

Trade unions and health and safety in the workplace, a complicated history

While the future is uncertain for the *Comités d'hygiène, de sécurité et des conditions de travail* – CHSCT (Committees for Hygiene, Safety and Working Conditions) in France, this book reminds us of the fundamental role they play in risk prevention in the workplace, but also of their limits.

Titled *Syndicalisme et santé au travail* (Trade Unionism and occupational health and safety), it is a collection of contributions from trade unionists and French social science researchers.

Annie Thébaud-Mony, an occupational sociologist, presents two examples of CHSCT actions in companies affected by cases of occupational cancer. In a factory in Auvergne which produces vitamins for animals for the company Adisseo, one of the market leaders in animal supplements, the use of a toxic molecule caused approximately thirty cases of kidney cancer amongst its employees. As a result of the persistence of the representatives of its CHSCT, the company was found guilty of gross negligence.

The second case of industrial action involves the exposure of France Telecom (now Orange) workers to surge protectors containing radioactive parts. A particularly dynamic CHSCT for the publicly owned telephone operator initiated an inquest which, with the help of a team of committed scientists, would allow them to prove the *lignards'* – line workers' – high exposure to radioactivity.

She writes, "While the public health and safety officials continued trying to sow doubt, the expertise of the CHSCT along with industrial and community actions brought to light dangerous situations which should have been subject to rigorous preventative strategies for many years."

Laurence Théry, former confederal secretary for the trade union confederation CFDT, presents the action research backed by her organisation since 2005. In her opinion, these initiatives led to a revision of trade union practices. They gave employees the chance to "speak out" and gave a view into "the black box of actual work".

Théry, who currently heads the *Association régionale pour l'amélioration des conditions de travail de Picardie* (Picardie Regional Association for the Improvement of Working Conditions), calls for a trade unionism based in the field, in close connection with employees. "In order to move away from a top-down, generalised discussion, trade union actions must be based in real-life work situations. For this to work, it must focus on the microscopic details, and resist the strong temptation to reduce them to anecdotes. Thus, any intended changes must be decided somewhere between the infinitely small and the question of the common good, these two points of view being intrinsically linked. By considering and understanding these microscopic details, the trade unions can mobilise employees and build a viewpoint that takes into account the complexity of situations," she writes.

The trade union confederation CGT also calls for the trade unions to turn their approach to work on its head. Jean-François Naton, a confederal counsellor for health and safety for the CGT, invites the trade unions movement to "dare to claim work as a foundation for emancipation and end the persistent theory of the end of work, which for too long has been a major topic of discussion."

In a chapter on the stranglehold that expertise exercises on public policy in terms of health and safety, the sociologist Emmanuel Henry and the epidemiologist Émilie Council question the "epidemiological paradigm". They denounce the importance placed on epidemiology in the field of research and its devastating effects on workers. "Epidemiology requires counting the number of illnesses and deaths over the long term, making it impossible to make preventative decisions. This reliance on epidemiology is sometimes seen as human experimentation on a large scale," they say.

The sociologist Danièle Linhart, who specialises in management methods, reminds us that for a long time, the trade unions resisted risk prevention as a strategy. During the *Trente Glorieuse*, they often used

occupational health and safety as a commodity. "The unions didn't so much try to eradicate danger and health risks, but rather used them as opportunities for moneymaking." The post-May '68 period left its traces. The slogan "Don't waste your life earning a living" is well remembered. But when workers themselves opened the discussion on work organisation and its impact on their health, the counter-strike carried out by employers in the late '70s, along with the introduction of new management methods in the following two decades, considerably weakened the trade unions.

His fellow sociologists at Aix-Marseille university, Paul Bouffartigue and Christophe Massot believe that when it comes to psychosocial risks, a CHSCT can only be effective if two conditions are met: employee representatives must have a certain power over the employer and the question of actual work must be discussed in this capacity. They recommend that the elected officials should seek to work closely with the employees they represent rather than remain isolated in their offices.

Should they seek inspiration from the "Italian workers' model" of the seventies? This is what Laurent Vogel, a researcher at the European Trade Union Institute, suggests. In his opinion, this would require internal transformations within the trade union movement. He suggests "questioning the delegation of health and safety representation in the workplace to specialists".

— Denis Grégoire

Syndicalisme et santé au travail

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