

French telecom company Orange convicted over suicides

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Former France Telecom Chief Executive Didier Lombard arrives at Paris' courthouse in Paris, Friday, Dec. 20, 2019. French telecommunications powerhouse Orange is facing a potentially landmark court ruling Friday on whether it was responsible for dozens of employee suicides or suicide attempts during a painful restructuring. Former France Telecom Chief Executive Didier Lombard arrives at Paris' courthouse (AP Photo/Michel Euler)

France's leading phone and internet provider Orange was found guilty Friday of a string of employee suicides and its former CEO was sentenced to prison, in a landmark ruling against a major European telecommunications player.

Orange was ordered to pay around 3.5 million euros (\$3.8 million) in fines and damages to scores of families, employees and others party to the case, over suicides and other problems in the 2000s while the company was shedding thousands of jobs.

Emotion gripped families and friends of those who had killed themselves as judges read out the lengthy verdict—relief, but also renewed grief as they revisited their loss.

Orange, which was called France Telecom at the time, is France's first big company to be tried on a charge of institutionalized "collective moral harassment," so the ruling could open up the possibility for other companies to face similar legal challenges.

"A verdict for the future," was the response from labor union CGT. "It is the workers who make a company, who are the heart of its work."

France is one of only a handful of countries in the world able to prosecute companies or employees for such abuses.

The company's ex-CEO Didier Lombard was convicted and sentenced to four months in prison and ordered to pay 15,000 euros in fines. Six other managers were also sentenced to short prison terms and thousands of euros in fines.

All the defendants announced plans to appeal, except for the company itself.

They denied responsibility for suicides of people they didn't know.

But the court ruled they and the company were guilty of collective moral harassment, saying in its ruling: "The methods used to reach 22,000 job cuts were illegal."



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It is difficult for companies in France to carry out mass layoffs because of the country's worker protections, so France Telecom managers demoted staff or moved them against their will to new site locations.

Orange's lawyers said the job cuts were a necessary part of privatization of state-run France Telecom.

Orange is still France's dominant telephone company and has operations in 26 countries around Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Its share price did not see significant change after the ruling.

Lombard, his former right-hand man Louis-Pierre Wenes and the director of human resources Olivier Barberot were convicted for leading a "policy of destabilization" as they sought to shed thousands of jobs. Four other managers were convicted of complicity.

Scores of employees killed themselves amid the restructuring. The trial focused on 39 cases between 2006 and 2009: 19 suicides, 12 suicide attempts and eight cases of serious depression. Other employee suicides couldn't be linked directly and solely with their work.

Orange employee Sebastien Crozier choked up after the verdict.

"We remember them," said Crozier, of the CFE-CGC trade union. "I saw one of my colleagues die, she threw herself out of a fifth floor window."

For two and a half months, the court listened to the families of the victims and projected letters and photos on a giant screen. One read: "I am committing suicide because of my work at France Telecom, it's the only cause."

On the last day of the trial in July, Wenes said he was "deeply sorry" to

"those for whom work was a source of discomfort and suffering. I never wanted that."

Lombard, now 77, admitted in court that he "made a blunder" in 2006 when he said he "wanted employees to leave by the door or by the window." He also admitted to once saying there was "a fashion for suicide in the business." Lombard left his post in 2010.

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