

Workplace Suicide and States of Denial: The France Telecom and Foxconn Cases Compared

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Abstract

Workplace suicides are sharply on the rise and reflect a generalised deterioration in working conditions across the globalised economy. Despite their growing prevalence, workplace suicides are subject to specific modes of repression that tend to keep them hidden from public view. Suicides and their social recognition threaten the vested interests of corporate and political elites by giving material embodiment to relations of production in the form of extreme human suffering. This article focuses on 'suicide waves' at two distant corporations in the information and communications sector: in France, the telecoms provider, France Télécom (rebranded Orange in 2013) and in China, electronics supplier, Foxconn. Drawing on Stanley Cohen's notion of 'states of denial', the article examines the tactics used by corporate and political elites in an effort to keep the suicides concealed. These include discourses that denied the suicides, individualised their causes and repressive tactics intended to control information and impede investigations. Recognising workplace suicides and the forms of repression that seek to occlude them, is crucial if we are to confront the profound human costs of a new international division of digital labour on lived experiences of work.

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The Foxconn Suicides were a spate of suicides linked to low pay at the "Foxconn City" industrial park in Shenzhen, China that occurred alongside several additional suicides at various other Foxconn-owned locations and facilities in Mainland China. The series of suicides drew media attention, and employment practices at Foxconn—one of the world's largest contract electronics manufacturers—were investigated by several of its customers, including Apple and Hewlett-Packard (HP). 'France Télécom is responsible for my suicide'. Each story had to be told in detail - like that of Rémy Louvradoux, a 56-year-old France Télécom worker, who died by setting fire to himself outside his office in April 2011. His daughter, Noémie, said he became "the char stain on the wall" at the France Télécom building in the south-western town of Mérignac. "My father's death meant [management's] objective had been achieved." Or of Michel Deparis, who killed himself in 2009, leaving a letter in which he said: "What led to this is my job. France Téléc... Télécom and Foxconn Cases Compared. Sarah Waters. School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom, S.a.waters@Leeds.ac.uk. Abstract: Workplace suicides are sharply on the rise and reflect a generalised deterioration. in working conditions across the globalised economy. Despite their growing prevalence, workplace suicides are subject to specific modes of repression that tend to keep them. hidden from public view. At France Télécom, suicides placed corporate bosses under close scrutiny and the company's chief. executive was forced to resign. corporate and political elites at Foxconn and France Télécom in relation to the. tripleC 15(1): 191-213, 2017 193. CC-BY-NC-ND: Creative Commons License, 2017.