

## Wave of staff suicides at France Telecom

Angelique Chrisafis in Paris

guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 9 September 2009 21.50 BST

[Article history](#)

France Telecom is struggling to deal with a wave of staff suicides which has seen more than 20 workers take their lives in the past 18 months – some leaving notes blaming job stress and misery at work.

Today a technician in Troyes, south-east of Paris, stabbed himself in front of other staff during a management meeting. He had been told his job was to be cut. The man, in his 50s, was being treated in hospital for a stomach wound last night and was said to be stable.

France Telecom, whose key brand is Orange, is Europe's third largest mobile phone operator and biggest provider of broadband internet services. After what union leaders at France Telecom called a "spiral" of suicides over recent years – six staff have killed themselves since mid-July – the company has promised better medical support for workers and will today enter negotiations with unions to tackle workplace stress.

However, unions have warned that the company's entire management approach must be overhauled and some have called for strike action in Brittany on the same day. Trade union representatives at the company have blamed restructuring cuts, extreme pressure, bullying and poor management methods – which, they say, have worsened since privatisation.

On 29 August, a 53-year-old France Telecom technician and father of three killed himself in Lannion in Brittany. Colleagues and trade unionists blamed his death on difficulties surrounding his rank within the company and "infantile" management procedures.

Earlier in August, a 28-year-old worker was found dead in his garage in Besançon in the east of France. He had left a note that talked of his girlfriend, but also mentioned how he felt "helpless" and "angry" over issues at work. The prosecutor said it was impossible to formally establish a link between France Telecom and the suicide, but workers held a protest march over his death.

On 14 July, another 52-year-old employee killed himself in Marseille, leaving behind a note blaming "overwork" and "management by terror". He wrote: "I am committing suicide because of my work at France Telecom. That's the only reason."

Pierre Gojat, head of a trade union stress watchdog at the company, said he was "scandalised by [this] latest act of despair" after the Troyes worker stabbed himself. France Telecom issued a statement, saying the employee's life "was not in danger" and that he had been offered another post in the same town and at the same level.

Earlier this week, the company's director of human resources told Le Monde it was "too simplistic" to affirm a simple cause and effect relationship between issues at work and the staff deaths. He said experts had told the company that suicides were usually caused by various factors, rather than one unique problem.

Twenty-nine France Telecom staff took their own lives in 2002 and another 22 in 2003. The French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) union said 22 France Telecom staff had killed themselves since February 2008.

In 2007, a French prosecutor opened an inquiry into working conditions at carmaker Renault after suicides at one of its factories.