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Acting on the quality of work to increase its sustainability: An occupational psychology approach

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Abstract. *This article considers sustainable work from the perspective of quality of work and its impact on workers' health and on public health. Based on an occupational psychology social experiment within an organization, it shows how empowering workers to influence their work and the conditions in which they do it can have a major impact on public health and environmental protection. This calls for new methods of deliberation and reforms to labour law.*

Keywords: *social sustainability, environmental sustainability, quality of work, occupational health, deliberation, workers' participation, sustainable work, public health.*

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1. Introduction

The problematic relationship between the social and ecological sustainability of work is attracting increasing attention in the academic literature (Duarte et al. 2015; Haslam and Waterson 2013; Gaudart and Volkoff 2022; Cukier, Gaborieau and Gay 2023) and a link has been established between contemporary productive organizations and harm to the environment and to human health (Clot et al. 2021; Ferreras, Battilana and Méda 2020). Indeed, various recent industrial disasters demonstrate how, in addition to its immediate effects on workers' health, poor-quality work within enterprises can have external impacts on public health and the environment (de Terssac and Mignard 2011; Lascoumes 2018; Aggeri and Saussois 2017; Clot et al. 2021).

Using a social experiment applying "activity clinic" methods¹ from the field of occupational psychology, I consider these impacts from the perspectives of the effects of quality of work on public health, and of employees' ability to influence their work and its organization. Conceptions of sustainable work all too frequently continue to differentiate the social and ecological dimensions of sustainability (Herzog and Zimmermann 2025 – this Issue). A stronger theoretical framing is therefore needed to improve our understanding of the relationship between these two dimensions (Boudra 2016, 237–238; Goutille, Théry and Gaudin 2023). This article seeks to contribute to this understanding by considering the link between social sustainability and social mechanisms of deliberation on work within organizations and their effectiveness. Indeed, it argues that reinforcing front-line workers' power to influence their work and organizations – understood as the social sustainability of work – will determine action on the external effects of work – that is, its ecological sustainability. The activity of work, when subject to deliberation at all levels of an organization, is the essential link between the social and ecological sustainability of work. Reshaping the institutions and mechanisms of deliberation on work within organizations would thus empower workers to take action against the harmful effects of poor-quality work beyond the confines of the organization.

Many examples – including the 2017 Lactalis contaminated milk scandal in France and the 2015 "Dieselgate" scandal – show that public health risks can result from workers being unable to ensure the quality of their work in collaboration with the other "social dialogue" stakeholders within an organization (Clot 2016). Under current legal frameworks, employees with concerns about the quality of their work are regularly at risk of being "silenced" (Herzog 2020 [2022]). In both of the above-mentioned examples, the workers knew that the quality of their work was deteriorating but, without any dedicated institution or the means of expressing their concerns, their concerns went unheard. Calling on their expertise, at the right time and place, could have helped prevent harm to their own health, to public health and to the environment beyond their enterprises (Clot et al. 2021). There is thus a strong link between occupational health, public health and a conception of the sustainability of work that does not dissociate the social and ecological dimensions of that sustainability. In this context, as we will see, "One important step [...] would be to legally recognize the rights of such workers to a collective and individual voice in the processes of organizing work" (Herzog 2020 [2022], 57), especially where such processes undermine the quality of work. This article thus presents a methodology to establish the socio-ecological sustainability of work that requires a shift in existing labour law. Based on a case study, I propose a concrete method for deliberating on quality of work within organizations as a concrete means of establishing the social sustainability of work. This method must necessarily be accompanied by a shift in labour law that grants workers the

¹ The activity clinic is an approach in francophone occupational psychology (Filliettaz and Billett 2015) that uses clinical action research methods to bring about workplace transformations through dialogue and interaction that benefit health and productivity (Clot and Kostulski 2011; Kloetzer 2013; Kloetzer, Clot and Quillerou-Grivot 2015; Bonnemain et al. 2019). It is part of a body of international literature on historico-cultural theories of activity (Leontiev 1978; Vygotsky 1978; Engeström 2000; Kloetzer et Seppänen 2014; González Rey, 2020).

right to intervene both individually and collectively on questions relating to the quality of their work within organizations. Associating the social and ecological perspectives allows us to consider how deliberation focusing on quality of work within organizations can be a means of establishing a sustainable “ecology of work” (Clot et al. 2021).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The second section provides a review of the theoretical and methodological principles in the occupational psychology literature, while the third details the case study that I consider in this article, conducted among the workers and management of the garbage collection services of a large French municipality. On this basis, the fourth section sets out the organizational method followed in order to foster social sustainability in relation to quality of work and thereby reinforce the ecological sustainability of work. Extrapolating from the case study, the fifth section shows how the socio-ecological sustainability of work requires stronger workers’ rights to allow workers to influence the quality of their work through discussions with management. I draw on the example of the 1982 Auroux laws in France to identify the conditions required for such legal provisions to make social sustainability the means of developing the ecological sustainability of human work. The sixth section concludes.

The methodological approach adopted in this article has had similar results in other contexts (Bonnefond 2019; Musseau, Zittoun and Clot 2022; Cromer, Bonnemain and Folcher 2022; Cromer, Bonnemain and Coutarel 2023). Even though it has yet to be tested at a larger scale, this approach is worth reviewing here given the potential costs for the sustainability of work – both social and ecological – of denying workers a say in the quality of their work. The article thus considers the role that internal deliberation among an organization’s front-line workers could play in increasing the social sustainability of work and thereby warding against the daily ecological hazards that work can impose on nature and society. From this perspective, the social sustainability of work, which is essential to the development of its ecological sustainability, poses both a methodological and a legal problem.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework

The impact of quality of work on workers’ health (Lhuillier 2014) has been well documented in the francophone literature (Clot 2010a; Coutarel 2022). Being unable to intervene, in collaboration with others, to bring about changes in one’s own work is one of the main sources of work-related mental health conditions (Clot 2008). Workers’ commitment to work can be eroded by an environment that curtails their agency (Clot and Bonnefond 2018).

Being repeatedly confronted with such restrictions can have long-term effects on health, as shown by the recent research carried out in France by the Directorate of Research, Economic Studies and Statistics of the French Ministry of Labour and Employment (Coutrot and Davie 2014; Bègue 2021). The results indicate that in 2014, 35 per cent of manufacturing employees and 35 per cent of public sector employees said that they lacked “a sense of pride in the quality of their work (always or often)” (Coutrot and Davie 2014). In 2021, 54 per cent of employees said that they were “not able to work to a high standard” and “had to sacrifice quality” (Bègue 2021). Another study carried out in 2017 by the same institution indicated that it is better simply to inform employees about changes, rather than consult them without following up on their proposals, which increases the risk of depression (Coutrot 2017). Not taking workers’ opinions into consideration – creating what is known in the literature as a “futile voice” (Bonnefond 2019) – can, in the long term, affect workers’ health. The latest European survey on conditions of work indicates that French workers are particularly badly off in this regard: they are “consulted very little [...]” and can rarely influence the decisions that affect their work” (Méda, Bigi and Parent-Thirion 2023). Empowering workers to take discussions beyond their immediate circle and address issues in their everyday work by collaborating with their management in defining tasks is decisive in making work socially sustainable. It makes worker voice effective, whereas that voice remains “empty” when it does not have even the slightest effect on the object and

organization of work (Detchessahar 2019a). Enabling workers to participate in sustainable deliberation with others to influence the quality of their own work is essential for their well-being (Bonnefond and Clot 2018).

This explains the increasing number of studies on experiments with deliberation and its use in both occupational psychology (Bonnefond 2017 and 2019; Bonnemain 2019 and 2020; Bonnemain and Tomás 2022; Bonnemain et al. 2019; Massot and Simonet 2017; Miossec and Simonet 2019; Kaltchéva and Kostulski 2020; Musseau, Zittoun and Clot 2022) and ergonomics (Arnoud 2023; Arnoud and Falzon 2013; Casse and Caroly 2017; Domette 2019; Falzon et al. 2012; Petit 2020; Rocha, Mollo and Daniellou 2015; Cromer, Bonnemain and Coutarel 2023), as well as in management studies (Detchessahar and Journé 2018; Detchessahar 2019a and 2019b). In their way, each of these studies validates the role of deliberation and “professional dialogue” (Sailly et al. 2022) in the promotion of well-being and efficiency (Guérin and Ruffier 2016). These mechanisms are seen as a means of achieving greater social sustainability in human work based on dialogue that does not follow the rationale of communication but rather is an instrument for a true re-politicization and transformation of work (Kloetzer and Seppänen 2014).

However, all these studies also indicate that, before deliberation on quality of work can be used to provide renewed cooperation between management, professional groups and trade unions, a number of issues need to be addressed (Quillerou-Grivot and Clot 2014). By their very nature, the criteria defining good-quality work vary across organizations. Across hierarchies and within each of their levels, organizations tussle with many different, divergent or even contradictory criteria (Clot 2010a; Bonnemain 2021). In practice, without specific spaces for collective deliberation on potential forms of arbitration on everyday work situations, this conflict can be damaging to productivity and well-being.

The study presented in this article was conducted between 2016 and 2023 and aimed to test the use of such spaces for dialogue on quality of work. A municipal waste management department responsible for garbage collection provided the “testing ground” for “professional dialogue on quality of work with the aim of reorganizing the department”.² It enabled a large-scale trial of this type of dialogue, following a request for intervention from the Director of Human Resources of the local council, and involved all the relevant stakeholders (Bonnemain 2019 and 2022; Prot, Bonnefond and Clot 2021). On this basis, a methodological framework for a clinical action research approach was established, comprising three levels:

- A steering committee made up of the department’s management, the researchers and the teams involved;
- A monitoring committee made up of the steering committee members and trade unions;
- A team of garbage collectors³ who volunteered to analyse their own work in collaboration with the researchers, with a view to subsequently entering into dialogue with their management in order to identify critical actions for change.

This case study combines three methodological phases⁴ (Bonnemain 2020) that seek to establish sustainable practices of dialogue focusing on the conflicting criteria used to define “good” work (Kloetzer, Clot and Quillerou-Grivot 2015). The method develops

² According to the terms of the research agreement established between the local council and the team of occupational psychology and clinical activity psychology researchers of the Research Centre on Work and Development of the *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers* (CNAM). See Clot et al. (2021) for a more detailed description of this research.

³ A group of 20 garbage collectors volunteered to take part in the research, following the presentation of the project and its objectives to all 120 workers in the department and to all levels of management.

⁴ These three phases comprise: (1) trialling dialogue within the group; (2) testing a new organization of dialogue within the department to improve quality of work; (3) generalizing this organization throughout the waste management department in a sustainable way.

various interlinked spaces for deliberation: within the specific work team, between the workers and their management, and between all these actors and trade unions. Each of these spaces is specially conceived to test a new “dialogical approach”⁵ (Bonnefond 2019, 71) in acting on the quality of work (Bonnefond 2017; Kloetzer and Seppänen 2014). In this type of action, practical transformations that strengthen collective action and inform scientific knowledge result from the multiplication of perspectives on a single object, with a view to identifying new ways of transforming it. Focusing conflict on differing criteria can thus be the means of fostering cooperation between and within the different levels of an organization with a view to improving the quality of work. This process of long-term dialogical cooperation turns the various conflicting conceptions of quality of work into the prime means of providing a better collective definition of problems and their solutions. This process could be described as one of “conflictive cooperation” (Clot et al. 2021; Bencheikroun 2017; Trentin 2012).

As the case study will show, it is the repeated exercise of cooperation on the practical details of work that can create a new dynamic between work teams and their management: open disagreements about the definition of good-quality work can create social ties that are more authentic. This offers a new way of developing the sustainability of work. Considering collective dialogue on the quality of work within organizations – social sustainability – as a means of strengthening collective action on the external effects of work can contribute to achieving the socio-ecological sustainability of human work.

3. The case of the garbage collection services of a large municipality: From occupational health to public health

The case reported here is indicative of efforts that had been made within this local council since 2016 to improve the social sustainability of work in terms of its quality, through experiments with dialogue involving all stakeholders. These efforts would result in modest but real effects on the ecological sustainability of the work of the municipal garbage collectors.

I present the case study in three subsections that trace the development of a more sustainable organization of dialogue between the garbage collectors and their management with a view to improving the quality of work. First, I describe the gradual organization of this dialogue, with initial deliberations among three garbage collectors about the collection of containers from Roma camps – one of the specific work situations that the team had asked the researcher to film. Rat infestations at these collection points were becoming an increasing problem for the workers, preventing them from doing their work properly and creating a public health and hygiene hazard as rats can carry many zoonoses – diseases that are transmissible to humans (Himsworth et al. 2013). I report on the process of analysing and dealing with this occupational and public health problem. In the following subsections, I use this process to examine the possible links between the social and ecological sustainability of work.

3.1. Evaluating and analysing quality of work among colleagues: “The containers need to be replaced”

The first methodological stage lasted three months, during which everyday work situations were filmed for collective analysis based on specific dialogical methods.⁶

⁵ In this research, dialogue on work is considered to be effective when it allows collective deliberation on the basis of different conceptions of quality of work, with a view to developing new solutions (Clot et al. 2021, 44).

⁶ In particular, the method of crossed self-confrontation (Bonnemain and Clot 2017) was used. This consists of confronting the workers with footage of their participation in activities that could be improved. By provoking deliberation, this activity analysis opens the door to new collectively identified solutions.

The video of the above-mentioned situation was first analysed by the three garbage collectors who had volunteered for the exercise, and their collective analysis, which took the form of a deliberation, was filmed. This would later be shown, together with other selected video extracts, to the whole management team at the first meetings of the steering committee.

The three garbage collectors were not used to engaging in this type of dialogue. It required in-depth analysis of the situation – sometimes creating disagreement – to give them a better understanding of the problem and allow them to come up with solutions for improving the quality of work at the problematic collection points.

As they watched the video, the workers' deliberation increasingly focused on the risks that they faced, in particular the risk of rat bites. In the video, some of the workers could be seen taking the preventative measure of kicking the containers in order to dislodge any rats that might be inside. But when this was discussed as a solution, the three workers agreed that it was not altogether effective. They eventually came to the more specific conclusion that the problem required replacing damaged containers that spilt garbage on the ground and attracted the rats. In addition, the plugs at the bottom of the containers, which had been removed to drain away any water, needed to be replaced to stop the rats from getting in.

In this methodically prompted dialogue, the deliberation led each garbage collector to reassess their work with a view to making any necessary changes. This was the aim of the clinical methods applied in this study, that is, to consider the actual activity and its obstacles from different, sometimes opposing, angles, to provide a clearer understanding of problems and allow people to come up with new ways of addressing situations. However, the garbage collectors' analysis left many questions unanswered. Extending the dialogical analysis of this specific quality-of-work problem to the other levels of the organization was, therefore, essential. This was the aim of the second methodological stage.

3.2. Confronting management with the analysis results: “We should have made small perforations in the bottom of containers”

During this second stage, which lasted seven months, the management received regular updates on the analysis from the garbage collectors' dialogue. This exercise was then extended to the whole organization. The garbage collectors elected two “focal points” to participate in day-to-day dialogue. They were responsible for compiling the team's analyses and proposals, and for presenting them to the different levels of management.

The deliberation process presented below resulted from the first meeting between the two focal points and their management. At the meeting, a list of problems relating to quality of work was distributed and the workers' analysis and discussion process was presented using a video recorded by the researchers. The recorded discussion centred on the garbage containers and the rat infestations, which the workers considered to be priority issues.

After watching the video, the department director said that the garbage collectors' analysis was an “essential” contribution to identifying appropriate solutions in cooperation with management. He was “very proud”, and somewhat surprised, at how effectively the focal points had managed the dialogue among their colleagues. This effectiveness, as documented by the video, lent them greater credibility with their management.

This was a positive starting point. The garbage collectors' initial solution was to replace the plugs at the bottom of the containers to stop the rats from getting in, but “conflictual cooperation” (Trentin 2012) led to a change of strategy. The department's administrative manager objected to that first solution, pointing out that the plugs had been removed at the request of the garbage collectors themselves, to prevent water from collecting and splashing them. This was a legitimate objection and it made everyone consider

other options. Eventually, one of the focal points came up with a new solution: small perforations in the containers would drain the water while allowing the plugs to be replaced to stop the rats from getting in. It addressed the concern raised by the administrative manager, who accepted this solution. No one had previously thought of it – the solution was reached through cooperation that allowed for diverging points of view on the quality of work.

After the meeting, a plan was drawn up to implement the solution: the two focal points were tasked with coordination, asking their colleagues to identify which containers were damaged and needed replacing. The focal points and their supervisor then removed the damaged containers, collected new ones from the technical workshop – checking the perforations – and installed them back at the affected collection points. At this stage, the experience of dialogue started to contradict – without altogether removing – the workers' basic belief about their lack of agency. Whereas they had previously not had an institutional space for collective deliberation and confrontation on such subjects, they now felt more empowered to influence the quality of their work and that their opinions carried greater weight and improved decision-making.

3.3. Exceeding the remit: “We even went into the Roma camps to consult the users”

A month later, the same people met again to continue their previous discussion and, at the garbage collectors' initiative, began discussing other subjects. The treatment of the garbage container problem presented above was the subject of a specific conversation at the start of the meeting.

For both workers and managers, the conversation would be decisive for the longer-term use of dialogue in all the department's teams – the third methodological stage. By that point, all the participants recognized the effectiveness of the methodical deliberations they had participated in, having previously been used to “talking for the sake of talking”.⁷ Witnessing a first concrete, jointly led change made them feel less powerless and showed them that they were not only able to contribute but that their contribution improved the quality of the services provided in the municipality.

In practice, while the solution that they had come up with was necessary, it did not altogether resolve the problem. When replacing the damaged containers, the two focal points had to make some adjustments after speaking with the users in the Roma camps. In their opinion, the local council needed to provide more containers to allow them to separate their garbage properly, thereby avoiding damage to the containers. Finding that the previous solution only partly solved the problem, the garbage collectors negotiated directly with the “camp chiefs”, going beyond their responsibilities: “If we give you more, you have to stop leaving garbage outside, or we will not collect the containers”. At their own initiative, they involved the users in addressing the problem, knowing that without their effective contribution, the planned solution would not end the rat infestations. The residents needed to change their habits, by separating their garbage out between the containers and not allowing it to pile up on the ground. By including the users in their initiative in a concrete way, efforts to put a stop to the rat infestations – and the resultant ecological and environmental public hygiene hazard – were no longer only down to professional exchanges within the local council. They had been opened up to the end users, whose use of the municipal services was an external factor that could improve or worsen the quality of work, thereby making them essential partners. The deliberations about the quality of their work thus enabled the garbage collectors to include the end users' external criteria in the internal decision-making process.

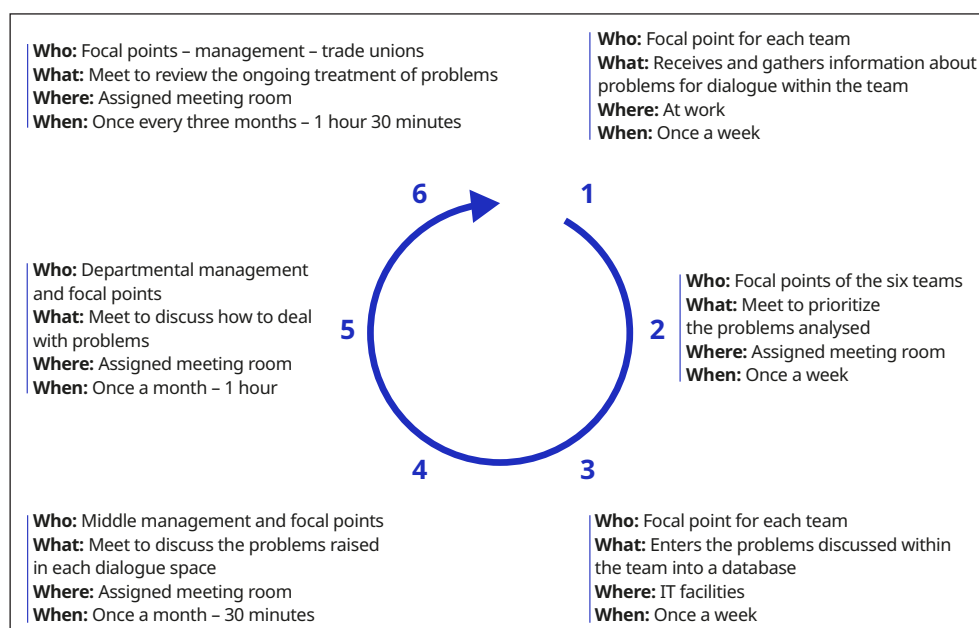
⁷ Something that the waste collectors had regularly reported to the researchers.

4. From social sustainability to ecological sustainability of work: Finding an ecology of sustainable work

In 2018, the solution devised the previous year was still in use. At the team's request, the monitoring of the containers had been delegated to the skip drivers, who had readily taken up the task. The garbage collectors had noticed a considerable improvement in their work: although the rats did not disappear altogether, their number decreased and the work was considered to be less risky.

Up to 2023, the new organization of dialogue (see figure) based on the garbage container experience, among others – tested and then extended to all six teams in the waste management department⁸ – was used to deal with around a hundred problems relating to quality of work, following an initial analysis by the garbage collector team (Bonnemain 2020). As a result, for example, the department's working hour policy was overhauled through social dialogue between management, the garbage collectors and the trade unions. After 2018, they met once every three months in tripartite committees to address questions raised by front-line teams and formally submitted by the focal points using dedicated monitoring tools.⁹

Organization of dialogue implemented since 2018



This organizational transformation – which is itself a method of organizing – improved the social sustainability of work, since it allowed the garbage collectors to contribute to deliberations at all the decision-making levels. By demonstrating their expertise on problems affecting the quality of their work, they were better able to identify with their work, lending them greater credibility with management. Such recognition is vital for well-being.

Beyond the garbage collectors' well-being, this case study also shows that social transformation can make an organization more resilient in terms of its external relations.

⁸ Moreover, this organization was also extended to other municipal departments with the help of the garbage collectors (Prot, Bonnefond and Clot 2021).

⁹ The garbage collectors created various monitoring tools – that is, deliberation mechanisms at the various levels of the organization. The “Problems table” was filled in by the focal points on the basis of discussions with their colleagues, the “Problem form” allowed the focal points to add a problem to the agenda of a meeting with management, and the “Follow-up table for resolved problems” was filled in by management and provided a long-term overview of issues.

As the garbage container example shows, the agency and the credibility gained within their department empowered the garbage collectors for external interactions and to enter into dialogue with public service users when problems required it.¹⁰ Action on work and action on the environment are related, hinting at the potential for socio-ecological sustainability in human work.

It will, of course, be argued that such contributions are insignificant given the scale of ecological challenges. Nevertheless, this example highlights an important point: by increasing their agency within the organization, thanks to the credibility they gained with the decision-makers in relation to their work, the garbage collectors were able to alter the balance of power in such a way as to oblige the management to collaborate with them in addressing a specific work problem that ultimately affected public health. In the Lactalis and Volkswagen cases (Clot et al. 2021, 171), such a dynamic would have helped forestall problems and monitor work and its quality, guided by the concerns of the workers themselves. In both cases, though, the silencing of individual and collective “on-the-ground” expertise (Herzog 2020) no doubt had a part to play in the public health and environmental problems that extended far beyond the organization.

In contrast, when deliberation is possible, the direct contribution of front-line workers can give them sufficient weight to change the criteria on which management will base its decisions, and to bring in the criteria of the users affected by the cause of the problem. They can – though not without difficulty – “pressure” organizations into addressing shortcomings that are often invisible to others and lead to a degradation in the quality of work and its external effects. Beyond the kind of exchange found in this case study, between the garbage collectors and the Roma, which was spontaneous and went beyond the initial aims of the action plan, methods and measures need to be devised to integrate the voice of end users, and of all stakeholders within an organization, in deliberations from the outset.

Applying this type of collective dialogue to quality of work naturally requires a certain amount of reorganization and the creation of institutional spaces similar to those tested in this case study that do not avoid conflict concerning quality-of-work criteria. In such institutions of professional deliberation, front-line workers would have new responsibilities going beyond the quality of their work within the boundaries of the organization. The workers, who in this case increased their agency within the organization, played a similar role to that of the “sentinels” – as opposed to “whistle-blowers” – explored by the anthropologist Frédéric Keck (2020) in the specific field of techniques to prepare for pandemics of animal origin. The distinction with whistle-blowers is useful in better defining the relationship between the social and ecological sustainability of work. A sentinel warns of anomalies in a situation in advance, thus enabling pre-emptive action, whereas whistle-blowers have a palliative effect after the fact. A sentinel “notifies the warning signs before they are visible to others” (Keck 2023, 12). Accordingly, by monitoring changes in the quality of work within an organization through dedicated institutional spaces,¹¹ the ripple effects of direct worker deliberations can spread horizontally and continuously, through ever wider social networks. Like sentinels, worker representatives are at the centre of a reiterated, cumulative and cooperative process of methodical consultation on problems relating to quality of work. They monitor quality of work from the inside and over time, taking on responsibilities beyond those of their everyday tasks, which enable them, when necessary, to call for deliberations at different levels of the organization.

In this light, developing an “ecology of work” that combines social sustainability and ecological sustainability requires changes in the organization of deliberation to enable workers to contribute directly to decision-making processes. This will provide a new means

¹⁰ Although the users mentioned here were external to the formal structure of subordination of the department, they nevertheless participated in the division of labour for garbage collection.

¹¹ In this case and others, the organizational structure was modified: tripartite spaces were progressively and sustainably established, bringing together focal points elected by their colleagues, trade union organizations and the management of the departments concerned (see figure; Bonnefond 2019).

of monitoring for shortcomings in quality of work that could have an impact beyond the organization itself.

5. The socio-ecological sustainability of work: A legal problem?

Current labour law, which is based on the principle of subordination, cannot guarantee the long-term viability of an organization that changes the division of labour by authorizing front-line workers to identify problems and their solutions through internal dialogue, before submitting them to discussion with the different levels of management and with trade unions. The organizational protocol presented in the case study thus subverted the principle of subordination by authorizing groups of workers to intervene directly and sustainably in dialogue on the quality of their work through the new focal point role. This subversion was crucial in obtaining the results presented above. Paradoxically, however, it is the workers' direct participation in transforming their work and its organization that makes the whole system so fragile, having no basis in law.

The management of conflict between the different criteria defining quality of work – seeking to make workers' direct participation in defining their work the means of enriching their indirect participation, and vice-versa (Sailly et al. 2022, 69) – is not yet backed up by legal institutions that enable the type of deliberation illustrated above at all organizational levels. This would entail removing the limits imposed by the principle of subordination. These limits hinder dialogue even though – as shown in our case study and in other examples (Bonnefond 2019; Musseau, Zittoun et Clot 2022) – deliberation can safeguard public health by bringing concerns to light, demanding the re-examination of evidence and collectively devising previously unthinkable solutions. It can, moreover, be the source of collective creativity extending beyond the workplace. This can change the very meaning of quality (Chabot 2019). However, any such change requires an erosion of the principle of subordination that currently underpins labour law (Maximo 2020; Béroud 2013; Trentin 2016, 96). By subverting the current legal framework, the example in our case study shows another possible future for labour law in which employment contracts could allow workers to participate in the individual and collective control of their work – that is, to participate in deliberation on the quality of their work with all stakeholders, including its beneficiaries (Wolmark 2016).

Demanding that employees have a direct say in their work is nothing new. For example, even though they had no lasting impact, the French Auroux laws of 1982 were a significant attempt to establish employees' freedom of "direct expression" about their work (Weiszfeld, Roman and Mendel 1993). The laws had limitations (Bevort 2013; Le Goff 2008) that explain employees' current say in their work within organizations. Two particularly important limitations were that the laws provided that dialogue was to be led by direct managers and they did not allow employees to prepare for dialogue among themselves before meeting with management (Coffineau 1993).

This attempt at regulation shows how interest in the right to expression can be lost when there is a lack of method. Allowing workers to express themselves is not enough. Sophie Béroud rightly refers to "a long-standing challenge for the labour movement, that of obtaining real agency to not only represent workers but also to make concrete changes in the organization of work and in the object of production" (Béroud 2013, 18). The future of the employment contract must be seen from this perspective, which challenges the subordination and passive availability of workers (Didry 2016). A new employment contract is needed to give employees the right – beyond that of the freedom of expression – to evaluate and control the object and organization of their work (Trentin 2016). However, the regulation that would enable this does not yet exist.

Further research would be needed to compare the deliberation model presented here with the many models tested in other countries. Comparisons have already been made with experiments conducted in the Netherlands and Sweden (Sailly et al. 2022) and an experiment carried out in Italy's Fiat car manufacturer in the 1970s (Oddone, Re and

Briante 2015) could also be used. Each of these cases highlights the relationship between the direct and indirect participation of employees in the organization of their work. At the different levels of dialogue, the focal point role analysed in this article provides a new means of avoiding the ever-present risk of disconnect between the practices of employee representatives – whether attached to a trade union or not – and the reality of work (Lhuillier and Meynaud 2014; Sachs and Wolmark 2017). Social sustainability goes beyond co-determination among employee representatives elected to enterprise and management governance bodies, whose effectiveness is the subject of debate in the literature (Nègre and Verdier 2023). It also requires the institution of another kind of co-determination, organizing cooperation between employees and their elected representatives in order to rebalance social dialogue in enterprise governance through localized professional dialogue. In this setup, the focal point figure is a new key spokesperson for shopfloor staff representatives. Dialogue taken to the shopfloor and wider organizational levels by the focal point can re-establish the credibility of front-line workers and is an essential means of anchoring the actions of employee representatives to governance bodies in the reality of work, thus warding against the constant risk of disconnect.

In this light, the development of the social and ecological sustainability of work seems to require an “effort to link the various scenes of employee representation” (Conchon 2014, 5). In France, for example, a recent government report to the Parliament indicates that the law does not currently allow employee representatives to hold any other employee representation roles (Ast 2022). According to the report, this was necessary in order to “establish relationships of trust with other governance body members” (*ibid.*, 31). However, “isolation” (Nègre and Verdier 2023, 84) from the organization’s circles of sociability is bound to increase the distance between elected representatives and workers’ actual work and specific concerns about the quality of their work. The social division of work is so entrenched that even Isabelle Ferreras’ (2020) proposal of a bicameral system within enterprises to “govern capitalism” (Ferreras 2012) should be considered from this angle. The case presented in this article shows that the meeting of professional dialogue and social dialogue calls for the integration into labour law of provisions informed by existing experiences.

It thus appears increasingly clear that the social sustainability of work, essential to its ecological sustainability, poses both a methodological and a legal problem.

6. Conclusion

The social sustainability of work cannot be reduced to a problem of access to employment (Volkoff and Gaudart 2015; Delgoulet and Desriaux 2021; France Stratégie 2021), no more than ecological sustainability can be reduced to the development of “green jobs” (Herzog and Zimmermann 2025 – this Issue). Socio-ecological sustainability ultimately concerns the social institutions and mechanisms of deliberation on work within organizations (Clot et al. 2021). Not being able to contribute directly to decisions relating to the object of their work deprives workers of a freedom that is decisive for their well-being and effectiveness at work. In this light, organizing deliberation to increase social sustainability is essential. And, as I have shown, greater reliance on workers’ expertise also leads to their involvement in action on the external effects of work, with a view to its ecological sustainability. However, this requires a legal framework that gives workers the “freedom of the city” at work, thereby reducing the employer’s prerogative to make unilateral decisions about the content and organization of work (Wolmark 2016) and strengthening the role of employee representatives within governance bodies. This employer prerogative is increasingly ill-adapted to achieving socio-ecologically sustainable work.

The approach that I have analysed in this article – promoting the social sustainability of work – can be regarded as a methodological instrument to “prepare” (Keck 2020) for ecological sustainability that goes beyond mere “prevention”, which seeks only to limit the impact of damage after the fact. Indeed, as witnessed in numerous public health scandals,

deterioration in quality of work that is noxious to the planet has an increasing impact on everyday life. This calls for a methodical organization of quality of work through new legal mechanisms that safeguard against potential ecological harms. The social sustainability of work takes on an ecological function by bringing about a shift in the organization of work from “the short-term perspective of public health crises to the long-term perspective of threatened ecologies” (Keck 2020, 195).

In any event, as regards the future of sustainable work, it will become increasingly difficult to examine or define quality of work behind the closed doors of an enterprise or institution. Conflicts over quality-of-work criteria between those who produce goods or “provide” services, on the one hand, and the users, clients, consumers and citizens, on the other, are increasingly likely or inevitable. Organizations will increasingly struggle to control the effects of their production on the environment if they do not work with all stakeholders, and in particular the workers themselves, who understand the difficulties associated with their own work. It is the development of the kind of methodical deliberation discussed in this article that can protect people’s well-being both inside and outside organizations. When reassessing the criteria of performance, this “deliberated activity” (Clot 2010b) can provide the link between social and ecological sustainability. Offering workers better guarantees of their right to influence their own work, in collaboration with others, is no doubt the best way of protecting both public health and the environment. From this perspective, quality of work could become a new subject for “social dialogue” as a whole (Clot and Bonnefond 2018), to be tested by all its stakeholders, with a view to developing the socio-ecological sustainability of human work.

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