

Renault drives change for the worse say employees

Malaise in the workplace is on the rise and coming under increasing media scrutiny. Reports often focus on “bullying petty dictators” and “victims” and ignore the work environment. The Renault CGT shop stewards have taken a different route – looking at work organisation to help explain the company’s ills, not least the spate of suicides. We met Fabien Gâche, the man behind action-oriented research that gives workers back a voice.

As told in Paris on 2 September 2013 to
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ETUI

Production lines are physically and mentally wearing. The CGT has set out to restore an attachment to work at Renault.

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When did it first become clear that things were not right at Renault?

Fabien Gâche — Complaints started rising in the mid-1990s, and things have got steadily worse since then.

The first redundancy schemes in 1984 let employees leave the company well before retirement age with pretty good severance packages. But a lot of workers had quite a hard time having to leave the company that early. Now, we have fifty-year-olds asking, "When is it my turn?" And some are even ready to take a big drop in income to go. It shows what a pass things have reached.

Renault started a pretty huge work organisation shake-up in the late 1980s. New working time arrangements were brought in which in practice meant doing away with meal breaks, cutting rest breaks and putting the production lines onto continuous operation. When I joined Renault in 1982, a whole shop would stop to eat together. There were times to discuss things and socialise. Losing break times created a big problem for union work, making it increasingly difficult to go out and meet with employees.

The problem got worse in the early 2000s when management did away with the union information time allowance, which was a legacy from the days when Renault was a state enterprise and as such entitled under

the Public Sector Democratisation Act to hold workplace meetings for employees during working hours for up to three hours a year.

A second step came in 1992 with the roll-out of the personal rate wage including to manual workers, i.e., where part of the pay depends on meeting objectives set for each employee by supervisors. At the same time, chains of command were shortened. Most supervisors were no longer in-house appointments. They were not employees that had come up through the ranks with a legitimacy derived from their acquired skills and knowledge of the job – they're now just managers. They set us what are mainly financial goals because the whole thing is, "You have to cut costs, step up the pace, reduce the scrap rate", etc. It was just one change after another.

We also observed a sizeable sociological change. In 1985, manual workers made up close to 65% of the Renault workforce, managers 5%, and the rest were supervisors, technicians, etc. Now, the job categories are more less equally divided. Another important sociological aspect is that the factories, especially the machine plants, are recruiting people with formal qualifications (occupational A-levels, higher and lower vocational training certificates, and even technical higher national diplomas), whereas before the production sectors preferred to hire people who didn't have qualifications.

Alongside these changes, Renault developed a strategy aimed at covering up the worsening working conditions. From the mid 1990s, employees came under a lot of pressure not to down tools, arguing that it would reflect badly on the company's image and that the more work stoppages there were, the more their jobs would be on the line. That was the sledgehammer argument they kept coming out with: the fewer reported work accidents and occupational diseases there were, the more likely you were to keep your job.

The CGT was not long in making the link between these changes in the business and the rise in work-related distress. How did this idea for action-oriented research come about?

FG — The first initiative dates back to 1999, when we organised a big public debate in Le Mans on work-related distress which we called, "Speak out!", the idea being to let employees talk about their experiences at work. The debate was also open to other firms in the industrial zone where the Renault factory was located. We got 1400 employees attending on one night for over three hours. We thought at the time that the initiative would let employees get their unhappiness out in the open and identify problems in the firm. It took us some time to see that we had missed our goal of creating opportunities: people went back with a sense of helplessness, thinking it was the same everywhere.

So we then asked ourselves: has the trade union work we have been doing for all these years given employees a direct influence over their own situation? We had to admit that it hadn't. It brought home to us that what trade unionists do on their own cannot change things, and that they cannot speak for other people.

"Doing the job properly, being able to say what you want to do, it's all about recognition – it's key to it."

The idea of action-oriented research with a small number of workers came about in the early 2000s, really taking shape around 2004, when former CGT confederal adviser Serge Dufour put us in touch with two occupational health academics, Philippe Davezies and François Daniellou. Looking at this kind of voluntary submission, we thought "That can't be right, people don't go to work in order to harm themselves, they go because they find something else in the work". We thought about the impact of isolation on employees' health and asked ourselves – what does work mean for an individual?

What methodology did you use?

FG — What we did was to start from scratch. Rather than asking employees "What do you want us to do?" we went out to see them and ask them: "Can you explain to me what you do in your job?"

We realised that it is precisely when an employee realises what they do that they become aware of the scope of what they do. People were pleased that we were interested in them. And it would not be long before they were telling us "Strictly, I should do so-and-so but I can't because the inspection machine's broken down". "OK, so why hasn't it been repaired?" "It hasn't been repaired because there are no spare parts in stock due to having to make savings". Or "It hasn't been repaired because the maintenance engineer has retired and hasn't been replaced". So a temporary agency worker is brought in to inspect the parts all day one at a time. And 18-20% of the parts get scrapped every day. And the bloke tells me, "Before, it was so-and-so who did that, except that so-and-so who did that was a technician, I'm just an unskilled worker. He got paid so much, I'm paid 20% less than him," and so it goes. So, at the same time, you get a demand that touches on issues of qualifications, job recognition and skills.

The next thing is to restate what they said and put the result up for discussion with the workforce. "Have we understood the situation right as being this?" "Is this what you think needs doing?" etc. This will provide the basis for action by elected reps, whether in the health and safety committee or the works council. And we took it public, by which I mean that we went out to see the employees more generally, telling them: the CGT reps in this sector have asked the employees about

facility X, this is the problem that employees have singled out. And that's what needs doing to get a significant improvement in things on the hurry-up. What we found is that the main issue is always job quality. You can clearly see that there is a double whammy: improving working conditions can't be separated from job quality.

Company management sell us things in the name of business efficiency. They tell us it will be more rational. The words they use are all to do with skills, performance, excellence. At the same time, there is a widening gap between their rhetoric and the reality experienced on the ground by workers. Here, the situation is reversed: company management are not the ones that guarantee efficiency or quality, the employees are the ones who want and demand quality. That's what will put company management on the spot, where they can't say "no way, I don't want to improve that" because quality is their article of faith.

Just under 100 workers took part in the "action-oriented research". That's not many, and some plants didn't participate ...

FG — It wasn't plain sailing: some didn't want to take part in the process, some didn't want to talk or didn't want to take the time for it. So, we went a different way. It's a long drawn-out process: we went out to employees, and they didn't necessarily have the time or inclination to talk. And you can't be a know-it-all, you have to go in saying, "Look, I know nothing about your job". This active listening isn't an ability you necessarily have as an elected rep wanting to get people onside. It's something you have to develop over time, and that complicates matters, because you don't have that long in office and organisations change very quickly. The thinking is ongoing because not everyone is yet won over to the approach, including in the CGT. Implementing it is still quite a complicated job.

What main lessons are you taking away from the project for your own union work?

FG — The main thing we identified from the action-oriented research is what work represents for all the individuals, by which I mean work as a building block of one's own individual health. It brought us to an understanding of why employees in physically gruelling jobs will agree to work overtime to try and mitigate problems of disorganisation in the

RPS-Renault project: benchmarks

- Duration: May 2008 - January 2010.
- Participants: approximately 100 employees (including 38 CGT reps) from 9 of Renault France 13 manufacturing sites and from its commercial subsidiary.
- Partners: The Emergences consultancy and the Institute of Economic and Social Research (IRES).

Read more

Chassaing K., Daniellou F., Davezies P., Duraffourg J. (2011) Recherche-action "Prévenir les risques psychosociaux dans l'industrie automobile: élaboration d'une méthode d'action syndicale", Emergences, 358 p. Downloadable from <http://www2.emergences.fr/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/emergences-rapportfinal.pdf>

The contents of a DVD report on the action-oriented research with workers' testimonies can be found at <http://www2.emergences.fr/?p=1184>

company. They'll come into work on a Saturday despite already being shattered. Doing the job properly, being able to say what you want to do, it's all about recognition – it's key to it. We were able to bring to light the fact that malaise in the workplace is often to do with what I'd call the "objectification" of individuals that stems from new management methods and enforced competition between employees. The individual is unimportant because anyone else can do what they do. They are undermined; their skills, culture and job role are disregarded.

In terms of union activism, the project allowed the union to be seen not as a representative body but as a means to enable employees to discuss together. The direct relationship with employees raises questions about the very usefulness of trade unionism, because if it cannot organise with the employees something that helps to improve their daily lives, they will end up asking: "what good is it?" ●