35 Employees Committed Suicide. Will Their Bosses Go to Jail?

French union members outside the Paris courthouse at the start of the trial of France Télécom in May.CreditCreditThibault Camus/Associated Press

By Adam Nossiter

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PARIS — In their blue blazers and tight haircuts, the aging men look uncomfortable in the courtroom dock. And for good reason: they are accused of harassing employees so relentlessly that workers ended up killing themselves.

The men — all former top executives at France's giant telecom company — wanted to downsize the business by thousands of workers a decade ago. But they couldn't fire most of them. The workers were state employees — employees for life — and therefore protected.

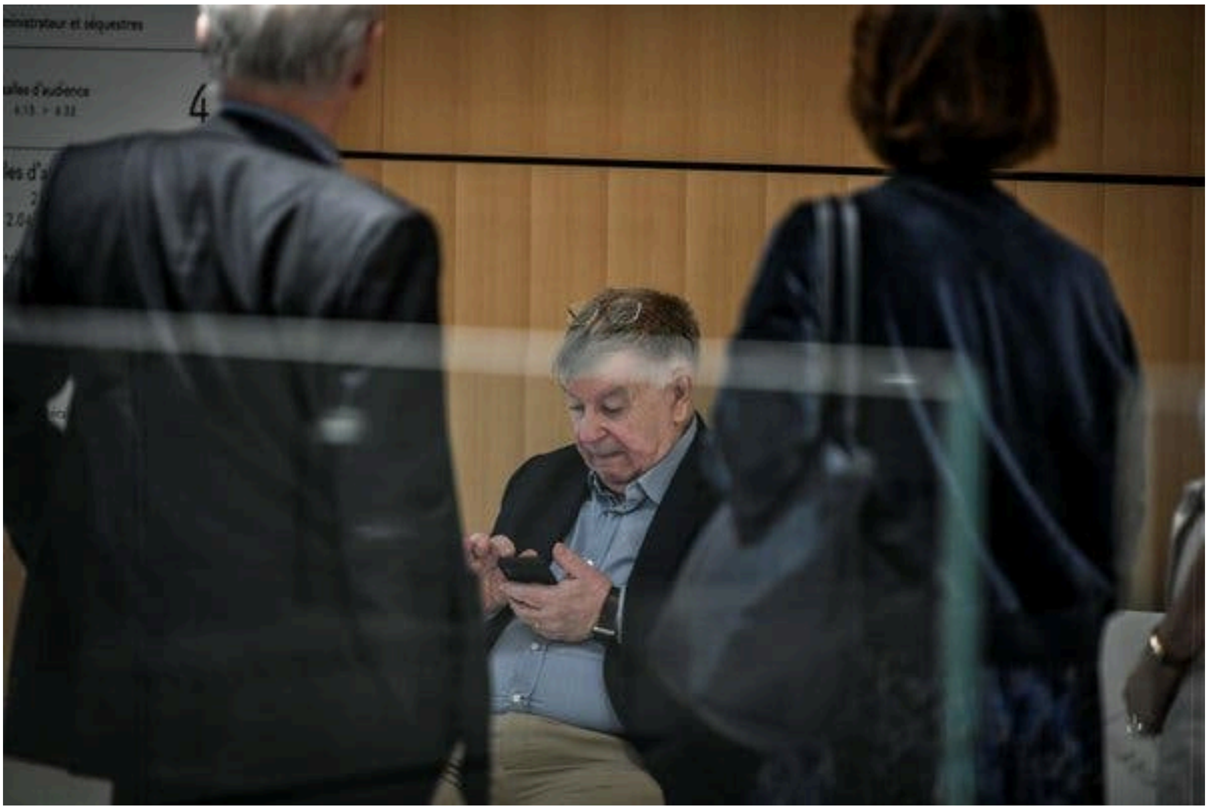
So the executives resolved to make life so unbearable that the workers would leave, prosecutors say. Instead, at least 35 employees — workers' advocates say nearly double that number — committed suicide, feeling trapped, betrayed and despairing of ever finding new work in France's immobile labor market.

Today the former top executives of France Télécom — once the national phone company, and now one of the nation's biggest private enterprises, Orange — are on trial for "moral harassment." It is the first time that French bosses, caught in the vise of France's strict labor protections, have been prosecuted for systemic harassment that led to worker deaths.

The trial has riveted a country deeply conflicted about capitalism and corporate culture, and may help answer a question that haunts the French as they fitfully modernize their economy: How far can a company go to streamline, shed debt and make money?

If convicted, the ex-executives face a year in jail and a $16,800 fine. But even before the trial wraps up on July 12, with a verdict sometime later, it has become a landmark in the country's often hostile relations between labor and management.

As President Emmanuel Macron has sought to make France more business-friendly, he has run into a buzz saw of strikes and faced a revolt among Yellow Vest protesters who accuse him of being the president of the rich. While many workers complain they struggle to make ends meet, employers say a system of generous social benefits and worker protections makes hiring onerous and stifles job creation.



Didier Lombard, the former chief executive of France Télécom, center, was recorded saying in 2007 that he would reach the quota of layoffs "one way or another, by the window or by the door."CreditStephane De Sakutin/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The trial has become a searing demonstration of those lingering tensions.

France Télécom was caught flat-footed by the digital revolution, as fixed-line subscribers dropped away by the thousands. The state ordered the company to go private in 2003, and by 2005, it was over $50 billion in debt.

Company executives thought they needed to get rid of 22,000 workers out of 130,000 — a necessity contested by the prosecution — to ensure survival.

“They were stuck, cornered,” said Michel Ledoux, one of the plaintiffs’ lawyers. “The only possibility was to make them leave, one way or another.”

Weeks of wrenching testimony about despairing employees who hanged themselves, immolated themselves, or threw themselves out of windows, under trains and off bridges and highway overpasses, have suggested that the former executives went very far in “pushing the company into the new century,” as corporate strategy dictated.

The executives include Didier Lombard, the former chief executive officer; Louis-Pierre Wenès, his No. 2; Olivier Barberot, the former head of human resources; and four others.

A grim universe of underemployment, marginalization, miscasting and systematic harassment was established at the huge company, according to testimony at the trial.

The executives “sought the destabilization of the workers,” prosecutor Francoise Benezech said in her summing up on Friday.

A France Télécom store in Paris in 2009. The state-owned, old-fashioned telephone company was caught flat-footed by the digital revolution.CreditLucas Dolega/European Pressphoto Agency

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“People who had worked outside their whole career were suddenly put in front of a computer,” said Frédérique Guillon, a worker advocate who testified at the trial, in an interview. “There were people whose work was simply taken away from them.”

Among those victims, the youngest was Nicolas Grenouville, 28, who was wearing a company T-shirt when he put an internet cable around his neck and hanged himself in a garage, Mr. Ledoux told the court this week.

“I can’t stand this job anymore, and France Télécom couldn’t care less,” Mr. Grenouville wrote shortly before his death in August 2009. “All they care about is money.”

An introspective technician used to working alone on the phone lines, praised for his scrupulousness, Mr. Grenouville was suddenly pitched into a sales job dealing with customers. He couldn’t stand it. “They threw him out into the arena without a speck of training,” Mr. Ledoux told the court.

The day before his suicide he had worked a 12-hour day with one 30-minute break. “Little Nicolas took this violence right smack in the face,” Mr. Ledoux said.

Camille Bodivit, 48, had been a planner at the company when suddenly his job description began to shift. He threw himself off a bridge in Brittany in 2009. “Work was everything for him,” his partner’s lawyer, Juliette Mendès-Ribeiro, told the court Tuesday.

“You killed my father — why?” asked Noémie Louvradoux last week, turning to the defendants, in one of the trial’s most widely reported moments. Her father, Rémy, set himself on fire in 2011 in front of a France Télécom office near Bordeaux, in despair over successive marginal reassignments.

“This isn’t going to be lacework here,” the the former head of human resources of France Télécom, Olivier Barberot, center, said in 2007. “We’re going to put people in front of life’s realities.”CreditYoan Valat/EPA, via Shutterstock

In their defense, the former executives have cited the intense pressure of a competitive and changing marketplace.

“The company was going under and it didn’t even know it,” Mr. Lombard, the ex-chief executive, testified. “We could have gone about it much more gently if we hadn’t had the competition banging on our door.”

Unfortunately for Mr. Lombard, he was recorded saying in 2007 that he would reach the quota of layoffs “one way or another, by the window or by the door.” The window is what a number of the employees chose.

“This isn’t going to be lacework here,” Mr. Barberot said in 2007. “We’re going to put people in front of life’s realities.”

To the mounting signs of distress management turned a deaf ear, testimony at the trial suggested.

Noëlle Burgi, a sociologist who worked with the employees during the suicide wave and testified at the trial, said in an interview that it was “a process of humiliation.”

“You were put in an office, underground,” Ms. Burgi said. “There was one guy who was literally kicked out of his office. He didn’t understand.”

The suicides and testimony made clear that France’s chronically high unemployment rate had left many of the workers feeling especially vulnerable.

France Télécom employees marching in Lannion after the suicide of a colleague in 2009.CreditDavid Vincent/Associated Press

“Before, when there was full employment, if you were unhappy at work, you could tell your boss to go to hell,” Ms. Guillon said.

But those conditions haven’t existed for years in France, where the labor market is stagnant and immobile by American standards, and workers have little culture of moving cross-country for a new job.

It is clear that these France Télécom employees had signed on expecting to finish their careers at the company. “Eighty percent were there to stay until the end of their professional life,” Pascale Abdessamad, a France Télécom worker who also testified, said in an interview.

Most of the employees were deeply dedicated to their work, testimony indicated. A company like France Télécom, iconic in French life for years, was an apparent lifelong security blanket.

“These companies were considered family,” Mr. Ledoux told the court. To be mistreated by one is extremely transgressive,” he said.

France’s executive caste, normally mutually supportive, has been notably silent about the executives on trial, while France’s workers have watch the proceedings with special glee.

The courtroom is filled with current and former company employees who look on with disapproval at the silent row of jacketed defendants.

“Even if the penalties are low, it will be a nice stain on their jackets,” said Noel Rich, a France Télécom employee who had come to observe the trial.

“These are guys who are used to hanging out with ministers,” Mr. Rich added. “There’s been no words of compassion for the little guy.”

Correction: July 10, 2019

An earlier version of this article included an incorrect reference to France Télécom’s financial history. By 2005, the company was over $50 billion, not $50 million, in debt.