

France Telecom execs may be tried over suicides (Update)

July 7 2016

Prosecutors have called for telecommunications giant France Telecom, now renamed Orange, and its former executives to face trial over a wave of employee suicides, a source close to the investigation said Thursday.

After a probe lasting seven years, prosecutors have asked an investigating judge to bring harassment charges against the company and its former chief executive Didier Lombard, the source told AFP.

Prosecutors want similar charges to be brought against the company's former number two, Louis-Pierre Wenes and its former human resources chief, Olivier Barberot.

Another four executives could be tried for complicity in the harassment, according to the prosecution requests dated June 22.

The investigation focused on 39 employees as "victims"—19 who took their own lives, 12 who attempted suicide and eight who suffered from deep depression or who were forced to stop work as a result.

The company was privatised in 2004, leading to major restructuring and job losses.

Between 2006 and 2008, it wanted to shed 22,000 jobs and retrain 10,000 employees for different jobs as it adapted to new technologies.

The deaths triggered questions about the way employees were managed,

whether they were bullied and how the company dealt with stress.

Prosecutors say the company and the chief executive introduced a policy of unsettling employees in order to induce them to quit.

'Great satisfaction'

Unions and management accept that 35 France Telecom employees took their own lives between 2008 and 2009 and Lombard stepped down as a result of the deaths.

A lawyer for civil parties and the SUD-PTT trade union, Jean-Paul Teissonniere, said the prosecutors' move gave him "great satisfaction even... without mention of involuntary homicide or reckless endangerment".

Another union, the CFE-CGC, demanded the company be charged with involuntary homicide, saying: "A deliberate disregard has been clearly demonstrated that threatened the lives of personnel for the sole goal of cutting jobs in order to increase profits."

However, an Orange spokesman said the request for a trial was "a normal stage in the procedure (that) does not assume how the judge will decide."

'It could happen again'

A family member of a 51-year-old technician who killed himself in May 2008 after being transferred to the sales team told investigators: "He was afraid he wouldn't make it... He wasn't sleeping... It's the work that killed him."

Lombard inflamed the situation with remarks that came off as extremely callous, admitting he had committed "an enormous gaffe" when he spoke of a "fashion for suicide".

The remark was seen as a final straw, and he resigned in March 2010.

Four years earlier, Lombard had said "I'll get them (employees) out one way or another, through the window or the door."

Lombard's lawyer Jean Veil objected that his client's "tactless language provided an opportunity to base a (possible) trial on harassment that rests on no serious elements."

Psychiatrist Patrick Legeron said "what happened was not due to a particular individual. The entire management was stuck in an infernal pattern of having to get people to leave and rewarded managers who succeeded in doing so."

France Telecom failed to "take the human factor into account," he told AFP.

He said that in contrast to Scandinavian countries which "understood that big changes in the world of work would have an impact on individuals, in France it took tragedies for awareness to catch on."

Legeron, recalling suicides at the Renault and Peugeot auto giants in the early 2000s, said "people were ashamed to talk about it."

But he said he feared French businesses were still more concerned about avoiding legal consequences than looking after their employees' welfare.

"It could happen again, of course," Legeron warned.

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Citation: France Telecom execs may be tried over suicides (Update) (2016, July 7) retrieved 20 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-07-france-telecom-execs-suicides.html>

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