their suicide counts. About 70% of these articles discuss stress and managerial harassment, following the framing provided by a union-initiated lawsuit. This shows how FT unions' narrative over 10 years has remained central both to this legal dispute and the broader media coverage.

## **5. Conclusions**

This article has sought to explain the changes that occurred in employment relations at France Télécom following the social crisis associated with employee suicides in 2007-2009. FT reversed its past practices focused on top-down restructuring and 'management by stress', and shifted from marginalizing unions to engaging with them in significant social dialogue at multiple levels. FT's unions helped to bring about these changes through mobilizing communicative power. This was achieved through a dual strategy of building a coherent, evidence-based discourse among the workforce that linked restructuring with worker stress (internal communicative power), and then of presenting this narrative cohesively to the public via demonstrations, media communication, and a legal complaint (external communicative power).

Social dialogue institutions became a more meaningful vehicle for worker voice as a result of this new communicative power. Following the social crisis, workers' well-being became a legitimate objective of management practice, and was given new primacy on the agenda of management decision-making. This commitment was sustained by fears that the unions could 're-mediatize' employee stress – and underpinned by regular surveys and joint monitoring initiatives that gave unions the tools to link practices to concrete outcomes.

These developments were not unique to FT, and are reflective of broader changes in social dialogue institutions and practices in France. However, FT is distinctive for the wide-ranging and ongoing media coverage it attracted, as well as the rapid and significant transformation of social dialogue that occurred within the company. In addition, as documented by Palpacuer and Signeur (2019), the workplace struggle at FT set in motion a series of state interventions that strengthened unions' institutional power resources. Social dialogue on psychosocial risks has since become increasingly common in French firms, though its impact on management strategy is uneven (Béthoux et al. 2015). The 2019 court ruling holding management and the company responsible for 'moral harassment' sets a legal precedent that will likely make it easier for unions to challenge management practices in the courts on the basis of their impact on worker health.

More broadly, FT's experience informs debates concerning under what conditions (if any) unions are able to strengthen collective worker voice, or 'democracy at work', in financialized organizations. Labor faces significant obstacles in challenging the increased dominance of shareholder value-focused discourse (Kinderman, 2017; Rothstein 2018) and expanding managerial discretion within liberalizing social European countries (Baccaro and Howell, 2017). Our findings suggest that it is possible to establish meaningful social dialogue under these conditions; but that this requires a significant shift in management priorities. This shift is grounded in effective counter-hegemonic communication asserting the social and economic value of worker well-being. Union strategies that mobilize communicative power are increasingly necessary to ensure worker interests in healthy and secure jobs are given more equal weight: within the firm, in the public sphere, and vis-à-vis the state.

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