

Flexible Employment Policies and Working Conditions

France

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1. General considerations

General problematics of the study

1.1 General setting

The study presented in this report is resting on the common problems raised and discussed during the two meetings in Brussels in December 1998 and in April 1999. Its aims in the final analysis is to answer a central questioning: *to what extent is it possible within an environment of flexibility to develop company policies that do not lead to the development of insecure employment, but which on the contrary preserve employment security and improve the work conditions? And where is the satisfactory balance of intervention in order to reach these aims?*

The questions of the research can be setted into four categories:

- **How are different types of flexibility combined at company level?** What are the managerial strategies of flexibility and how are they combined? What is the relationship between the policies of flexibility, human resource policies and policies of health and security?
- **What are the relationships between work conditions, employment conditions and types of flexibility?** Is it possible to improve work conditions while integrating the salaried and providing careers opportunities? To what extent bad working conditions may result from policies of external flexibility and precarious employment?
- **What is the general impact of flexibility on work conditions,** on health and security of the salaried, the relationship between expenses and profits of the organisation, on employment, on career development and more generally about integration and social exclusion? Also these questions include the impact of flexibility on the separation of the sexes at work and about the segregation of the most senior staff.
- **What is the role of the collective negotiation process and social regulation in the evolution of work conditions?** What role does collective negotiation play in the flexibility process at company level?

These hypotheses are shown in the table (Research framework, February 1999) presumed known and referred to here.

1.2 Questions of research and specific hypothesis

In the following we are presenting a summary of the French research project for the Dublin Foundation, insofar as these hypotheses may enrich, complete and give nuances to the general framework above.

1.2.1 The reasons for flexibility policies

During the sixties and seventies, companies dispose of a pool of workers, and they were trying to encourage a greater loyalty from the personnel, within a period of growth, with the crisis the employers are quickly seeking to adjust staff numbers or working hours following the market changes. On the whole, the increasing importance of flexibility answers to a variety of structural objectives:

- Market fluctuations and strategic flexibility policies
- The worry about maximising the DUI (length of the utilisation of investments)
- Qualitative transformations of the production devices due to the development of new technologies, looking for a functional flexibility by means of polyvalence, training and semi-automatic teams.
- Answering to employees requests for flexibility (i.e. part time or flexi-time). The latter point making the distinction between chosen part-time (requested by the employees and by collective agreements) and imposed part time, less noticeable but tending to develop in France. Part-time employment often goes hand in hand with “under-employment” that is, short-term jobs for young people.

Three important socio-economical factors have lately helped the increase in flexibility policies.

- An increasingly available manpower within the context of growing unemployment, giving employers a lot of choice in the selection of workers and imposing precarious statuses
- The weakening of the unions often incapable of controlling the policies of precarious employment
- State policies have had a tendency to differentiate statuses, particularly in the public sector, generally encouraging the private sector to employ flexibility policies.

1.2.2 The combination of different types of flexibility

On the whole French writing refers to four types of flexibility, listed by B BRUHNES ¹

- External quantitative flexibility (numerical) loosening recruitment procedures and redundancy, developing negotiable work contracts and putting in place a peripheral manpower. Variations in the numbers of salaried at the company according to needs (temporary work, CDD = contracts of determined length, different statuses).
- The externalisation of the manpower, sometimes called “distantiation” (sub-contracting, interim, commercial contracts replacing work contracts). These respond to strategic aims.
- Internal quantitative flexibility affecting time schedules (annualisation of work hours, time modules, variations in the routines).
- Functional flexibility (qualitative internal): opening up the span of duties and qualifications which follow the work and simultaneously developed an internal mobility (T. Treu) It consists of a resort to polyvalence and polyfunctioning, semi-autonomous groups, turnover, job mobility. Resting on personnel management's expectations and fitting in with the market in the intermediary and long-term

Several questions remain shelved however. Some writers find the results of the study of flexibility disappointing. Anna POLLERT (Farewell to flexibility) criticises the way the centre and the periphery of a company are separated. Jacques ROJOT on his part, has formulated remarks on the limitations of the theoretical and methodological studies on flexibility². It has mainly resulted the following remarks:

¹ B.Brühnes, **La flexibilité du travail en Europe: une analyse comparative de quatre pays**, OCDE, 1990.

² J.ROJOT: Flexibilité de la main-d'œuvre dans des entreprises; expériences nationales. **In Politiques économiques et sociales en Europe**, texts published under the direction of M.DURAND, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1992.

- 1) The presumed coherence of forms of flexibility often lead to a referral to the theory of the distinction between the central core and the periphery. Some employers practice on the one hand an external quantitative flexibility (for the periphery), on the other hand a qualitative and quantitative internal flexibility (for the hard core). In practice, one notices that the employers run jointly internal and external flexibility policies, the same company may have an external quantitative flexibility for some and a policy of functional flexibility for the other employees. Besides, the hypothesis of a dual work market unaware that there are no easier generalised tendencies is and that there are always passages between the primary and secondary market.

The first comments encourage a careful consideration of the center-periphery model (Pollert, Saglio, 1987). Moreover, the theory of the double market is not approved of unanimously. The analysis of Piore is pleading rather in favour of the “balkanisation” of the market, whilst D Marsden emphasises the co-existence of the internal and external market, and going from one market to another (Marsden 1988). If it is not disputable that segmentation increases, however there are “curricula” which enable the employees coming from less privileged job markets to enter the primary market or the internal company market.

- 2) **The definition of flexibility is not as clear as it seems.** A theoretical study using typologies is needed necessarily. In this way temporary work concerns the quantitative external flexibility whilst interim (temporary work with an agency for external workers) concerns externalisation. These notions often being identical.

Following other trains of thought, flexibility of salaries does not have a lot in common with other forms of flexibility even though the choice of flexibility often is rooted in cost-cutting policies, which are fixed by investment strategies.

The quantitative flexibility policies are not necessarily the result of completely voluntary strategies on behalf of the employers. These are guided by political powers, where like in Sweden where the ban on temporary work largely explain the increase in part-time work and CDD contracts (contracts of determined length). Moreover, as seen in a monographs, the employers margin of manoeuvre may be reduced due to the state of the market, which imposes a minimum flow of precarious workers in order to remain competitive.

Another point which also deserves attention: flexibility policies are not only meant for the manpower. It is suitable to place them within strategic flexibility policies: that is to say, a resort to externalisation is often the result of a choice turned in on the trade in the same way, sub-contracting is connected to certain industrial areas or sectors of activity (cleaning, gardening, computer data processing, system analysis). Flexibility is therefore, related to the manpower but also products, markets, organisation and capital.

1.2.3 The relationship between work and employment conditions and types of flexibility

It is not about to deny that flexibility and precarious work have negative effects on the work conditions which is why, but a few nuances need to be added here:

- 1) **The consequences of job segmentation over time are not always directly related to flexibility policies of the manpower.** Some external (from outside the company) salaried enjoy high salaries and work conditions, whilst “permanents” have low wages and benefits (this distinction is returned to below in the methodology). It means that one needs to take stock of the real work conditions.
- 2) **It is necessary to distinguish between work conditions and employment conditions:** it is known that within certain sectors flexibility policies systematically lead to worse work conditions. It is not sure that this happens everywhere we will see in the case of the electronics company that the workers employed by a temporary/ interim agency enjoy the same work conditions as the full-time permanent employees (CDI), and those on temporary contracts (CDD), but what makes a big difference are the employment conditions: the workers hired with an interim agency suffer a lot more from the feeling of precariousness.

Only the analysis of the experience of these workers enable us to establish links between work conditions and employment flexibility.

- 3) However, **the consequences of a growing precariousness of employment on the work conditions remain an essential line to follow.** Former studies show four possible dimensions to precariousness (D GERRITSEN 1994):
 - Social isolation of the workers, loss of references in relation to the unions. An isolation which is hard to bear in the cases of employees with “hybrid statuses” (i.e. leasing taxi-drivers).
 - Economical insecurity.
 - Professional: a drop in professional awareness and work motivation, low quality work performance.
 - Physical and mental health (studies of interim workers show that they have more accidents at work, heavier work loads and have less medical support).

1.2.4 General impacts of flexibility on the organisation

The monographs show that flexibility has consequences which go beyond health and safety, affecting the collective work balance, to follow the Dublin model. Two remarks here: it is important to measure the strategy of the actors presence, in terms of **“costs and profits”** and to learn lessons from it. If a flexibility is not always completely detrimental to the employees, it does not remain very likely that the balance of benefits and costs make the employer the main beneficiary. On the other hand, flexibility has obvious consequences over time, by **lessening the social cohesion**, the different statuses having a tendency to weaken workers cohesion.

When establishing whether flexibility works, we realise this can only be measured in relation to the actors’ satisfaction. In this sense, there are no ineluctable “a priori” tendencies: one may certainly postulated that a new context of company management is taking shape, resulting in a de-Taylorisation, a decentralisation of responsibilities on the level of production and management participation. However, contrary to J ROJOT, our studies show that the

participants are not necessarily integrated in the company, after the promising results in the 1980s. It is therefore of interest to analyse the internal qualitative flexibility policies and show whether they dissuade the employer from adopting external quantitative flexibility. We rather make the hypotheses that companies are “pragmatic” and often use various forms of flexibility.

2. The French national context

2.1 The French national context

2.1.1 A glimpse over the salaried work situation in France

During the last 20 years (1975/95) salaried employment in France has gone through deep changes;

- a) **A continuous growth of the salaried group** but at a slower pace compared to former decades between 1975 and 1996 it went from 82% to 89%.
- b) **The development of the female salaried group**
The place of women in salaried employment goes from 38 % to 46 % 1975/97. This development happens especially in low qualified services, the female manpower of the tertiary sector has replaced in the French landscape a male non qualified of post holders in industry during earlier period.
- c) **Shortening of professional life**
A reduction of the young population, 25 years old; 19 % in 1975, seven % in 1997. A reduction of salaried more than 50 years, especially between 1980 and 1992 according to the FNE (National Fund for Employment) and with the creation of early retirement. From now on, three salaried out of four find themselves in the intermediary age bracket; 25-49 years.
- d) **Transformation of the allotment of the socio- professional categories**
More than one-third of the working population is made up of managerial staff or intermediary professions, one-third are employees and a small third are workers out of whom 10.3 per cent are unskilled.
- e) **The decentralisation of industrial employment within small to medium-sized firms**
Breaking with the secular tendency, small and medium sized French firms increased the number of salaried posts from the 1970s. In industry the big units cut jobs, reorganise (breaking up into branches rather than merging) externalise or contract out activities, even when disappearing to the benefit of small industries or services. From the end of 1975 to 1995 the number of salaried workers in the private sector in establishments with more than 500 employees, drop from 21 % to 11 %, whereas establishments with less than 10 workers grow from 18 % to 26 %. This tendency is accentuated by the tertiarisation movement of the economy, because on average the size of industrial firms are distinctly larger than that of the service industries.
- f) **70% of employment today is within the tertiary sector.**
During the same period the drop in agricultural employment takes place (2.4 % in 1975, 1.3 % in 1996), in industry 42 % in 75 to 27 % in 96 and an increase in tertiary employment especially with the commercial services, this sector alone had 47.4 % of French employees in 1997.

g) Diversification of work contracts and statuses

The norm for salaried full time employment has lost its stronghold during the last 10 years due to the **development of temporary work (contracts of determined length and interim) and an increase in the number of part-time employees.**

Development of temporary employment and assisted employment

In the private and semi-public sectors there is a noticeable development of short-term work contracts. At the same time as the state by means of exempting the employers social charges is hoping to integrate people who are looking for work, by offering a training period or contracts of determined length. Between 1985 and 1997 the proportion of unassisted temporary jobs go from 3.5 % to 7.5 % out of all salaried employment (from 4 to 8 % for men, 3 to 7 % for women). Today in the private sector this goes beyond 10 % as opposed to 5% in 1985. The same goes for trainees where the assisted contract has grown in numbers during the last 12 years. Temporary employment today is frequently used by companies in order to adjust the number of jobs in relation to the workload; this increases strongly until 1990, then falls and takes off again from 1994. In structural terms these jobs reflect a recruitment style which is becoming more and more frequently used by companies in the management of their manpower, even for skilled positions.

In 1994 about three-quarters of the hired workers within establishments with more than 50 employees are offered these short contracts; contracts of a determined length may in some cases be changed to CDI (contracts of permanent length) after a period of assessment. If interim is most often used by companies from the secondary sector (car manufacturing, building trade), the CDD (contracts of determined length, temporary) are mostly used by companies in the service industry and the food industry. Interim work is therefore a strongly male domain, CDD work is a mostly female domain and increasing skilled.

The development of part-time temporary work

From 1975 to 1997 the population of employees working part time increases considerably from 13.5 % to 31 % (1975-1997) for women, from 2 close to 6% for men. More than one employee out of six is today working shorter hours. The increasing number of part-timers is attributed to the exemption in part of employers national insurance charges created in 1992 for the hiring of a part time employee or for the change from full-time to part-time.

2.1.2 Flexibility policies-the French way

The French model of flexibility in the management policies of the manpower are characterised by four main elements;

1. The existence of a significant public sector status (more than 20 per cent of the active salaried)
2. The strong importance of the State in relation to the regulating of employment and work conditions
3. The weakness of collective negotiation
4. French companies choice of external flexibility (redundancies, resort to temporary work, calling on the exterior) compared with internal flexibility (functional, work schedule arrangements and the organising of polyvalence)

The public sector with status

The public sector with status; state administrations and public establishments as well as public companies like EDF (French electricity board), GDF (French gas board), SNCF (French Railways), RATP (Paris transport). Within these organisations it is the public right status which defines the recruitment conditions, promotion, pay etc. The status ensures nearly complete job security to the beneficiary. The status does not tolerate any external quantitative flexibility and even internal flexibility is difficult. However, during this recent period one notices a certain evolution fought by the unions, in fact the public sector leaders have sought to reduce the number of permanent civil servants resorting to non permanent employees, contractors, not covered by the status and calling on sub-contractors to carry out duties traditionally managed by the establishment.

One may add that in France the borderline of flexibility goes between a still protected public sector and the private sector where the employees are less and less protected

The strong importance of the state with regards to regulating employment and work conditions

The negotiations between social partners, employment contracts are controlled by collective conventions and company agreements; social security and unemployment benefits are managed by councils consisting of representatives of employers and unions. But the government strongly interferes, work rights depend on a parliamentary law. As a result the measures taken in these areas like the hours of CDD's etc have revealed more about the law and political debate than social negotiation during the last few years.

The role of the state-contradictions and ambiguities

Ensuring that work laws are respected

Ensuring that work laws are respected. Legislate the change and contain the depraved effects of flexibility such is the role of the state, but this role is not exempt from contradictory practices. On the level of flexibility this is an aspect controlled by the law.

External flexibility in particular the use of CDD and interim work is regulated by an arsenal of laws. Interim work for example, agreements were signed by the employers organisation and the employees unions which resulted in laws sometimes regulating the use of interim (Law of 1985, law of July 1990, agreed in June 1992) and ensures protection, having clearly improved the interim worker's status especially in the area of social protection.

Internal flexibility and planning of work schedules, have been regulated by means of successive legislation which have softened the planning of working hours. We will not go into detail here, due to the sheer numbers, but it is important to realise that all laws concerning work schedules are accompanied by the modulation possibilities; following the layout of the 16th January 1982 which fixed the weekly hours to 39 hours and introduced several flexibility measures, modulation type I which through a company agreement allows working weeks of 48 hours on the condition that on a yearly basis the 39 hours average is not exceeded. The logic of calculating on a yearly basis comes into being!

In 1993 the government introduced modulation type III called **annualisation**, to break deadlocks. The working week may therefore be up to 48 hours by means of a simple company agreement, on the condition that the annual working hours are reduced. The 35 hour week law of the 19th May 1998 with the first aim of reducing working hours and the second to

create employment with the risk due to the annualisation of working hours, of introducing yet again a development of flexibility.

Under pressure from company claims State allows flexibility in order to save jobs

External flexibility; the state encourages this sort of flexibility by the suppression of authorisation prior to redundancy in 1986, which perverted effect we know, multiplied redundancies, creation of social plans that carried the weight of unemployment on to the national collective and which does not lead to job creation, contrary to what companies announced.

Through a multiplication of assisted job schemes and the exemption of social charges for the lowest salaries, State encourage firms to accumulated different forms of precarious contracts without hiring.

Internal flexibility; with the exemption of charges for part-time work in 1993 the state favoured a strong development of this type of contract, a tool for flexibility and productivity for the companies.

The weakness of a negotiated flexibility (agreements between social partners)

With the exception of state companies and public services, negotiated flexibility is rare in France.

In the private sector this situation is mainly due to the following two factors; **the weakness of the unions** (lowest union membership in Europe, 9% in 97) and **the development of decentralised negotiations** agreed to by the company.

Company negotiation on the one hand and national debate on the other typify France as well as most other European countries. Company negotiations matching employers³ demands. Going from the negotiations with the unions to negotiation with elected personnel representatives and also individual negotiation.

The company level becomes the decisive place managing social relations, individualised salary policies, adaptation measures of the manpower, linked to market demands are increasingly found on this level.

The different forms of this evolution are marked by the ability for salary to mobilise in each company and even more so in every branch within large companies.⁴

The decentralisation of negotiation and more generally, of social dialogue correspond to a deregulation claimed by the employers. Taking advantage of the bad job situation it enables each firm to find suitable social compromises, generally less favourable for the remuneration and social advantages granted to the employees.

³ The rise in company negotiations is confirmed by most experts, i.e. a study of professional relations by MIT directed by R.Locke, T.Kochan and M.Piore "focus on the company" *Revue Internationale du travail*, vol. 134 1995.

⁴ Christian Dufour *La négociation collective en 1994*, Tome 1 La Découverte 1995.

French companies faced with flexibility

To become more pliable companies may resort to either external flexibility (CDD interim externalisation) or internal flexibility (planning work schedules, polyvalence salary flexibility)

In France companies prefer the first solution because the second is harder to put into practice and often upset the mentalities and categorial interests of people.

Using an **external quantitative flexibility** French companies change staff numbers according to needs, redundancies if necessary and according to the rules by hiring on contracts of limited length (CDD). They also resort to externalisation using other companies, with a contractual arrangement with the worker. The limitations of work contracts make room for the pliable contract between a company and a sub-contractor, the supplier or the interim agency, employing the people the company needs. Externalisation is in general not very limited by employment rights, and sub-contracting has become a means to shift risks and where flexibility has become the order the day.

Internal flexibility where pliability is obtained not through varying staff numbers working for the company but by a different use of employees is little used. The internal quantitative flexibility mainly created by a variation in the actual length of the work leading to modulating work times in areas of production, collective or individual variations in the working hours, seasonal modulations based on an annual contract, part-time, intermittent, spending the available time on training or maintenance, extra hours etc. Employment rules may be rigid , but this is not a major handicap hindering the company from functioning. On the contrary, the reglementary outlines are complete except for certain new types of work. The five year law of 1993 introduced a pliability in the adaptation of internal flexibility and French companies today dispose of legislative tools which are aimed at introducing formulas of work schedule planning and polyvalence.

By focusing on the inflexibility of employment rules French companies show once more their preference for a specific type of flexibility, external flexibility. This situation is for instance due to the deficiencies of French management; external flexibility is a short time measure which is not hard to put into practice and whose impact on the employees is quickly felt. External flexibility is a form of productivism that consists of using limited means with fewer people, as well as generating precariousness and inequalities in the global society

Internal flexibility on the other hand is presented as having all the virtues. In all ways it is not easy to put into practice and it comes up against all sorts of barriers inside the establishment. Setting up internal flexibility requires a different type of management. Having to cope with variables within the management system. Still, under pressure to modernise facing vicious competition, the companies are not always ready to make the move which requires a lot of efforts in training.

2.1.3 The results of the flexibility model the French way; a landscape marked by precariousness

High inequal unemployment; 2,825,000 people according to official figures, but in reality more than 4 million of job seekers.

Precarious job numbers increased by 60 % in 4 years (1994-1998)

Imposed part-time work doubling in 8 years

General deterioration of work conditions; imposed part-time becoming greater than chosen part-time. The companies use more and more part-time, in order to cope with the crisis and gaining in flexibility, a tendency which is often done to the prejudice of the employees. The daily reality of this work schedule planning and especially its annualisation is unpopular with many employees, especially as the creation of jobs has not followed. Beyond the rules one witnesses an unauthorised modulation of work times. A lack of control and sanctions with regards to passing limits for extra hours lead to abuse, the deadlines of notification to do extra hours are not always respected. One sees therefore part-timers working full-time, partly being paid black.

2.1.4 The 35 hour law

1) The legislative procedure

The law about a reduction of the weekly hours to 35 was voted through Parliament on the 19th May 1998. It abrogates all other laws about time scheduling, especially the Robien-law of 1996. A report on the assessment of the putting into practice of the reduction in working hours will be presented in Parliament by the 30th September 1999, after consultation with the implied parties. Based on this report a second law is to be voted for, taking account of the difficulties encountered during the negotiations, integrating the system of extra hours, modulation of working times and part-time work. Once this new law is voted through, it will be applied from the 1st January year 2000 for companies with more than 20 employees, from the 1st January year 2002 for the others.

2) The aims of the law

The 35 hour law has two main aims:

- **Reduce working hours**
- The sharing of working hours **resulting in job creation**

3) Negotiations between social partners

This law incites to negotiations between social partners as much within different sectors as companies these negotiations should result in an **agreement about the reduction in working hours**.

What needs to be negotiated

The extent of the reductions - organisation of the working hours - resort to part time - fixing the effective work time - compensatory hiring - the salaried -preservation of the payment of the surplus hours worked in addition to the usual hours.

Financial incentives

To incite the private⁵ companies to reduce working hours and create or at least save jobs, the state will commit itself through a five-year signed agreement with the company to give financial aid if the company reduces the annual working hours **by at least 10 % and creates or saves at least 6% jobs existing** at the date of signing the deal. This aid will be deduced from the total amount of employers charges owed.

⁵ Public sector companies may not in principle benefit from any state aid.

4) In March 99, a disappointing evaluation

The figures; at the end of March 1999 only **2019 agreements** had been signed including 385 768 employees, 34 % of the deals were signed in industry and 36 % within the service sector of companies and individuals. **21 246 jobs** were created and **2909 were saved**. The PME⁶ are in a wide majority, 43 % of the deals concern companies with less than 20 employees, 22 % of companies with 20-49 employees. 37 deals of different sectors were signed covering 4.6 million employees.

The organisation of working hours is variable. Shorter days (37.4 %), shorter weeks (53.6%) short and long weeks alternating (22%).

The problems and the leeways

During negotiations between employers and unions **contradictory aims** linked to the 35 hours come to appear;

For the employers; the companies see in the law a possible augmentation of their efficiency and competitiveness with the annualisation of working hours. This situation risks resulting in a growth in flexibility by making late and Saturday hours allowed.

Many companies go from 35 hours by eating into breaktimes. In other respects faced with market incertainties company directors refuse to commit themselves to hire- quotas.

For the unions, this law requires a new organisation of working hours in order to be effective, allowing a healthy relationship between professional and private life, improving living and working conditions and creating jobs. This will keep the spending power, 35 hours paid 39 hours.

The power struggle during negotiations between different sectors or companies will enable the realisation of different objectives:

- Many hurried deals⁷, a stronger flexibility especially in the textiles and food industries, where the modulation can go from 16 hours to 44 hours per week, few job creations in January 1998, the optimistic hypotheses recounting on 50,000 creations of jobs. One may conclude like Alain Lebaube “the 35 hours fool”⁸. Moreover, the method chosen by the government that is to say, a law in two steps, favours wait and see policy from the employers who prefer knowing the whole plan before committing themselves.

2.2 Description of cases studied and research methods

The study concentrates on two autonomous companies: the FNAC, a Parisian establishment of a large mass marketing company of cultural products (two shops); an industrial electronics company, a Japanese company situated in France in the region of Brittany.

⁶ PME; small and medium sized businesses.

⁷ F.Aiziicovi “Les copies bACLées des chasseurs de primes” le Monde de l’Economie 13/04/99.

⁸ Alain Lebaube “Les 35 Heures, ça trompe énormément” le Monde de l’Economie 13/04/99.

2.2.1 The Fnac

The Fnac group owns 51 shops on French territory and has a turnover of nearly 14 billion francs, and where the activity of cultural products goes through multi-product shops (CDs, video, computers, image and audio, books)

The Fnac employs 8925 people (outside CDD); 80 % of the salaried are employees, 8.5 % supervisors and 11 per cent executives. Fnac in Paris (1743 employees in four shops) and the shops in the Ile-de-France region represent 33 % of the salaried at the Fnac and 38 % of the turnover.

We have compared the employment policies in two FNAC stores in Paris and the notion of flexibility within the two Fnac shops in Paris; the Fnac Montparnasse started in 1974 is a multi-product shop on four floors employing 432 people on CDI and 44 salaried on CDD (65 % part-time). An establishment agreement signed in 1985, readjusted in 1993, containing the rules about the work conditions of the employees. The second shop is Fnac Champs Elysees, opened in December 1997. This shop is special in that it is open 7 days a week. In January 99 the shop had 237 employees, with 72% on CDI and 28% on CDD. The sales assistants include 120 employees with 65% on CDI (35% part-time) and for the 35% on CDD (65% part-time). The sales assistants in this shop are very young (average age 24).

The interviews were done of sales staff, supervisors, managers and personnel directors. In the shop on Champs Elysées a socio-anthropological observation is followed as well as semi-directed interviews. Besides, for the Fnac Montparnasse, it has been possible to analyse the social evaluation of the last 10 years and reading the press of the unions.

2.2.2 An electronics plant

The electronics establishment in Brittany is a Japanese/ French branch specialised in making mobile telephones. This factory was created recently (1990) and has had a strong growth during the last few years. A single product is made on a hyper competitive market. The company is 4th in its field. In 1998 the turnover was 1,4 billion francs.

The staff numbers fluctuate, in 1998 the number doubled, totalling about 700 people. The most recent figures show that; there are 277 CDI (20 part-time), 160 CDD (generally skilled posts) and 236 interim (on a commercial contract), including another 12 sub-contractors (in the areas of gardening, cleaning, catering etc). Besides another 30 workers also sub-contractors who are in the service dealing with perforated cards. Like the other monographs the inquiry was based on interviews (about 20).

3. Case studies

From negotiated to imposed flexibility *The case of a cultural goods mass distribution company: The FNAC*

3.1 Employment policy and flexibility

3.1.1 The economical and social context

The Fnac group which is owned by the PPR (Pinault Printemps Redoute), consisting of 51 stores all over France, in December 1998, with a turnover close to 14 billion francs (5 billion francs in 1988). This figure was obtained mainly through “multi-product” shops (28% CD’s, 25% micro-computers, 24% image and sound, 20% books) in Paris the group’s turnover is 21% and in the greater Paris region (Ille de France) it is at 17%.

The Fnac has 8925 employees (in addition to temporary contracts), 52% men and 48% women, 69% of the employees are in direct contact with the customers. The average age is 33 years and the average length of service is 6 years. 80.5% of the staff are salaried employees, 8.5% are supervisors and 11% are executives. Fnac in Paris (1743 employees to 4 shops) and the Ille de France shops (1252 employees) represent 33% of the employees at the Fnac.

The activity of the Fnac is in the **service sector** within the area of **mass selling**, which in France is one of the areas where the notion of flexibility is the most developed, especially regarding part-time work. In fact, part-time employees represent 20% in the service sector and 40% in the mass marketing sector (an extreme example being Monoprix with 63%). The majority of part-time work is imposed rather than optional: reduced working hours and salary, long travel distances, including a time-gap in the working day, evening work, Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. This breaking up of the working day and the hours is justified by the employers as a necessity for businesses, staying open evenings, Saturdays and Sundays, including Bank holidays in order to satisfy customer demands. The notion of a “tight production flow” in industry translates to the mass marketing sector as a “tight employment flow”. Within this sector where imposed part-time work is usual, the notion of flexibility is often combined with unusual work contracts (temporary or limited contracts in particular).

Within the mass marketing sector dominated by food and clothes distribution, the Fnac has for a long time occupied a special place, “Mass marketing of cultural goods cannot be compared with the food sector”.

Based in the beginnings on a special company project: “*The interests of the consumers reconciliated with the access to cultural goods at low prices to a large general public – and the interests of the employees, through the effort of a common goal, which has the implications on the whole for the firm as well as in the creation of a new company model*”. The Fnac has always claimed to be different (with a cultural and social plus) and has strongly opposed mass marketing practises, particularly in relation to work organisation and social policies.

For a long time the Fnac who has occupied a monopoly within the mass marketing sector of cultural goods, found itself in the 80’s in competition as well with the development of this area within hypermarkets (especially Leclerc), as well as the setting up of Virgin megastores in France, the first branch opening on the Champs Elysées in 1988.

Following this increasing competition, the Fnac started questioning the social model which was characteristic of the company at the beginning. Going from a negotiated flexibility and often optional (Fnac company agreement, Paris 1985) which made the Fnac a model of social management, a model which was strongly opposed by Virgin with its model of “wild flexibility”, to an all-out imposed flexibility. With the opening of the Fnac Champs Elysées in December 1997, the model of wild flexibility began to take form. According to Daniel Ferrat “the Fnac borrowed the model of work organisation from Virgin”. At the time of the opening of the Fnac Champs Elysées, the young general manager of the group, François-Henri Pinault claims that it is “the international window dressing of the new Fnac”.

3.1.2 Company policies and the place of flexibility

3.1.2.1 One policy; policies?

Company projects, employment policies, changes over periods of time

Company projects and social policies at the Fnac have changed a lot over time. In order to understand the present situation, which represents a great diversity depending on the stores and the moment of creation, a brief look at its history is essential.

1954/1969 – Paternalism and consensus; the founding idea.

From the early years of the Fnac, the employees were specialists within their fields as well as trained to work as part of a team working towards a common goal, and where the managers were seen as innovators respecting and encouraging the employees’ different points of view. This direct communication process was encouraged because of the company’s modest size in 1964 – the staff consisted of 90 people following the opening of a second shop in 1969, the Avenue de Wagram, Fnac totalled 300 employees. The same year a company agreement was signed claiming a 39-hour week, a salary-scale indexed on cost of living, a principle of profit sharing and 5 weeks paid holidays.

1971/1977 – Contradictions and conflicts

In 1971 Fnac opened up to external financial investors (UAP and PARIBAS) turning the group into a limited company. The established harmony between customers’ interests and the social climate within the company starts to deteriorate, the social relations worsen, the new investors having a different understanding of profitability than their predecessors. The aim of profit imposes its demands, from a family consensus to opposition, and finally, conflict.

Unions appear on the scene and additional company agreements are issued more from strikes than from dialogues. A further expansion began in 1972 with the opening of Fnac in Lyon, and with the introduction of books. In 1977 Fnac has 2000 employees.

1977/1985 – Low business activity and the introduction of flexibility

The sale of Fnac to the Coop in 1977, is marked by a period of low business activity until 1985 without a distinct project, neither on the social nor the economical level. In **1985** there is however a turning point, the market is gloomy with strikes resulting in a 10 million francs loss when GMF and Habitat buy the Fnac. In the same year Monday opening is introduced at the Fnac Paris, threatening the two consecutive days leave entitlement of the permanent and mostly full-time employees. In order to deal with the problem, the unions and the management of the Fnac sign a Fnac-Paris-deal which introduces the notion of part-time work to permanent members of staff (from 5 to 30 hours advantages are conserved in relation to

the number of working hours, and a priority is given to working full-time if requested. A certain number of employees at the Fnac chose this option for personal reasons. One can speak here of a functional flexibility through negotiated and chosen working hours.

1985/1994 – Financial profitability and normalisation

The GMF group takes over the Fnac in 1987 and the late Michel Baroin is succeeded by Jean Louis Pétriat. In 88 the Fnac is yet again in the red, the new managing director outlines a new project for the company; the key word being “Normalisation”, the aim is clear – maintain the cultural, social and consumer orientated image within the management guidelines. The debureaucratisation of the Fnac, an in-depth rehabilitation of the company becomes the objective at the end of the 80’s and at the beginning of the 90’s. During the period from 1991 to 1995, Fnac’s manpower increases from 5400 to 8200 salaried employees, a growth due to the opening up of new shops nation-wide and abroad. For the unions this period is above all characterised by the eating away of the social rights of the manpower, led by a management inspired by dull and retrograde guidelines of mass marketing (noted by the recruitment of executives and supervisors from Auchan and Carrefour).

1994 – The capitalist era of Pinault Printemps Redoute

In August 1994 the P.P.R. group buys back 66.6% of the capital with the Générale des Eaux, in 1996 P.P.R. group is the only shareowner of the Fnac. By November 1997 François Henri Pinault presents his company project to all the personnel, this project may be summarised as follows: “Strengthen the vocation of the Fnac and improve its profitability”. With regards to the social level, the general director decided not to touch the common agreements characteristic of the Fnac and said “*These are costly agreements facing the competition on the market, but they are part of the company’s history* “. The aim of improving profitability will quickly become evident by the development of the plans for centralisation. ARIANE, with productivity gains totalling 800 people, and cutting back 489 positions. The setting up of a certain number of shops around the country and in Paris should allow a reintegration of some of the personnel.

Different statuts from one shop to another

In 1999 the Fnac can count more than ten different legal entities. The most well-known are the Fnac SA (headquarters) and the 4 Fnac Paris (Etoile, Montparnasse, Forum, St Lazare), the only ones to benefit from the company agreement signed in 1985, Codirep (about ten shops in the Paris suburbs), Fnac Relais (35 shops all over the country), Fnac service etc. The technique is called company “mushrooming” with the creation of Fnac Junior, Fnac Telecom, Fnac Software and more recently, Fnac Champs Elysées. Beyond this manifold of legal statuses, the management policy of the personnel remains at a central level, and within this model the directors of the stores and of the “DRH” appears quite weak.

Within the group as a whole, the management policy of the personnel is defined by the particular nature of these sector, “Mass marketing, whether it’s foods or cultural services, must be in the service of the customer”, and with the aim of profitability, “The Fnac is not a cultural centre but a capitalistic company”. The profitability is insured by keeping the costs down to a minimum, employment policy may be defined as follows:

Recruitment

When a new shop is opening most of the **recruitment** is in terms of part-time temporary contracts. At the same time a core of employees from other stores are present in order to supervise and establish the working spirit of the Fnac. In older branches like the one in Paris,

there is no recruitment in the sense that the permanent employees who retire are replaced by part-time workers on temporary or limited contracts (although the number of workers remain the same, the number of working hours drops, which in turn lower the costs but increases the employees workload).

Training represents 3.5% of the wages according to “DRH”, in practise however, it does not exceed 2% and is mainly destined for qualified employees, most of whom are men.

An important part of this training is devoted to the “nursery”. Three years ago this “ American battle horse ” of the new management was created with the aim of “ *Encouraging potential, speeding up career development and evolving our resources* ”.

During the annual appraisal, (applied to all employees) some of them are selected to benefit from a 6-8 months training periods.

3.1.2.2 Employment policy and flexibility

The “DRH” of the Fnac justify the need for flexibility by the special nature of the services offered. “Mass marketing, specially in a high competition period, must be at the service of the customers, so the shops need to stay open as long as possible which means that the working hours of the employees are adjusted accordingly”. Each form of flexibility practised by the Fnac is argued by the different constraints of the firm.

External quantitative flexibility

If the Fnac use sometimes, especially in summer time and for Christmas some agencies workers, most of them being students, this kind of flexibility is not part of the employment strategy, at contrario the use of temporary work contracts is more and more developed.

Temporary work contracts

The increasing resort to this type of contract (Contrats à durée déterminée CDD) is justified by the inflexibility of employment codes and the difficulty of redundancy procedures in France. Temporary contracts therefore serve as a form of pre-hiring, which can later be turned into permanent contracts if the employer is satisfied. With the opening of new shops it also allows for an adjustment of the number of permanent employment to the benefit of the shop.

Internal quantitative flexibility

Working time arrangements

Special daily and weekly hours, evening and Sunday work are justified based on customer demands and longer opening times.

Part-time work

Part time work at the Fnac can go from 5 hours to 30 hours. per week

The resort to part-time work is justified by the high level of charges in France, especially due to the social security charges. Allowing for a reduction in the costs (i.e. exemption from employers charges and benefiting from state aid in cases of employment below a certain salary level), equally compensating for the rigid company agreements (Fnac Paris), which faced with 37-hour weeks with 2 days off cannot cope with the longer opening hours.

However being conscious of the risks of deterioration of the social climate (30% of union members at the Fnac in Paris), the personnel management of the Fnac has decided not to go beyond a certain level of temporary and part-time contracts (20%) as this could lead to a loss of motivation and impoverishment among the personnel.

3.2 Flexibility, employment and working conditions

Results of the research

3.2.1 The Fnac Montparnasse - a negotiated flexibility-?

3.2.1.1 General context

Some figures

The Fnac Montparnasse , rue de Rennes, which opened in 1974 , was the first to have a books department which is still today the most important one in Paris. In March 1999, it had 432 permanent employees, between which -240 sales assistants and 54 cashiers- Out of the 432 employees, 30.6% work part-time, for the most part more than 20 hours.

44 employees have temporary contracts, 24 of which work part-time.

The temporary contract workers (CDD) taken into account outside of the peak periods, may be considered as temporary permanent workers. The number of part-time and temporary workers is highest during the holidays and during the Christmas period.

In terms of qualifications, 67% are skilled workers and 33% are unskilled.

Among the 240 sales staff at Fnac Montparnasse, 55% are over 45 years old whereas 45% are under 30 , giving an average of 39 years. The length of service in 1998 was such that 58% of employees had more than 10 years seniority and 41% more than 15 years.

This situation explains (according to the DRH of the Fnac in Paris) that:

“ All attempts to change work procedures come up against a wall of protests, problems with senior staff being difficult to deal , everybody cannot be the boss, many do not want to, because it would mean giving up working 37 hours, with two consecutive days off , even the carrot of remuneration is not enough to compensate for working extra”.

Beyond these recent datas it may be of interest to take a closer look at the general tendencies over the last 10 years through the analyse of the social records (Bilans sociaux). The staff level remains constant from December 88 to December 97, despite an increasing business activity; so the charge of work is growing. Specially as the relationship between full-and part-time work evolved strongly during this period; 12% part-timers by the end of 1988, 42% by the end of 98.

The nature self of part-time contracts evolve, at the beginning of the 90's we passed from optional part-time (consisting mainly of students working 2 or 3 days per week) to imposed part time, given that the majority of new employees get work contracts of 30 hours.

With regards to temporary contracts the same thing is happening. Between 1988 and 1998, the number of temporary contracts increases from 17% to 28%. Temporary employment mainly affect unskilled workers, whereas the level of qualifications stay the same.

To conclude over these evolutions, it is clear that flexibility is strongly developed during this 10-year period, mainly affecting new employees (unskilled assistants), who are hired as part-timers and with temporary contracts. These new comers are in a situation of both psychological and financial precariousness (a beginners wage for 30 hours being below the agreed french minimum wage level).

Social model; A privileged company status?

Fnac Montparnasse had from the start (1974) a social model where the personnel benefited from an above average salary and a profit-sharing. From this period it kept a strong entreprise culture and high rate of syndicalisation (35% to 30% union members) which is uncommon within mass marketing. Since 1985 the three leading shops in Paris, Forum, Montparnasse and Etoile were governed by a company agreement exemplary of negotiated flexibility “ A top deal ” revolutionary of its time, yet anachronistic today. “ *The Paris model is an exception at a time when everyone else is playing around with the hours, the holidays and Sundays, the assistants at the Fnac in Paris work 37 hours, paid 39 hours; the cashiers do 34 hours per week, the switchboard operators do 25 hours, paid 39* ” C.G.T. union spokesman.

Openings until 19.30 only, idle Sundays, except in December, two days consecutive leave for full-time employees, such is the system at the Fnac in Paris. An attempt to eliminate the two-day consecutive leave system in 1993; result in a strike which forces the management to withdraw. Even in terms of salaries the four Paris stores are above the average starting level which is 6585 frs for 37 hours, paid 39, the average salary being about 10,000 francs per month.

3.2.1.2 Work organisation and flexibility

Out of necessity for the survey we met 10 sales assistants from different departments, age and length of service, 4 permanent part-timers, 3 temporary staff, 3 permanent full-timers and one supervisor.

The organisation of the work and the profession

Table 1: *Distribution of the assistants at the Fnac Montparnasse, March 1999*

Department	CDI	Part-time	Full time	CDD	Part time	Full time	Total
Image sound	69	24	45	9	4	5	78
Micro computers	34	14	20	6	3	3	40
CD's	51	10	41	3	1	2	54
books	60	18	42	4	3	1	64
Total	214	66 30.8%	148 69.2%	22 10.8%	11 50%	11 50%	236

Before linking flexibility and work conditions it seems to us important to underline the diversity of the situation at the departement level , as it appears through the above table.

In effect the sales assistants at Fnac Montparnasse are shared out in different departments, the CD and bookstores attracting the most people, with a core of senior staff remaining (and a

minority of atypical status), Opposite to these departments the departments of computers, office equipment and video, in strong development since the late 80's. recruitment new assistants is mostly with atypical status (CDD, Part time etc)

Each department has a manager and several department supervisors for each section. For instance the audio department has one manager, and a specialist supervisor for each kind of music (classical music, rock, folk, jazz etc.). Each department has a team with variable numbers. The teams are like units at the base of the functioning of the store where a great diversity and complementary of profiles can be found (from the killer to the psychologist), also regarding the hours and age and the employment statuses. The teams get together each weeks to plan and discuss problems, the supplying, product choices, sales figures etc.

Despite the different statuses, sometimes of a precarious nature, differences in age and seniority, the busy Christmas periods etc. what characterises best the general atmosphere is a love for the profession (especially in the bookstore-CD-video departments, less in office equipment) as well as on the level of the working team and the solidarity between the assistants.

In order to understand the practical reality and the point of view of the sales assistants regarding the work conditions in general and about flexibility in particular, it is important to be aware of the very different sales staff, doing to an extent different jobs depending mainly on the product sold.

In the Burotic department, the sales assistant is usually young and not necessarily passionate about the goods sold (mobile telephones, e-diaries), the assistant is very often working part-time on a temporary contract (41% and 20%). *“ For three years I have been working in the office department where I mainly sell mobile telephones, however I would like to change department now. The selling we do does not really include giving advice etc. it is more like just doing the bill and that is it. ”* says a 31-year-old sales assistant working full-time at the Fnac since 85.

In the audio department the sales assistant is usually a man, a music lover and sometimes a musician, young beginner or a senior member of staff who are passionate about what they sell. This type of assistant matches the “old” notion of an assistant at the Fnac, someone who above all is offering advice, dealing with complaints etc. “A passionate assistant looking someone to help and offer advice”, there are fewer part-timers (20%) and temporaries (5.50%).

“ When I came to Fnac Montparnasse at its opening, I came from Etoile where I was in the World Music section. The people working there have a lot in common, they enjoy their job and personally, I was given the task of setting up the Latin American section which I enjoyed a lot. There were no problems between my older colleague who was in charge of everything but Latin America, it was a really good team ”, says a 58-year-old full-time permanent assistant working at the Fnac since 1969.

In addition to sales and advice, especially in audio, video and books, the assistant has autonomy with the managing of the section (selecting, displaying, ordering), alone responsible for the catalogue and liaison with the record companies.

The weekly meetings ensure a smooth running of the department. An assistant at the Fnac seems very far from the reality of other mass-market assistants, where one may talk about exploitation.

“ I much prefer working at the Fnac not only because of earning a better salary, but the working atmosphere is much better. At Darty I had certain skills, but in terms of pay it was starting with the minimum wage (SMIC), otherwise it was a question of bonuses in relation to the sales, which created an appalling working atmosphere as there was no team work ”.

This situation evolves further however, with the introduction of training methods from Carrefour and Auchan, which are trying to impose their own style. Other signs of the times is the often too common reproach at the annual appraisal meetings that the assistant was spending too long with the customers and not making enough money. Otherwise if the assistant still has a certain management autonomy, this is further reduced with an increasing centralisation of the ordering and the need to promote products chosen by the management.

Flexibility and work conditions

As we saw before, the principal forms of flexibility at the Fnac Montparnasse are:

- Internal quantitative flexibility with Special planning of working hours and part timers
- External quantitative flexibility with temporary work contracts

In order to understand the overall effects of the flexibility policies on the work conditions, it seems to us important to question not only “ the atypical : part timers and temporary contractors) but the permanent staff as well, who tell us about their own flexibility (special working hours), but also about the consequences of the flexibility imposed to the part-timers and temporary members of the team over their own work conditions.

Flexibilities experiences and practises

The permanent full-timers

Internal flexibility the organisation of the working hours

This kind of flexibility does not seem to bother the full-time permanent, because their week is in fact determined once and for all during the job interview in discussion with the manager.

“ At the Fnac everyone has their own working hours, what really counts is the organisation of the team, to them I am a bit of a godsend as I work Saturdays and often close the shop. I work from Tuesday to Saturday inclusive, Tuesdays from 14-19 .00 , Wednesdays from 11-19.00, Thursdays and Fridays from 11-19.00 and Saturdays from 10-19.00. This schedule was put in place in 96 when I went from the office department to video after discussions with the team which suits me fine, it is a soft flexibility ”

Full-time permanent assistant 29 years with the Fnac since 88.

External flexibility temporary workers

“In the Fnac since the 90s’ there is more and more temporary workers who remained temporary for 3 or 5 years and that is not legal. They are called upon by the Fnac every

3-4 months, leaving for 1-2 months and then coming back again, which is not justifiable because sometimes there are not enough staff around and which at the end that affects the quality of our work of the work of all the team.

The notion of flexibility affects the service offered, because one needs time to get familiar with the tasks in a department, which always changes from one dept. to another and when someone is not there it affects the rest of the team who may have to step in. In the near future I believe that the Fnac will turn into just another mass marketing chain ”

Full-time permanent assistant 23-year-old permanent worker since 1997.

Permanent part-timers

Internal flexibility the organisation of the working hours

The flexible organisation of working hours is not heavy to bear when it had been negotiated in the beginning.

“After my first interview with Mr. M who was the manager at the time, I managed to negotiate 30 hours in 4 days rather than 5, he accepted and I was working Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday without working either Saturday or Monday. At the beginning I was not particularly interested in working 30 hours, I had preferred 37 hours, but 37 hours were no longer offered only 30 hours ” 24-year-old sales assistant in the Fnac since July 97.

But at the opposite, part time as a real inconvenient that is the level of salary (4200 Frs per month + bonus about 250 frs for 30 hours per week) which is very low and bearable only if you are bachelor and live in your family

Temporaries workers

A difficult situation in the long term, being renewed each month. The temporaries workers (CDD) are cumulating the inconvenients of all the forms of flexibility (internal and external)

Temporaries are more inclined to suffer from physical tiredness (not getting any training to prevent accidents and back problems) and psychological tiredness, stress (often at the busiest periods) which is accentuated by the lack of security in their employment.

Internal flexibility the organisation of the working hours and multifunctionning

Changing hours and duties

Imposed part time and permanent disponibility that is very often the situation lived by the temporaries workers

“ I work 30 hours, but before I was working 25 hours. It was imposed part-time I was doing 30 hours, which later increased to 37 hours and now finally back to 30 hours. At Christmas rising to 37 hours including Sundays, turning into full-time work. Last week I worked full-time again because someone was sick. And when a colleague who is going on holiday in two weeks time, I think I will be asked to work 37 hours again. When one is neither working Fridays or Mondays and one is asked to work Saturdays “ if you don’t

mind” it is hard to say no. When you are looking for a job you have to be flexible rather than saying that it is impossible ”

Jumping from one department to another hinders the development of a proper skilled profession

“ Since I was young I was dreaming about becoming a bookseller, but I was disappointed, I did not realise that you are a packer spending a lot of time tidying the shelves, and of course dealing with the customers. A packer, always being told we are working in a bookshop, which is rubbish, never spending enough time in one section to learn about economy, law etc. and as there is no training provided one can only learn from experience. If they need someone in the eco-dept . you go there, it is not because you know a lot about foreign literature that you find yourself in that section, yet those who stay in the same section for years they become knowledgeable. Myself for instance, I would have chosen literature which I know about, yet I have worked with economy, law and computers which I know nothing about and where I am unable to respond to enquiries ”

External flexibility: Temporary work

For temporary workers specially when they are part timers what is unbearable is

The lack of continuity

“ I have been with the Fnac since 23rd March 1998, starting as a temporary, after 5 contracts varying from 15 days to 2 months, I was offered a 6 months contract from November 98 to April 99 ”

The financial discrimination

Bonus-schemes being only available to the permanent workers, the life for the temporary workers paid 43 francs per hour times 30 hours per week is very difficult

“I earn 4400 francs net, it is awful, I cant have my own apartment , in Paris I cant paid a rent , so I live by my sister , but that is not bearable for long ”

29-year-old bookseller

Flexibility and statuses

To resume, in the Fnac Montparnasse, the living of flexibility through the direct experiences of the staff there, it is clear that flexibility of working hours in less of a problem to the permanent workers as it is put in place from the start.

For the temporaries who feel under pressure, worried that a refusal one their part may lead to a termination of their contract and consequently jeopardise any future hopes of a permanent contract. The temporary status on the other hand which is most often part-time, causes a strong sense of insecurity both psychologically, financially and professionally.

Part-time work is generally accepted by the most senior permanent staff who were given the option, this is not the case however among those who were not given the choice.

Wider implications of flexibility and working conditions

We told here above how flexibility policies and induced work conditions are experienced by the sales assistants of different statuses.

We will try now to catch wider implications of flexibility policies and working conditions in two standpoints:

- Social integration and exclusion
- Segmentation by age and by sex

In term of integration or exclusion, the main problem is the integration of temporary workers in permanent statuses. We must say that there is a deficit of integration which is growing on. In the 70's to the beginning of the 90's, many of the new comers who begin with a temporary contract, were integrated to a permanent job after 6 months or at most one year, since the beginning of the 90's that is more and more limited. Now we find at the Fnac workers who are on temporary contracts (CDD) which are succeeding during one to 3 years without getting a permanent job. As we see above this situation is very difficult to tolerate specially for part timers, so many of them in spite of loving their work leave the Fnac to earn their living in another place when they find a permanent job.

This difficult struggle for having a permanent job deny the statement that "temporary work contracts" are a form prepping for every new comer, if that is true it's only for a happy few

Segmentation by age and by sex

By age

- As we told above, when we look the figures of the staff in term of age, it is certain that the population of sale assistants at the Fnac Montparnasse is composed by a hard core of 58% permanent and full time sales above 45 years old and that the most part (68%) of the "young" people (under 30 years) have temporary part time works.
- We have also noticed that to the segmentation by age and status is added a segmentation by type of work and a distinction between "aristocratic" departments (books and music) and the others (specially burocratic).

By sex

- Regarding sex segmentation, there is no sex segmentation at the Fnac Montparnasse as well for the statuses as for the salaries.
- The temporary workers are as well women or men, and the part timers we were women in the majority in the 80% when it was chosen part time, are now equally dispatched between women and men who are in majority imposed part timers.
- We must also underline that the unions are very aware of the problem, and each year with the "social record" (bilan social) there is a publication of the figures over statutes salaries etc. between women and men to prevent discrimination.

Despite all that, we must say that beyond the statistics, the reality through the original "social model" and the team system is for the tenants, of particular statuses much more bearable at the Fnac Montparnasse than elsewhere.

As a temporary worker said: “ *flexibility is easier to cope with at the Fnac than elsewhere I like the people at the Fnac, they are friendly – I have never met as many nice people anywhere else, the colleagues, the atmosphere appeal to me – even the relations with the bosses are different, my supervisor is nice too in spite of the different camps we are in. We also have a certain autonomy in our work as soon as they trust you* ”

The system of labour relations

Trade Unions and flexibility policies

As we said before, trade union density at the Fnac Montparnasse is relatively high (35%) compared average for the sector and even for the others Fnac. The union representatives of 3 trade unions (Sud CFDT-CGT- FO) are recognised for purposes of collective bargaining. The more active of the Unions is Sud CFDT (a radical branch of the CFDT). Besides the Fnac Montparnasse has a long tradition of union actions as well for strikes, than for negotiations of corporate agreements.

Regarding flexibility policies and working conditions the trade unions and specially Sud Cfdt, are very worried, because the multiplication of “ atypical statuses ” is weakening union force. If they consider that their task is to defend every body, they cannot ask temporary workers for instance to be member of unions or to go in strike, because it will be dangerous for them and reduce their opportunities to get a permanent job.

In any cases they find themselves quite powerless to stop the development of flexibility especially external one and of part time.

Union point of view

“ From optional part-time (student jobs) we passed to imposed part-time; chosen life-long part-time is in a minority, for women it is often due to having children and therefore wishing to have the weekends and Wednesdays off. This is what is referred to as old part-time contracts. From 93 things get out of hand and the unions are unable to stop it. There is no real negotiated flexibility, all sorts of unions have internal discussions about it, yet unable to do anything, because now everything is decided at the moment of hiring. The only area where we might have an influence is in the part-timers battle for a full-time post, that priority is given to people within the company whenever a full-time post is vacant, rather than it being turned into another part-time post. A mistake was made back in 1985, when the agreement on part-time work was signed, where the unions ignored the long-term implications. Due to unemployment there are abuses of part-time, and full-time is often being replaced by part-time. Like in the case of a young woman who wanted to change from part-time to full-time employment, a fight that went on for 5 years, going by the industrial tribunal.

The temporarie (CDD), is another even more serious problem where there is very little we can do, we put on pressure and ask for justifications for using temporary work as a permanent solution, but we very rarely succeed in obtaining information, laws are often bypassed by introducing a part-time apprentice instead ”

34-year- Sud Cfdt old union spokeswoman

3.2.2 The Champs Elysées store - an imposed flexibility from the start

3.2.2.1 General context:

A new model of Fnac?

Before talking about the situation at the Fnac Champs Elysées, it needs to be said that we have met enormous difficulties here, denied access to figures and interviews, all apparently due to the 35 hour-week negotiations on behalf of the management and the DRH, and on behalf of the temporary staff, out of fear of not being considered for a permanent contract, equally with regards to employees from other branches, who were worried it might affect their chances of promotion or transferral to another branch. This illustrates quite clearly the unhealthy climate there. We did manage however to obtain information from a department manager, a union representative, 2 sales executives from another branch and 2 sales assistants who have obtained their permanent post or gone from part-time to full-time, and who have left the branch.

The Fnac Champs Elysées inaugurated 2nd December 1997, consisting of 2500m², situated right next to Virgin, is open 7 days a week until midnight. According to the managing director of the Fnac the aim was to: “ *Brush the dust of the image of the Fnac, develop the distribution of innovation and creation. An updating of technical products and even future products. An anticipation of young talents when it comes to books and CD's* ” On the social level it is a long time ago since Fnac denounced the regulations launched by Virgin in 1998, the new Fnac, its window dressing is very far the social conventions dating back to the beginning.

In order to impose flexible working hours, enabling competition with Virgin, the PPR group did not need to negotiate, the Champs Elysées store being a new structure the legal functioning of which remains unknown even to the unions.

“ We struggled for ten years to obtain a committee at the Fnac and when we succeeded it was dissolved when the PPR group took over. Today only the Paris Fnac and the head office have an agreement benefiting everybody, 5000-7000 French employees do not benefit from such an agreement ”

Out of 200 people hired at the Champs Elysées, two thirds comes from other stores, the rest were spontaneous applications, in order to recruit from the exterior 2000 applications were examined.

In spite of taking their clients the Fnac Champs Elysées has already borrow from Virgin his social model, as a C.G.T. union representative of the Fnac Paris.says:

“ The Claridge Shopping Centre is the down-market version of social conditions at the Fnac ”

A typology sketch

Walking through the aisles as a customer, one sees mainly tired looking young sales assistants, however looking more closely as a researcher, one can see three different types of staff:

- group Fnac A: consisting of employees and supervisors recruited from other Fnac stores with the prospect of rapid promotion , from VQ 1 to VQ2, from VQ2 to section

supervisor, from supervisor to manager of department or from a temporary to a permanent status. These people are mainly recruited from the Fnac network in the suburb, they have already work there two and a half years, they are destined to return to the Fnac of origin or another store and get a promotion, the average age being 29 years old.

- group Fnac B: consisting of people from other suburban branches of the Fnac, young under 30's, who have had problems of different kinds at their original branch, clashes with the leadership, high-profile, union activity etc ... for them, the Champs Elysées store represent a last chance, this situation gives rise to a special kind of blackmail : *"if you do not behave you are shown the door"*
- group Fnac C, new recruitment: this third group comes from the outside and consists mainly of young men under 25, coming from different professional backgrounds and above all unemployment. Recruited temporarily, often part-time and ready to accept any working conditions to obtain a permanent full-time contract.

The general atmosphere can be described as a world where the carrot and the whip play important role in the personnel management. An atmosphere which is well illustrated by a young union representative, a former worker at the Fnac belonging to group B and who is planning to join Virgin where one knows at least what to expect, knowing that the methods are less barbaric.

"It is a Fnac where there is a lot of "clientilism" (exchange of favours) between the people in charge, that is to say, executives coming from super-stores like Carrefour or Auchan.

Epecially in the record departments, in the French Variety section, where the sales assistants are treated in an incredible way, this could never happen in another Fnac, manage a section through fear; because they are young, anything goes, one single guy managing a whole section, usually a VQ2, the rest are experienced or beginners. This create a bad atmosphere where we are all running around feeling tired. People are on their guard".

Other aspects affecting the atmosphere at this particular Fnac, are the products sold. The cultural and innovative sides come to an end, the main aim is to make sales, largely led by the executives.

"The supervisor is like the sheriff in the saloon, with an appalling behaviour towards others. They are not professionals, but people who want to make money wasting the personnel and making fun of the cultural or innovative side to the products. They come from mass marketing outlets like Carrefour, Leclerc, they are there to make a good turnover, they do not care about the cultural aspect. After all it is the only Fnac where they do software without selling computers, the only Fnac with 50,000 francs gadgets like "The Goonies" by the shop's entrance, the only Fnac solely created to make money.

There are no books, no computers, people who come to buy books are disappointed, how is it possible to have a Fnac without books?"

3.2.2.2 Work organisation and flexibility

Work organisation and atmosphere

Table 2: *Distribution of sales assistants at the Fnac Champs Elysées*

CDI	Part-time	Full-time	CDD	Part-time	Full-time	Total
78 (65%)	27 (35%)	51 (65%)	42 (35%)	27 (65%)	15 (35%)	120

At the beginning of 99, the 213 staff were divided between four departments, audio, video, software and office equipment. The departments have been adapted to the surface area of the shop, 2500 square metres, choosing a large area for audio and out of the 500 square meters left, there was video and software in the basement, upstairs in an area detached from the rest the office equipment.

Different types of sales assistants

Out of 213 people working at Champs Elysee there are 120 sales staff, among whom 60 % come from the outside and 40 % come from the Fnac. According to a manager who was before a supervisor at the Fnac Forum, the two groups are totally different.

The Fnac'ers, as they call themselves have a greater knowledge of the products than a younger newcomer to the company. In the Parisian Fnac branches there is a tradition of union claims, but beyond that there is also a company tradition the leading to a strong attachment.

The new sales staff have a kind of spirit, dynamism and stronger reactions than their seniors however, they are less precise, their knowledge of the market is more approximated and they do not care about the company traditions linked to the Fnac, they are also a lot less passionate about their job In reality, "fnac'ers" and outsiders co-exist without too many problems within the new departments like office equipment and software as well as video. In the audio department the co-existence is a lot more problematic, all the more so as the supervisors and managers said the sales staff are up against one another, "to punish the rebels"

Constant Pressure and checking

A subtle but constant pressure which weighs as much on the executives as the sales staff is present in the shop. The proximity of direct competition by Virgin has led to a constant checking of going prices on the product sold. And since the shop is not far from the Fnac head office, the managing directors make daily visits and check the clients judgements of the performances of the sales assistants. Other forms of "spying", the mystery client who is sent for a product and goes to see an assistant whose performance, politeness and knowledge will be judged. Within this stressful environment to say the least, the working conditions are extremely hard and flexibility reaches its climax.

Flexibility and work conditions

At the Champs Elysées store the principal forms of flexibility, as at the Fnac Montparnasse are:

- Internal quantitative flexibility with Special planning of working hours and part timers
- External quantitative flexibility with temporary work contracts

Internal quantitative flexibility

Special planning of working hours

Time planning according to extended opening times. This kind of flexibility concern everybody with obvious differences depending on the status. Working hours would come within the framework of dispensation for companies within a tourist area; openings from 10am until midnight during the week and from midday until midnight at weekends. The work contracts state that the shop employees must work 18 Sundays per year.

The flexibility of hours are moreover defined according to the needs of the company and not stipulated in the work contracts, consequently the same person working full-time may work three types of schedules; from 10 to 18, from 12 to 21 or from 15 to midnight.

The reception staff are given their work schedules for the coming week on a Friday, and have little time to get organised. After discussions the sales staff establish a three-week timetable, A B C of 39 hours. Week A and B, from Monday to Friday with a weekend off, week C working the weekend with the Monday and Tuesday off. He later openings for example, four per month distributed between one in week A and one in week B and two during weeks C.

According to the management some employees adapt very well to flexible hours and varying timetables whereas others are bothered by the forever-changing hours. The time planning is increasing the task of the supervisor or the manager of the Department.

It needs to be said that the flexible hours were accepted by all, the first three months after opening, the “fnac’ers” as well as the exterior recruits were carried by enthusiasm for the creation of a new branch and did not complain.

“I started working at the opening in December 97, in the CD’s section with the independent labels by the shops entrance. I worked from January to March without a weekend off, I did everything to make my section work, I had a lot of goodwill. We had a good December month it was great, the inauguration, a good turnover and all that, in January those small problems started coming up.”

29 year old CDs sales assistant, permanent full-time at the Fnac (Group B) since 90 and CFDT - union representative.

Even the “fnac’ers” from group A, (see above) may cannot stand the work tempo and cannot imagine it in the long term, according to department manager;

“The Champs Elysees branch is mainly a stepover, it is hard to imagine how people could be working seven days a week sometimes until midnight with enormous family problems can stay. Moreover, working every third Sunday is very disruptive and not liveable over time, it needs to be a period only lasting from half a year to two years maximum..”

Part time

One-and-a-half year after the opening of the shop the development of part time work is clear. In this way assistants working 30 hours, left because they did not obtain a full-time positions, and were replaced by others working 25 hours. In March 99 between permanent and

temporary staff, 45 % of them work part-time. These assistants are even further penalised by the extended openings and flexible hours. Part-time, chosen or endured? The question is no longer raised.

Part time was imposed from the start,

“I was offered a 25 hour contract from the start even though I was looking for full-time”,
says an externally hired employee.

Part-time still imposed 18 months after opening

Few assistants have obtained full-time and more many temporary sales assistants who were working 39 hours have on the contrary accepted the changeover to 25 or 30 hours in order to become permanent and are kicking themselves because they cannot live on it and are looking for additional work hours.

The part-time staff is also penalised doing their job because they are responsible for catalogues like full-timers, the demands of the managers are the same for them and the full-time staff.

Alongside this general picture “the young wolves”(externally hired waiting to rise) think *“it is great because it sharpens the teeth”* the others (mainly young “fnac’ers”) say *“we are not numerous enough and you bet we sweat.”*

External quantitative flexibility

The temporary contracts (CDD)

During the last six months a certain number of sales assistants hired on contemporary contracts, have had their contracts made permanent after having to make allegiance to their supervisors and accepted extreme compromises

Those who did not fit in were made redundant without further formalities. These serious cases have made a work inspection necessary, a young temporary sales assistant who was asking for the granting of tenure (becoming a permanent) theoretically agreed to by the management of the Fnac got a slap in the face.

The temporary is more than any other exposed to loose hours, especially part-timers who feel obliged to accept anything in the hope of a permanent contract.

Being called at eight o'clock in the morning and asked to work the same day even if it is the their day off, in addition to two late openings per week. The temporary, despite being younger than the average (18-22), is often tired, but do not dare to be absent fearing that their contract might come to an end or not having a national health insurance cover. This adds a strong financial insecurity, and if all the staff at Fnac Champs Elysees were well below the payments of other Fnac branches, the starting salary of a novice would be 6700 francs gross for 39 hours, the temporary who is working 25 hours would earn only just 4000 francs gross.

Extended hours combined with temporary part-time contracts results in a lack of attention to the aisles during peak periods (Saturday and Sunday) and the heavier workload for everyone which causes health problems. General tiredness, nervous breakdowns and following therapy.

The system of labour relations

As a legal obligation a company committee was elected one year after the opening .

But the development of the elections is significant of the bad social and human climate of the store.

During the first round there was only the list of the union, which because of all the scheming did not go through, then a second round was called for.

In the second round there was an independent list with a finger from the management, during the second round the union list won two seats, the independent list as well. In any case, unions were not wanted by the management, they wanted to manage the thing in peace without any trouble and then, they tried the independent list and now they find themselves with a company committee where even the people from the independent list are beginning to turn against them. Anyway the union representatives are, submitted to pressures and push to dismiss by the management and there is no real discussion of the collective problems at the company meetings behind the restaurant tickets.

The Fnac Champs Elysees. Imposed flexibility in the long term intolerable.

To conclude about the working conditions and flexibility within the Champs Elysees store, we can say that if in the opening period in order to impose difficult working conditions during a period of unemployment, the Fnac has played on the image of a rewarding profession. “Only passionate people can work at the Fnac” originating from earlier times, the slogan which succeeded in attracting a young population from the exterior, seduced by selling cultural products, music, cinema, video etc and a rather “pally” management style.

A year later the argument no longer holds up and results in disappointing many of the newcomers (groupe C) who leave the Fnac sometimes for Virgin

“I left better paid job to work at the Fnac, but after six months I realised I was wrong, this Fnac is not like the others, it is not about cultural product but showing off, we sell flashy stuff, we have to make sales and one’s passion, in my case music, there is no time for this or sharing it with others. It’s not about advice it’s about invoicing, it’s like a supermarket, moreover the atmosphere is very tense and the working hours are difficult to cope with, especially for part-timers. I was promised full-time or at least 30 hours, I’m still waiting, I can’t stand it any longer and am looking for something else now full-time, maybe with Virgin. As soon as I find something I will resign, in any case I can’t live on this than they can’t stay with my mate forever” 28-year-old CD sales assistant hired in March 98 on 25 hours and who left the Fnac in February 99.

Still working at Fnac Champs Elysees in 99 the weak “fnac’ers” (group B) and new ones (Group C) who would like a full-time permanent contract (CDI) and who are hoping to do a career; *“they could just as well be selling tinned peas what they are interested in are sales and earning the maximum, ready to stamp on the rest”*.

The other “fnac’ers” seeking promotion (Group A) leave the Champs Elysées for another Fnac, preferably in Paris. Some who were disgusted by the methods used and who are stuck, especially due to union involvement have left or are leaving the Fnac in the near future.

“When I've finished with a 35 hour week negotiations I'm off, one can neither work properly here nor carry out functions for the union, one is persecuted by the management and on top of that one is not really backed by one's colleagues.”

Comparative Conclusion

By drawing a parallel between employment policies and flexibility, about their effect on the work conditions and the general atmosphere in these two stores, one is led to believe that flexibility has good days ahead at the Fnac.

While Montparnasse was putting a brake on it due to the strong union presence and a tradition of solidarity going beyond work statuses, it had a negative effect at the Champs Elysées where nothing remain of the “Fnac spirit” or socially.

The former image has been only acting like a screen against the practices believed only to exist within traditional mass marketing, a new sales assistant profile at the Fnac is looming ahead; available, with a little interest in the product and seeking to climb up the ladder in the hierarchy.

A final question within such different contexts, which might see the repercussions of the new law of 35 hours (negotiations running in the two stores) especially regarding flexibility?

Given the hypotheses that: At Montparnasse where the management cannot hope to receive state aid and where the unions refuse an annualisation of the working hours, resulting in an elimination of positive flexibilities especially at break times, with certain transitions from part-time to full-time, however the number of temporary contracts will increase in order to deal with weekly and seasonal peak periods.

At the Champs Elysées where the balance of power is less favourable towards unions, it is likely that the refusal of annualisation will not pass; one schedule of high weeks and low weeks (48 hours/31hours) will be set up. This leads to an increase in imposed flexibility compared to the present system.

The case of an electronics company

3.3 Company context and political orientation

3.3.1 The economical environment

The management policy of workers at the electronics company has to be seen in its context. The studied establishment is a business unit belonging to a large international group under Japanese management, which specialises in products depending on different countries in Europe. France was chosen for the creation of a plant in Brittany in charge of making telephone equipment, due to the favourable conditions located there. The factory is recent (1990) making a unique product which is very sensitive to a hyper competitive market. The company is No. 4 in its field and has to fight against local competitors.

The management is united in describing the consequences of this vivid competition, within a climate of price war, the directors have to adopt a policy of high productivity with a merciless struggle against hidden costs quickly adapting to variations in the ordering. The factory has gradually increased in power since its creation and took off especially in 1997; in 1991 it made 25,000 telephones, in 1996-350,000 and in 1999-1,400,000 units. But the market cannot be taken for granted; one can only have confidence in the general market growth (booming – with a new product) and sales forecast stretching from a fortnight to six months. Besides this, the factory is sensitive to supply deadlines and market prospects are in general reduced to two months. It applies a personnel strategy based on large staff fluctuations marked by a resort to 50 % interim workers, who are hired on temporary contracts. The production management state that it plays jointly on four types of flexibility; a search for a strong organisational response, a policy of changing hours, the search for staff fluctuations in relation to the amount of work, finally, an extensive use of external workers (mainly resorting to interim workers on contracts which are renewable every 15 days, staying on average for 7-8 months with the company which hires and lays off depending on the workload).

The local employment market is right, with a pool of workers, even though the directors say it is hard to fill certain skilled posts. The young in particular, find it very easy to get temporary work as an unskilled operator within an employment area where unemployment has dropped by 5 %. Some young people hired as temporary agency workers turned down the offer of a permanent contract, for reasons which we will develop further. The management told us also that telephone manufacturing requires people with low qualifications, but in a context where factory work is intellectualised it prefers to hire temporary agency workers with A-levels as a minimum, because they understand better the demands for quality linked to supplies or organisation. 50% of the personnel therefore are temporary agency workers, often over-qualified, even though some have degrees or technical diplomas within another field. According to a supervisor; "in this top industry there is no place for fools".

3.3.2 Strategic flexibility policy and personnel management

To the question concerning the strategic character of a no to flexibility, a major part of the executives answer that it is about a wanted, planned policy which tends to respond to the constraints of the market, but which is applied with a real margin for manoeuvring on behalf of the management. Even if some prefer the term "suppleness" which is less loaded, the personnel management like the production management agreed that it is about a choice (present everywhere in electronics). The reasons are many; adapting better to market changes, without risks and extra labour costs; the means of reducing labour costs, greater automation possibility through a rapid shedding of excess unskilled workers; practising an extensive

polyvalency and selecting people capable of learning to train others; saturation of production tools, thanks to the extended working hours where the machine costs are paid off through intensive use.

The policy of flexibility is also clearly anchored in the idea that the company is conceived of as a "hard core", mainly consisting of skilled men and a peripheral work force of mainly women, especially in posts where dexterity and delicacy are important. The company does notably seek a faithful manpower however, this does essentially apply to skilled workers recognised as experts. There seems to be a departure at the heart of the leadership with regards to opening up the hiring with the recent growth. But the figures remain moderate; among temporary agency workers in October 1998 there were 70 changes to temporary contracts (CD D) out of which 30 obtained permanent contracts (CDI), in relation to the need for skills and selecting people in relation to their ability to adapt, their attitude to the company and after working on CDD for 18 months⁹. The personnel management underline without doubt that the company uses troops of "bacheliers"(school leavers with A-levels) with an experience from industry, that this policy should not change and in the future the change from interim to temporary will not be done and the changes to permanent contracts will also be very limited.

3.4 The coherence of different forms of flexibility

This policy of flexibility responds to a worry mainly expressed by the management of coherence between the various forms. It manifests itself according to the production manager by an additional worry, about three essential dimensions of competitiveness; an operational flexibility which aims to make the organisation more responsive, a time flexibility, allowing an extension of working hours and matching changes in workloads; the fluctuation policy affecting the staff where the advantages widely compensate for the high costs of using temporary agency workers. Extending the external qualitative flexibility, because the staff fluctuations with the massive resort to unskilled workers from the outside double.

3.4.1 Organisational flexibility (qualitative internal)

Our speakers rarely defined the flexibility of functions except as a way of adjustment which allows a better internal response to worries about the organisation's responsiveness (training, mobility, polyvalency, promotion, personnel appraisals). The reasons for this search for flexibility are many; the hunt for hidden costs, quality faults, material losses; limit organisational wavering, (everyone needs to have clearly defined duties); the problem of limiting the hierarchy, the need to increase productivity (in packing we will soon have nine staff, from packing 450 telephones to 1000 an hour); also the problem of generalising polyvalency; looking for loyalty from the most technically competent and motivated staff (underlining the risk of losing the best trained to competitors).

The most important tool is training. The management underline that the company policy on this subject represents an important and expensive investment. Like other tools for the flexibility of functions, it varies according to the targets. Everybody gets the initial training which aims to instil the main values and rules within the company, (one half-day training). But concerning the temporary agency workers, training is carried out on the job by binomials

⁹ At the moment of the enquiry the personnel is divided as follow : 277 CDI, 160 CDD, 236 interim, 50 in the service industry – research and development, 12 in sub-contracting (security, cleaning, catering), adding 20–30 in sub-contracting making perforated cards. The total of “ temporaries ” is therefore widely above 50 % of the whole staff.

together with somebody more qualified, either another more experienced interim or a permanent worker (CDI). The training effort for the mostly qualified is from 3 days to 3 weeks and includes technical aspects. One mentions also management training of supervisors aiming to include a greater understanding of social cohesion and the company rules in addition to the technical aspect.

Polyvalence, mainly aiming to extend the tasks is a policy which is systematically applied in the workshops. The aim is to get around the absences, teach people different jobs, avoiding routine and creating more fully integrated teams. Some point out tensions within certain teams due to the fact that certain operators do not fully master the job or the rhythm required. The management underline that depending on the workshop, polyvalency fits everything from apprenticeships to 2,6 or 9 different posts. An additional reason verified by the operators, is that there is a strong demand for polyvalency by the operators themselves in order to break the routine of this Taylorian type work. Little is said about internal mobility. The transfer from one workshop to another is a way of activating the most senior workers. But in terms of mobility, it is above all the external mobility which is strong; the company was not able to supply the staff turnover figure, but it seems to have been 50-60% of the manpower for several years (referred to below, the external quantitative flexibility). The only figure we have is the departure of 100 workers in 1998 out of 600 staff.

The practice of assessment also varies depending on whether the workers are temporary agency workers or not. With the temporary agency workers there are occasional meetings with the leadership where the job and problems that might have occurred are commented on. But the regular annual evaluations are with the temporary or permanent staff, following a grading scale which is kept in the personnel file of the person in question. The supervisors do not hide that those holding posts of responsibility are the first to be considered. In the same way, the possibilities for promotion are much more limited or non-existent for the temporary agency workers, who are not a preoccupation for those in charge; in any case the path goes from a temporary contract CDD to a permanent one CDI. We met a permanent worker who followed the course from being a machine-operator and who is very satisfied with this evolution. But the management tell us selection is hard, that the temporary agency workers are sorted and that promotion depends firstly on the diploma, basic technical skills and the suitability of the applicant's attitude to the company. Obviously, advertising vacancies is not enough to insure a professional transition. Although we met a former operator who has transferred to the administration, most temporary agency workers are vowing only to pass through.

This type of flexibility which most of the time only gives transfers to a qualified minority already on a temporary contract. To the rest flexibility limits itself to an instrumental polyvalency which does not insure a real rise in qualification, but which allows the facing up to a certain number of unknown factors in production. Some managers question the effort that goes into training at the bottom level; "we seek to train people and then they leave". This flexibility certainly allows for a better response within the organisation at the same time satisfying operators who dislike routine. But this mobility of functions does not exempt the management from risks, with the extended working hours policy as well as a significant fluctuation policy of staff numbers. In this way, we notice that the different forms of flexibility are not in opposition, but fit into the framework of a coherent and co-ordinated policy.

3.4.2 The internal quantitative flexibility (work times)

The company practices a large range of flexibility on the subject of work schedules; the 2 /8 shift is general; some work 3/8 or in teams at the weekend. The resort to these forms of working depends on the workload. The management reckon the choice of work schedules is a matter of consultation; first of all asking for volunteers for the 3/8; if there are not enough of them (often among the senior),"we may impose it". Regarding weekend teams, necessary in order to pay for expensive materials, it is imposed by the management with the initiative from the electronic-card section, forming an operational nucleus completed by temporary agency workers.

If one takes into account the new assignments for temporary agency workers including an obligation to be available for all sorts of hours, and checking with the temporary agency workers themselves, it turns out that the work time policy is imposed without consultation neither with the representatives nor the interested parties. Considering the law about the 35 hour week it obviously does not interest the management, who having formed a special group on the subject saying that the state of the market does not accommodate for such a law, neither by reducing the work times nor in the creation of new jobs.

3.4.3 External quantitative and qualitative flexibility

The two most common forms of flexibility are we have been told, the massive resort to externalisation (via interim) and a significant fluctuation policy with regards to staffing numbers. They nearly get confused, if we put to one side certain categories of personnel which are the most often external with companies (i.e. gardening, catering, cleaning etc).

Knowing that an interim costs more than a permanent contract worker, it is considered a preferable policy, in the name of loyalty exclusively for the "hard core", as much for economical as social reasons; the mobilisation of an unskilled manpower is faster, besides temporary agency workers are easier to manage, paid through an interim agency; the managerial costs of temporary agency workers are low compared to permanent or temporary contracts. On the social level choosing young school leavers means having a supple manpower; the senior employees on permanent contracts are often absent and have a tendency to encyst. The argument is reinforced by the fact that everyone does not want to stay with the company, it is hardly of interest to leave operators on a low qualification status for a long time and that bonuses are given to temporary agency workers who really wish to evolve and who are capable, finding themselves there at the moment when the company needs them. The management approved only in 1998, when 70 contracts (CDD) were offered, 10 temporary agency workers refused the change preferring the status of the interim, which ensures a pay of about 1500 francs per month more (with higher bonus of precariousness and paid leave).

A policy of flexibility is therefore coherent and thought through. For the management temporary work has to be distinguished from " insecure" work and separated from harmful and derogatory connotations. Temporary work is wanted by the young and corresponds to the expansion in economic activity. The average profile of an interim worker we are told, is a 20 year old coming from studies or sometimes waiting to continue, who wish to earn money fast to get his/her own place. Later apparently, the contract of determined length is offered depending on the needs. However, the management point out that there is no question of going below the limit of 30 % interim workers.

This theory of a "hard core", mentioned before is considered by a section of the management as being part of Japanese values; also saying that the company was created after a cultural

diagnosis of the attitudes of workers in the region (with a reputation for seriousness, believing in the virtue of work, attached to the area and respect for authority). Even more clearly some put Japanese culture forward as representing values of consensus, harmony, strong relational involvement, team spirit and everyone respecting the limits of their skills, everyone is invited to limit sources of conflict, do a good job in an atmosphere marked by a wish to belong, with a strong management and company attachment. Like a supervisors says "there is a strong relational policy which is what makes up our policy of responsiveness".

Whatever the argument is about the influence of Japanese culture, the leadership assure us that management methods for the manpower in the factory continued to promote a large social cohesion; the temporary agency workers are not a problem as long as the legal rules of the renewable contract every 15 days are respected; the management listens to difficulties they may face in their work; the team leaders remind of the rules and values regularly; the hierarchy is accessible and teamwork is strongly approved of, contributing to a defining of skills, a higher level of professional consciousness and without paternalism, but resting on a clear contract for all.

3.5 The temporary agency workers discourse on company and work conditions

3.5.1 The profile of the interviewed

We met 10 operators (2 men, 8 women) chosen by the company. The sample group represents different statuses (2 permanents, 2 temporary, 6 temporary agency workers), for the comparison the ages vary between 21 and 28 being representative of the group; all have at least A-levels, some a professional diploma or equivalent professional experience, all have previous experience, there or from other companies of temporary work (from six months to four years).

There are no differences regarding the civil statuses. The main differences are on the level of qualifications and experience, people with a technical diploma and the operators who have had experiences from elsewhere like supply primary-teaching, sales assistant in a sport shop are missing their previous experiences because they feel downgraded and demonstrate a certain dislike for unskilled work in industry which they see as a kind of "decline" and are very determined to leave the company, as soon as they are able to make the move. It is those who have another project and in the long run feeling inclined to continue their studies or training. They fit well into one of the categories mentioned by the management; they are temporary agency workers for practical reasons, are in waiting, and do not want to invest in the future there. They are the most critical of interim work, talking about the stigma attached to it and unequal treatment between worker and user. The others in the same group-all have A-levels from technical college and explain that they came to the company just to try it, because the A-levels in themselves were not offering enough openings (trade, office-work etc).

Finally, apart from one machine-operator presently on a permanent contract and who is very satisfied with her internal progression, not seemingly worried about the pay. There are as much criticism in relation to temporary agency workers among the permanent and temporary staff we have met, as among the temporary agency workers. Moreover the strongest criticisms of the work conditions come from permanent workers. These remarks must be watched since only very few were interviewed.

3.5.2 The job and the working atmosphere

On the whole the work itself and the atmosphere were quite positively judged. Especially appreciated by those who have been promoted within the company, the only negative aspects are related to the routine of an unskilled job (3 operators out of 10). The work is clean and simple, some underlined the possibility of doing an apprenticeship, the mobility between the posts is appreciated and some say also that the job is interesting. It is remarkable that all emphasise the strong extent of personal involvement, independently of their judgement of the interim situation. This may be explained no doubt by the high-tech production as much as the training of the operators, who are in general over-qualified in relation to the duties.

In eight out of two cases, one boasts of a good atmosphere with the colleagues, with a helpful and stimulating attitude, strongly tied up with the notion of a young company. One also boasts work autonomy, opportunity to move, friendly inter-personal relationships and respect from the leadership (where openness and a young attitude are important). Negative judgements are in a minority; in some cases there is a tendency towards an everyone for himself attitude a lack of help, difficult to become respected, like one person says: "here, it's the survival of the fittest", one needs to know how to get respect, only the operators being young do not defend themselves, and that the "Japanese style" is a facade. But she adds: "still, it's not too bad here".

Recognition on behalf of the leadership is also underlined and confirms the judgement of the executives as being lenient. Replacements within the teams are easily accepted and also getting time off due to illness. Two people who disagree with the apparent lack of respect from the leadership, are also those who underlined the disinterest in the work, the bad atmosphere and bad work conditions.

3.5.3 The work conditions

We made a very detailed questionnaire about the work conditions going from the hypotheses that interim work is a source of several declines, on the level of health and safety, the conditions carrying out the work and work conditions in general. This hypotheses only check the feeling of precariousness referred to in the 4th part. The general picture of the factory is of a place where the work conditions are mainly judged as good and better than other local factories.

The work tasks are not generally considered as hard, one rarely speaks of difficult positions; the workplace is not thought to be too hard even if "bosses push the pace". The routine in itself does not reveal bad work conditions but as something one has to accept. It seems therefore that the management worry about team spirit contributing to the general feeling, and that people are quite autonomous, at the same time remaining within the collective context. About health and safety nothing negative is said. Everywhere it is agreed that the temporary agency workers have the same accommodation as the CDD's or the CDI's, with no discrimination of any kind.

Three out of ten people reckon that the work hours are negative, the difficulty of working nights and the stress. The complaints are especially linked to the 2/8- system forcing people to get up very early interfering and causing unsynchronised work rhythms. But on the whole it is quite surprising that the young who are little used to the rhythm in industry, are not particularly dissatisfied with these work times. Some of them undoubtedly accept these limitations part of a project with specific aims and who in fact are happy to get a pay which is

not as bad as all that (speaking about 7,000 francs per month, bonuses and paid leave inclusive).

3.5.4 Training and career prospects

Few operators speak readily about training and career prospects. Some miss the lack of training which they blame on the work routine. Most tasks require no skills. The disinterest in career cannot only be attributed to the answers coming from young people. Their expectations mentioned below are mainly concerning stability and it is only attaining a CDD and later a CDI contract that they can hope to interest the management with chances for a minority of becoming a machine operator. It is out of the question that they may become team supervisors. This inequality regarding training is perhaps an indicator of the lack of participation in the decision-making and the way the work organisation work. In this respect the temporary agency workers share the conditions of the CDD and the CDI operators.

3.5.5 A typology sketch

Generally speaking the company's image is seen as positive by most people; in relation to work conditions, the pay and the attitude which are described as "young", facilitating equal and warm relations with the management. Nonetheless, this good atmosphere cannot hide all the different strategies with regards to work conditions and prospects there. Three kinds appear;

- "the loyal" - three or four interviewees who see the company in very positive terms and who do not have an alternative employment strategy feel at ease there and wish to stay. They are scarcely critical of interim as they are planning to stay in order to obtain a CDD contract, later converted to CDI.
- "the critical insider's"- this is a group consisting of CDI ,CDD and temporary agency workers; they vividly criticise the interim situation but to scarcely have any alternative. They want to stay with the company and value stability .
- "the strategical group"- this group consists of four operators who clearly states the lack of intention to stay, having in general other plans and stay as long as they have to. Only one of them said clearly he would turn down a CDI offer , not wanting to settle in. The others are hoping for a more rewarding job or to continue their studies. They sometimes extend their employment due to waiting or out of short term money worries. They are very critical of the interim employment.

3.6 The participators strategy faced with interim employment: the question of social cohesion

One may think that the integration and social cohesion offered by the company are satisfactory, taking into consideration the unskilled nature of the jobs leading to responsibility, and if it was not for the discourse and reasoning which underpins the interim employment relationship. Relying on more typical characteristics of this, we will attempt to clarify advantages and drawbacks of this relationship.

3.6.1 Advantages and drawbacks of interim work to the management

The managers do not hide the advantages of a systematic interim employment policy. On a political level, it is sometimes underlined that the operators are happy with the interim situation, that they have chosen it and in any case, and that all other competitors do the same. For many of them, interim means temporary employment, better paid, more than permanent employees even if it is a first working experience. The suggestion is certain, softened by the

fact that it is above all women who are recruited under this status (80%) and that the men have greater difficulty finding their place.

The economical arguments are there straightaway; the resort to interim allows for changes of operation and adjusting to the rhythm of automation. The phenomenon becomes ordinary within the sector like elsewhere, a certain number of considerations need to be added ;and the externalisation of personnel management lowers the costs, to become reasonable; the market is right, with a boom, and encourage replacements of operators from one day to the next of those who do not satisfied the demands for productivity fixed by the company. The argument about the saturation of production tools is not convincing; one can make the equipment work with permanent employees. No more than with the apprentices; the route from CDD to CDI allows above all the time to sort the good at from the bad. In this way , the argument of "a clear contract" sorted out with the person, creates inequality in the employment relationship; those who present themselves on the market do hardly have the choice most of the time.

There are as well obvious “ social ” reasons, which the management is not trying to hide. The temporary agency workers make up a manpower which is easy to renew without having to assume the responsibility of an employer. This results in a certain number of advantages like the easiest way to make people accept the constraints related to production, eliminating without conflict potential unmanageable elements, in short, follow the company's manufacturing conditions within the "company's tradition" backed by the management. The use of school leavers adds to social quality often lacking among employees with lower education. The use of selection is often underlined; the interim status allows for a goodbye to those who do not fit in, forcing the individual to exercise self-control and respect one's responsibilities. We are also told that it is a good way of avoiding to keep people who in the long run are less conscientious and who risk encysting themselves. Intrins facilitate the search for a manageable manpower, very little inclined to protest, who protect the employer from "troublemakers" or even unionists.

The other side of the coin though; temporary agency workers are expensive for the company but this is however accepted .The cost of training cannot be ignored and the suffering of social relations; some managers complain having trained operators even to a minimum extent, who then leave and who are disinterested in the industry, and the time spent training new ones is often wasted despite a strong selection process.

3.6.2 Advantages and drawbacks of interim operators

During the interviews it is striking to see the contrast between a relatively good assessment of the work and of the company, and the complaints about temporary agency workers. The phenomenon is present in seven out of ten interviews. Strongest among those who reckon themselves to be over- qualified, but it is a general reaction going well beyond the company, which is not the only one to resort to interim workers.

A minority of operators do not complain about interim. It is true there are certain advantages financially, a better direct salary (bonuses for precariousness are higher and the holiday pay is included in the salary). But this we are told encourage them not to take holidays out of fear of losing the job. Locally too, interim employment is numerous, which makes some have no doubt about unemployment. There are also personal reasons: interim work allows a first contact with industry: a certain freedom for the employer as well as for the operator, to leave the company whenever desired, multiplying the work experiences without commitment. It can also be a job of transition, acting as a stepping- stone towards studies or retraining. Finally,

some young people we questioned were in a state of waiting or indecision, which is easier being single and staying with their parents.

The disadvantages of interim largely outdo the slim advantages. In most cases, it is not a choice, single or not, the complaining operators need to earn a living that's all. The complaints are sometimes violent: "We are like goods", "throw-away jobs, we are fed up with precariousness" or "still temping?" - "you accept what you are told or you leave, being a temp is nothing". The quotes are numerous, hiding a terrible anxiety and demoralisation, waiting for a "real job", which was promised and taking time to come. The interviewed also stress the absence of control over the future : "with interim, it's hard to plan, settle down, hoping for a career". The effect on private life is often referred to : inconvenient hours, disrupting family life, hard to find accommodation.

Contrary to what a manager says, to the interviewed the word "interim" mostly rhymes with "precariousness". Financial precariousness first of all, because an income continuity is never guaranteed. Job precariousness, feeling one might get "fired" for the slightest prank; leads to, a conformist behaviour, one operator says: "Here I do everything well, I accept overtime on Saturday, you have to fight to get a steady job, avoid absences, not take holidays, do favours. Accepting as much as possible, defending oneself as far as possible. And then - hoping!" Professional precariousness, since the jobs offered are unskilled, polyvalancy is often perceived as "gap-filling", the using of skills remains low. Therefore, "the struggling" that the interim must embark upon, through meekness and hanging on, in order to obtain a CDD contract and then a CDI.

There is no doubt that this painful experience on a large scale dampens the judgement of social cohesion. Despite the equal treatment of the unskilled workers, the company's "hard core" never stop distinguishing between the "insiders" and the "outsiders". The strength of the company remains the strong growth and the hope that many people aim to joint the "selected few". These days both here and at many other firms, only having a steady job is seen like "a godsend".

3.7 Professional relationships: a no-negotiated flexibility

Personal delegates have only existed for a year and remain weak. The three people we met (the CFTC delegate, the CHSCT representative and the company committee representative) confirmed that the management have complete freedom of manoeuvre and do not hide their criticism; the delegates are often isolated and discredited failing to truly represent their colleagues, complain about a lack of information, and especially about job prospects due to the recent growth the management refused to negotiate with them, especially about the 35 per hour week question (in accordance with the Aubrey bill , applying to the situation in France).

The delegates recognise their shortcomings in their financial training, stopping them from attacking the question of temporary agency workers. The average age of the personnel for the CDD's is 20 and 30 for the CDI's, they are not easy to mobilise, given an acceptable salary level, within a tradition of consensus and with regards to temporary staff there is weak involvement in the company. The delegates therefore blame the communication, which does not encourage protests even on the subject of being obliged to work nights and work overtime on Saturday.

The management is treading very carefully on the question of flexibility, personnel representatives do not challenge the constraints facing the company; demanding a quick response which is not typical of the company, no more than operating with high numbers of temporary agency workers. Other examples in the region were referred to where the conditions are less favourable. In any case the consequences for the management of the manpower are vividly criticized; a policy of “throw-away-workers”; temporary agency workers being “gap-fillers” and occupying the least dignified positions; the criticism is mainly about the management’s refusal to transform precarious contracts to CDI; the massive resort to temporary agency workers leading to a strong feeling of insecurity among them; a lack of confidence in the future, excluding forward planning; it is not unusual to call them at the last minute, asking them not to come, because of dropping workloads (which obviously reduce their income). With the delegates the management have succeeded in keeping a stable atmosphere, on the one hand because they chose people with a “good attitude” and enticing them with a CDD contract, later becoming a CDI which is kept for a small minority.

On the other hand regarding work conditions, the delegates acknowledge that the company is not “bad ” benefiting from a brand with a good image in the area; the work is carried out in a clean environment (required by this kind of manufacture); the temporary agency workers are treated the same as the permanent (no discrimination is done by the management), the temporary agency workers have financial advantages because in addition, they benefit from holiday pay (which they very rarely take because they are worried about losing their job); to the point of which some permanent reckon their situation is worse financially. Acknowledging that there has almost never been redundancies (dismissals of temporary or temporary agency workers are not considered in the same way).

Some points which are objects of complaints from the delegates; stress among certain temporary agency workers in difficult positions (i.e. assembling and testing); the lack of respect from the management at times; the ease at which the management impose night or Saturday work (the official way is to ask for volunteers but this is not always respected); moreover, volunteers are lacking and the last recruitment procedures specify clearly the obligation if necessary to work the 3/8-shift or weekends. Another more typical criticism is about fixed position work in general, which force certain employees to get up in the early hours of the morning to start work at five o'clock; also criticism of the routine of a Taylorian system in the organisation of tasks. Another discussion point was the alternation between sitting down and standing up which some have fought for, as well as the difficult positions of certain jobs (especially welding cards).

To resume, the delegates remain attached to a company which on the whole offers good work conditions compared to other companies in the area. The crucial point remains the uncertainty of employment and inconvenient implications for the temporary agency workers. An expansion of the work surface is underway, which foresees an increase in the operation (speaking about a doubling of the production capacity), yet without a guarantee of durable employment.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The two case studies allow us to draw more general conclusions about the relationship between flexibility policies, work and employment conditions and professional relations. We have tried hard to compare as far as possible the analysis made in every aspect of the two monographs. Finally, we will suggest some recommendations.

4.1 The differentiation of statuses created by the policies of flexible employment

At the Fnac which is in mass marketing (cultural goods), we find typical work statuses of the private-sector. The traditional norm here is CDI (permanent job) and the gap is mainly between CDI (secure employment, but open to redundancy) and CDD (temporary contracts), which are increasing in number from one period to another. This gap is doubled by the distinction between full and part-time: we find both part time and full time CDI and CDD; but whereas the part-time CDI has been negotiated at Montparnasse, the most recent tendency at the Fnac Champs Elysees is to hire CDD's, preferably part-time. Internal quantitative flexibility (atypical forms of work hours) rests on the the whole population of workers, but the part-time CDD's are more subject to the constraints of flexibility than full time CDD and part time CDI. The policy of recruitment is anyway changing since recent years: CDI contract is diminishing, especially at the new shop Champs Elysées (only 28 % of CDD contracts at Montparnasse, instead of 70% at Champs Elysees). Part time contract is also increasing, because of the necessity of hours adjustments (from 5 to 30 hours a week), mainly due to the trend to open the shops during a longer period of time each day, and even during week-ends. But we don't find here neither subcontracting manpower neither temporary agency workers, except during the exceptional period of holidays at the end of each year.

In the electronics company the same distinction as at the Fnac is found, except that there are hardly any part-timers (this is a management policy which handicap certain people like young mothers who sometimes prefer part-time work). But the gap is on one hand, between the CDI (working full-time) and who do not risk redundancy (during a period of economic growth) and on the other, the CDD (where the contract is not automatically renewed) and, on the other hand, between those who are integrated to the firm (whatever is the contract) and the temporary agency workers (employed by an interim agency), a group who have no job security from one fortnight to the next.

So, the policies of flexible employment do create many differentiations among work-force: full time CDI, part time CDI, full time CCD, part time CDD, and temporary agency workers make up the employment segments which progressively have less job security consisting of more or less precarious groups depending on the professional sector. In the end, in most cases these segments do not tie up and constitute as many borders which the salaried share facing flexibility. Like we have seen at the Fnac where the destiny of the CDD's is to remain a CDD without any hope in most cases of becoming CDI; whilst at the electronics company there is a "sort of battle" to go through for the temporary agency workers who are hoping for a CDD one day and with the ultimate compensation of becoming CDI. On the other hand, the distinction between part time and full time (at FNAC) becomes a disadvantageous cleavage when it is associated with temporary contract: whereas part time CDI workers have negotiated their status, part time CDD appears as an obligation for the many youngers: 30h at Montparnasse, less than 30 h at Champs Elysees. To a certain extent, the social position of part time CDD is comparable to temporary agency workers: they do not have any

employment security, but the level of wages is more favourable to the full time temporary agency workers of the electronic company (as to draw the distinction, temporary agency workers earn among 7000 F monthly (including a precariousness bonus, instead of 4400 F for part time CDD, on the basis of 30h, at Fnac).

4.2 The reasons for flexibility policies

Returning for a moment to the causes of flexibility policies. They seem to be about the same everywhere relying on a multitude of factors depending on the sectors.

- first of all, flexibility of markets and products, which renders more generally the strategy of flexibility policies, where the flexibility of the manpower is only a consequence of extended shop opening hours (Fnac) or necessitating a compensation for the change of workloads (in the industrial company) , the main reason being the transformations of products, markets and facing competition.
- in some cases the worry of cushioning the costs of expensive investments, lead companies to seek out the essential tools, something which may have consequences for the work organisation and pliable working hours (i.e. electronic devices as much as capital investment at the Fnac).
- computer technology emphasises this phenomenon (for example, automation in the manufacturing of perforated cards in the electronics company).
- social factors have to be added : for all employees in France the rigid employment rules make it harder to make people redundant than before. The massive hiring of temporary agency workers where it is allowed , makes it possible to get around the employment rules, systematically renewing the contracts for short periods of time not assuming the employer's responsibility.
- the struggle against “granted rights”, on the management side, has to be considered too; where unionism is weak the challenge is easier (like the balkanisation of hours at the Fnac, questioning the former system of 37 hours and two consecutive days leave; or all the more so in electronics, where the unions are not very representative and powerless against the systematic recruitment of temporary agency workers. Here the temporary agency workers are no longer the “gap fillers” like the part time CDD’s at Fnac.
- to a certain extent, employers do also have to face to new demands from some categories of workers, who prefer either part time (for different personal reasons) either rapid turn over from a company to another (for example, the “strategical group ” at the electronic company). But, as we pointed out, these cases are incomparable with the increasing pressure from employers for the acceptance of part time (Fnac) or of interim status, which appears to be the normal access to many an industrial company in France, during a new period characterised by the “banalisation” of precariousness, especially for the young low level of qualification. As a matter of paradox, employers put forward that, doing so with temporary agency workers, they offer a flexible opportunity for a first step of socialisation at work (what is called by specialists “interim of insertion”, as compare to voluntary interim for professional reasons). Anyway, the given argumentation is challenged by the evidence of the market pressure and the preference for a flexible manpower (at the electronic company, not less than in many other firms), that employers in both cases do underline at the same time.

4.3 The managerial policies of flexibility

The complementarity of various forms of flexibility is verified in our inquiry. Flexibility is definitely a strategic goal and combines different ingredients, especially at the electronics company, as we mentioned. At Fnac, only internal quantitative flexibility applies to the problem of extended schedules of work, combined with external qualitative flexibility in terms of recruitment of more and more temporary contracts.

- *internal flexibility of functions* allows for a pliable organisation, however it is either limited to skilled employees or generates nothing but polyvalency, which enables the fight against Taylorian work tasks (Electronics). This “functional” flexibility has no impact on the other forms of flexibility: the company provides constantly unskilled jobs with the flexible recruitment of temporary agency workers.
- *internal quantitative flexibility* (modulation of work schedules) is a sought after priority everywhere. The negative consequences bear on the employees of a less favourable status: as seen in the electronics company or at the Fnac where inconvenient hours are systematically given to CDD employees or temporary agency workers. However, there is no discrimination in terms of job occupied at Fnac: a precarious.
- worker has as much access to a qualified job as a permanent one; the only difference consists in a different allocation of tasks according a scale from “less noble” jobs to “noble” jobs: permanent workers generally work at bookselling counters, while temporary workers are allocated to burotic counters. At the electronics company, temporary agency workers only occupy low skilled jobs: so the difference of statuses is linked with a discrimination in terms of qualification (as a contrary to Fnac, CDD temporary workers also occupy low skilled jobs).
- *external flexibility* is also widely researched, both the qualitative (varied statuses) and quantitative (variation in staff numbers). Not being in sectors of decline where the resort to redundancy is rare, in the orders or on the level of competition. But the external qualitative flexibility is an increasingly frequent practice: mainly hiring CDD's (preferably part time) characterises the new policy at the Fnac, breaking with the granted advantages in older stores (in obvious competition with Virgin): in electronics the extensive resort to temporary agency workers serves the purpose of tests before hiring, and tends to become a replacement for direct hiring.

Do all employers have the scope for developing these policies? To a certain extent they feel restricted by competition which is above all the case in electronics and at the Fnac. It is clear from their statements that flexibility policies are chosen, modulated and put into practice in relation to the chosen strategies. In this way the theory of a “hard core” seems to be verified (at the electronics company) despite being contested by some authors. Flexibility varies depending on the sectors, but it responds to general more political aims (it is difficult to estimate at what level of the company it is decided). This is mainly the case in electronics, where the management's production policy relies on flexibility, in consultation with their personnel management, with a treble aim: increase the organisation's responsiveness, spread out the hours and adapt staff fluctuations in relation to the orders. On the contrary, we don't find at FNAC any reference to the theory of “hard core”: the same work conditions apply to all the workers; the only distinction consists on more opportunity of career for olders (Montparnasse) than for youngers (Champs Elysees).

Can we predict the generalisation of the “hard core” system? to a certain extent, at FNAC, the senior staff of Montparnasse undoubtedly benefits on a system of protection which is

compensated by the new trend of recruitment of temporary workers ; but the problem of the faithfulness of a “hard core” is not at the agenda. On the contrary, the electronics company goes along a policy which is shared by more and more industrial firms: on one side, manpower in general older, better trained, more masculine that is counted on and destined for training and promotions (and often better work conditions); on the other hand, a manpower putting up with flexibility and who have little chance of integrating (going from interim to CDD or a permanent post). In the case of electronics, these choices fit in with Japanese values, but this evolution seems a general tendency. As we mention further, temporary agency workers tend to take the place of the traditional figure of the “unskilled worker” previously integrated to the firm in the 70’.

4.4 Flexibility, work and employment conditions

The central questioning in this study focuses on the link between flexibility and work conditions in the widest sense. Several observations have been made.¹⁰

A distinction needs to be made between “work conditions” and “employment conditions” as already mentioned. In the case of the electronics company, work atmosphere leadership relations and the material working conditions of temporary agency workers or CDD are not worse than those on CDI. And generally, work conditions are described in positive terms. On the contrary, complaints are very strong against the notion of interim work; “gap feeling positions”, the necessity of excepting the strong restrictions related to the hours, complete absence of job security, “throwaway jobs”, lack of professional future, dependence on the company “who is King”, deciding whether to keep the employees or not within a very short space of time. A real problem of “disqualification” is touched upon here: in the past there was a place for all young unskilled school-leavers and guaranteed progression based on seniority; today with the crisis, the low-skilled are thrown into sectors like electronics where they are only offered an external place (interim), again on the condition of having at least A-levels. Temporary agency workers serve therefore the purpose of sorting the “competent” from the “incompetent” at the same time making sure the manpower is rejuvenated (no more seniors who encyst). The interim worker therefore becomes not only a *dequalified* operator but a *disqualified* one.

At the Fnac, there is undoubtedly a more typical situation where the workers on CDD have to put up with the extra weight of bad work conditions and a lack of job security. Here again it is the young who have to pay the price of flexibility policies (especially Fnac Champs Elysées). This is also the consequence of a choice for part time for many workers. What we could say is that there is here an *accumulation of precariousness for temporary CDD workers*: social precariousness (less consideration, isolation, more exclusion from promotions), professional precariousness (more imposed mobility from a counter to another, decrease of the quality of service), economical precariousness (lower salary, especially on part-time), psychological precariousness (no job security, stress at work) and precariousness of health.

If some people see the advantages of the interim situation (at the electronics company), it is often at the cost of a real professional advancement. In this way, the chase after CDI in the electronics company, temporarily hides the absence of evolution and the possibility of promotion. The employees end up being envious and considering the CDI as the ultimate

¹⁰ Mainly comparing the Fnac and the electronics company.

reward - in fact the chances of this are very slim - earning less in any case and remaining most of the time only unskilled workers, a slave to routine work and confined to a low level job.

So we don't verify that flexibility of statuses always contribute to the degradation of work conditions, in terms of work penibility or equal treatment of workers. What is to be pointed out is that, under certain circumstances, temporary work leads to deteriorations (as in the case of Fnac). So we propose to resume the effects of flexibility on work conditions and work employment stressing on the following points, more as hypothesis than on demonstrated propositions:

- Flexibility can have harmful effects on physical and mental health (heavy loads, packing, stress and bad work atmosphere, more frequent nervous breakdowns).
- Security has not been considered here because of the employees not being faced with risks as much as in other sectors.
- Flexibility affects in certain cases job quality and team organisation, as well as senior workers who enjoy their skill.
- Flexibility makes integration a lot more difficult (especially employees on 30 hour contracts); not encouraging participation in the company, a factor of discrimination with access to training (Fnac, electronics).
- Flexibility (everywhere in our examples) is a bad experience because of the unusual hours; the employees suffer from working inconvenient hours, disrupting daily life (the electronics company, the Fnac).
- Flexibility makes workers less able to plan, because of failing financial security and employment security.
- Finally, the thesis about sexual discrimination can't be verified: at FNAC, there is no difference; in the electronics company; it is the women who most often do interim or part-time work. Then, there is also an age discrimination; the less stable jobs for the young, reputed to fit in, be grateful and accept poor work and precarious employment conditions. But this is heavily dependant on the different labour markets (traditionally, women are more frequent in low-skilled jobs in the electronics sector, as in other specific sectors).

4.5 Flexibility and professional relationships

The research hypothesis' of Dublin have been proved : flexibility imposes itself even more where unions are weak and membership low. The unions (actively present at the Fnac) widely defend what has been granted, above all concerning working hours. Something which is clearly seen at the Fnac Champs Elysées where the unions are finding it increasingly difficult to control the expansion of flexibility wanted by the management, whereas at Montparnasse unions remain influent. One may recall that, at Champs Elysees, the management tried to support the implantation of representatives devoted to the management. But two additional remarks have to be presented : in all cases, unionists feel rather impotent facing the extension of flexible employment policies, except negotiating part time work ; moreover, they refrain from calling the youngsters to unionism, because they may be subject to sanctions. At the electronics company, the frequent mobility of temporary agency workers prevent from unionisation. This problem remain a stake for traditional unions. So the shift from the interim status to CDD or CDI permanent job is only dependant on the will of management.

No doubt collective bargaining is the answer; but this requires strong participators faced with a management forever trying to eat away granted advantages or who apply different statuses

in the company; like the Fnac, where everything is done to make negotiations impossible in the new stores or at the top of the company. In the case of the electronics company, it is hard to imagine anything changing this tendency. In contrast to certain companies in France today, we have not found such a mobilisation of the employees (i.e. strikes by temporary agency workers or CDD workers, union action fighting for integration). In France the socialist government is threatening from time to time to reinforce legal prescriptions to limit the abusive resort to temporary agency workers. But the ambient atmosphere keeps being characterised by the often-shared feeling that the most important aim remains the decrease of unemployment, whatever is the status of employment, even if precariousness and employment segmentation is developing.

4.6 Recommendations

Two case studies are of course unable to draw conclusions, even less recommendations. This work has to be compared with other case studies, at the international level. We just want to point out final remarks:

4.6.1 Unintended effects of intense flexibility

The case of Fnac draws attention on the social and economic consequences of a large policy of internal quantitative flexibility : deterioration of the climate, increase of stress, bad quality of service to customer, dequalification of youngsters who have to move rapidly to one counter to an other, where they don't have time to improve their skill. To a certain extent, these policies may also affect the customer, who is entitled to get good service. Bad work conditions and job insecurity may also push some workers to defection (in so far the labour market reverse to a more favourable position for workers).

Managers could react in some way, when the new trend of growth leads in some sectors to visible shortage of manpower.

4.6.2 The labour market regulation

No doubt that, in spite of legal regulations, the situation on the labour market is decisive: at Fnac, the market is larger than at the electronics company: unsatisfied workers can run away and some do so; at the electronics company, the work conditions are better than in similar companies (as we were told), and many low skilled young workers would not find easily a better job elsewhere. But two factors must be taken into consideration: the interim situation may evolve according the market tendencies; the young workers could put pressure on their employment conditions, if they decided to react within the context of interim agencies. But for the moment, the management keeps a decisive position.

4.6.3 Chosen flexibility versus imposed precariousness

The strategic evaluation of costs and advantages we tried to conduct in both of the case studies leads to the conclusion that, as an increasing trend, flexibility is more often imposed than chosen. And even if temporary agency workers at the electronics company can argue they have rather good work conditions, most of them incriminate the injustice of bearing the burden of job insecurity and precariousness. At FNAC, as we saw, the trend to part time or temporary work may fit with will of more independence or transitional situation. But both irregular work schedules, temporary contracts or interim situation are described by most of the workers as constraints with no compensation. One can argue finally that in the context of a "social re-foundation" claimed by different managerial partners in France, collective bargaining should develop for negotiating compensations and protections. But this is the more general problem of finding new rules on the decay of the "Fordian compromise".

5. Annexes

Bibliography on flexibility

Study Author: BOISARD P

Title: *L'adaptation des horaires de travail aux fluctuations de la demande: les stratégies des entreprises.*

In: Travail et emploi, n° 59, pp. 18-30.

Date: 1994

Country: France

Method: Study of work schedule strategies in 10 companies; 5 based on an industrial logic, 3 based on a trade logic 2 based on domestic logic.

Variables:

- Flexibility: temporal flexibility, work schedules
- Working conditions: Polyvalence
- Labour relations:
- Other variables:

Abstract: Faced with the variables companies are confronted with, they adopt diverse strategies of work time schedules. Their practices reveal a trade rationalism rather than a resort to legislation; contracts of determined length, personalised flexible hours, credit/debit hours. But the reasoning for the choice of hours can only be studied in relation to recruitment procedures. The author focuses particularly on the type of flexibility used in the resort to contracts of determined length.

Study Author: BOYER R. et alii

Title: La flexibilité du travail en Europe. Une étude comparative des transformations du rapport salarial dans sept pays de 1973 à 1985

Press: Paris la découverte

Date: 1986

Country: France, Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany

Method: Historical and economical monograph for each country

Variables:

- Flexibility: analysis of the notion of flexibility
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations:
- Other variables: Creation of a new concept of salary

Abstract: Economical and social flexibility are at the heart of the economical transformations in Europe. The question the authors raise; “How to benefit the most?” There are two aims; comparing the evolution of economical and social ways of organisation of each country and assess Europe's capacity to adapt to new economical considerations. Two options stand out; an “offensive” combining technological modernisation and social progress, and a “defensive” approach based on regressive measures

Study Author: BUE J.

Title: *Les différentes formes de flexibilité*

In : Travail et Emploi, n° 41, pp. 29-35.

Date: 1989

Country: France

Method: A questionnaire in two parts; work organisation and use of modern production equipment. A sample of 20,000 people.

Variables:

- Flexibility: of organisation, technical flexibility, employment flexibility, flexible working hours.
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations:
- Other variables:

Abstract: The author establishes four forms of flexibility in relation to the technique and organisation of the jobs or active workers; flexibility of work organisation, technical flexibility, flexibility of employment and work hours. From that there are two types of flexible workers, the external who has a precarious job with unusual hours, no work autonomy, using no modern equipment; the internal flexible worker who have a stable job, regular hours, work autonomy and who use modern equipment.

Study Author: GERRITSEN D.

Title: D'une modernisation à l'autre: dévalorisation du travail, flexibilité économique et déchirure sociale.

In : Gerritsen D. et Martin D. (dir.), Effets et méfaits de la modernisation dans la crise

Press: Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, (Coll. Sociologie Economique)

Date: 1998.

Country: France

Method:

Variables:

- Flexibility:
- Working conditions: Precariousness, hybrid status
- Labour relations: Participation
- Other variables: Modernisation, social transformation

Abstract: Modernisation, regarded as a social transformation process which updates the social reasons and the new rationality in order to understand the effects and side effects. During this procedure flexibility seems like an essential tool which provokes a calling into question of the Fordian compromise and which leans on a new element; financial capital. The effects and side-effects of these new orientations are conveyed by a serious questioning of the value of work and lead to significant social gaps; unemployment, precariousness of work, hybrid statuses... For the author, modernisation today is marked by the absence of a political project of social cohesion.

Study Author: GORGEU A., MATHIEU R., BALAZS Gabrielle, PIALOUX Michel

Title: *Les ambiguïtés de la proximité: Les nouveaux établissements d'équipement automobile*

In: Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales; Les nouvelles formes de domination dans le travail, n° 114, pp. 44-53, p. 91, pp. 93-95.

Date: 1996

Country:

Method:

Variables:

- Flexibility: sub contracting, externalisation of jobs, just in time
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations:
- Other variables: Organisational changes

Abstract: The study questions the effect of a externalisation of production within car manufacturing industry. The fitters have recruited young people with no industrial and unionist tradition, which has enabled the organisational innovations link to time-keeping to be accepted without protests. The organisation rub shoulders with the permanent and temporary staff the qualities of whom are often little or badly recognised in terms of job security, classifications or remuneration. In most establishment's due to the absence of unions and pressure from the clients the changes are often imposed in order to increase productivity.

Author: GUÉLAUD F.

Title: *Les diverses formes de gestion de la flexibilité dans les hypermarchés*

In : Formation Emploi,, n° 35, pp. 3-13.

Date: 1991

Country: France

Method: Empirical study of the selection of supermarkets(more than 2500 m2)

Variables:

- Flexibility: Workforce, numerical flexibility, temporary work, hours
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations:
- Other variables:

Abstract: The author describes different solutions envisaged by supermarkets and shops to respond to variations in the activity, understanding the choice between internal flexibility or external qualitative or quantitative. It is noticed here that the management of flexibility is the management of time, which often results in the resort to part-time work and overtime. In fact, it is rare that new work organisation appear, enabling more stable work conditions and a greater work autonomy for the employer.

Study Author:, KAISERGRUBER D. (dir.)

Institute: Bernard Brunhes Consultants

Title: Négocier la flexibilité. Pratiques en Europe

Press: Paris: Les Editions d'Organisation

Date: 1997

Country: Germany, Spain, France, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden

Method: selection of study cases

Variables:

- Flexibility:
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations: negotiations themes, negotiation participants.
- Other variables:

Abstract: Faced with the fact of flexibility which imposes itself more and more in European companies-the authors question the way it can be negotiated and with whom. An increasing tendency for decentralisation of the negotiations depending on the economical constraints, which may be a risk to the employees creating inequalities depending on the company's financial situation, or the size of the company, or even the presence of union activists.

Study Author: MICHON F.(dir.) et SEGRESTIN D. (dir.)

Title: L'emploi, l'entreprise et la société. Débats économie-sociologie

Press: Paris: Economica

Date: 1990

Country: France

Method: Collective work. France put in perspective within an international context

Variables:

- Flexibility: unknown of executives, working from home, competitive strategies of using a workforce
- Working conditions: qualification, work organisation, innovation,
- Labour relations: the job market, professional relations, employment, unemployment
- Other variables: new job areas

Abstract: Beyond the differences that separate economy and sociology, the authors have wished to focus their attention on the employment situation; discontinuity of the work market, the diversity of types of jobs. Whereas the 80's were marked by the liberalisation of the work market from the 90 s there is a general re-coding of the relationship between employer and employee. Nevertheless, far from creating a homogenous model of reorganisation of social relations, a diversity of contract forms can be seen, taking the form of the more and more significant segmentation of the job market within which some social groups are put out of the game.

Study Author:

Institute: O.C.D.E

Title: La flexibilité du temps de travail

Press: Paris:Les Editions de l'OCDE

Date: 1995

Country: Germany, Canada, France, Italy, Japan, Holland, Great Britain, Sweden

Method: Study of cases in relation to the sector

Variables:

- Flexibility: Working hours,
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations: The legal system, the unions attitudes
- Other variables:

Abstract: This work tries to consider different forms of the organisation of working hours depending on the particular sector, competition, all parties concerned (workers, employees, unions and the public powers. Three sectors have been analysed metallurgy retail trade, and healthcare- in eight countries.

Study Author: RAMAUX C.

Title: *Comment s'organise le recours aux CDD et à l'intérim? Les résultats d'une enquête auprès de 24 établissements*

In: Travail et emploi, n°. 58, pp. 55-76.

Date: 1994

Country: France

Method: Quantitative analysis in 24 establishments

Variables:

- Flexibility: flexibilité quantitative externe, emploi précaire
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations:
- Other variables:

Abstract: The authors suggest an X-ray of companies behaviour in relation to temporary work, an interpretation of the tendency and of extending this practice observed for 15 years. Particularly wanting to show the permanent elements and modifications examining the resort to temporary employees showing that this is based a series of constraints examining eight cases and questioning the changes in the employment norms during a crisis and on the limits of state policies on employment.

Study Author: STANKIEWICZ F. (dir.)

Title: Travail, Compétences et Adaptabilité

Press: Paris: L'Harmattan, (coll. Dossiers Sciences Humaines et Sociales),

Date: 1998

Country: France

Method:

Variables:

- Flexibility: flexible organisations,
- Working conditions: qualification, transversal skills, adaptation
- Labour relations: work economy, productivity
- Other variables:

Abstract: Confronted with technical and economical changes the social system needs to adapt. Taylorism is succeeded by an era of intelligent work which claims more flexible organisation. Based on this, the authors describe the different work situations on the one hand, which needs to be adapted and answers found, and on the other hand analysing the determining factors putting in place transversal skills through training and professional experience.

Study Author: STORPER M. et SCOTT A. J.

Title: *L'organisation du travail et les marchés locaux de l'emploi à l'ère de la production flexible*

In: Revue Internationale du Travail, vol. 129, n°. 5, pp. 633-654

Date: 1990

Country: Industrialised countries; North America, month and Western Europe, Japan

Method: Comparative analysis of local employment market evolution with the development of flexible production

Variables:

- Flexibility: flexible production, internal and external flexibility, adaptation of the workforce, sub-contracting
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations: Job market
- Other variables:

Abstract: The authors are interested in the crisis of Fordian mass production and the rise of flexible production since the beginning of the Sixties. A simple taxonomy of employment practices is suggested within a flexible production system - internal flexibility (in the company) and external - and show how it influences employees sense of security. Paying particular attention to the type of production whether or not it favours flexibility. Distinguishing between the structures of tradesmen, high-technology production structures and a service structures.

Study Author: TERTRE (du) C.

Title: Technologie, flexibilité, emploi. Une approche sectorielle du post-taylorisme

Press: Paris: Harmattan (Coll. Logiques Economiques)

Date: 1989

Country: France

Method: Study of sectors of economical activity; car industry, the building trade, petro-chemistry.

Variables:

- Flexibility:
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations:
- Other variables: salary relationship system of accumulation, forms of capital the pits values

Abstract: The author questions apparent homogeneousness of a Fordian organisation applying a sectorial type of analysis to give prominence to the evolution of forms of job management where a move towards flexibility is obvious. Three sectors are analysed; the building trade, petrochemicals and car industry, based on these the author analyses the effects on the specifics of each sector with regards to growth during crisis.

Study Author: THEBAUD-MONY A.

Title: *Sous-traitance, rapports sociaux, citoyenneté, santé : Sous-traitances*

In / Press: Travail, n°. 28, pp. 65-82.

Date: 1993

Country:

Method:

Variables:

- Flexibility:
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations:
- Other variables:

Abstract: The economical phenomenon of sub-contracting has had negative repercussions for 20 years evident in terms of restructuring/destructuring of social relationship. It is particularly the case of a worsening progress of major attacks on health at work, where it seems that job flexibility, geographical mobility and lastly and individualisation of dealing with the risks, leads to a considerable decline through neutralisation of the common rules and mechanisms of prevention and alert.

Study Author: TREU T.

Title: *La flexibilité du travail en Europe*

In : Revue internationale du travail, vol. 131, 1992, n° 4-5, pp. 533-549.

Date:

Country: Pays européens

Method: Analyse comparée

Variables:

- Flexibility: All forms of flexibility
- Working conditions:
- Labour relations: National structures of negotiations
- Other variables:

Abstract: If flexibility appears to be an answer to the economic crisis from the end of the 1970's to the beginnings of the 1980's, it gives rise to debate and controversy. Some people believe that the European countries difficulties, rest on the institutional rigidity, to others it is to the crisis of Fordism. Today it seems that the introduction of flexibility could open up to acceptable compromises between the different parties. If it is an answer to the competition for the employers, it seems to respond to a need for new models in life and at work for the employees, on the condition that it does not threaten jobs security, which is what it all hinges on according to the author.

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