

# New forms of work. The telework, opportunity and necessity of a framing

Paris 5th Section of the Socialist Party Thematic

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Contribution

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## Introduction

Before 2020, teleworking was already a form of work that was already in use and even underwent a certain development in companies and organizations. With the COVID-19 health crisis, telework has quickly become established, on a large scale, in a constrained, often non-negotiated way, according to rules defined unilaterally by companies or organizations.

The change in the scale of telework use in this period induces, compared to the previous situation, new situations and new impacts.

Teleworking can be a source of progress and improvement in quality of life, for example by reducing travel time, but if left unchecked, it can also lead to regression and new inequalities.

Regressions in work time, fatigue, stress, isolation, loss of social bond for example. A source of new inequalities between those who can benefit from telework and those whose nature of the job does not allow it, but also inequalities between those who benefit from good material conditions for telework and those who do not.

Given the importance of this theme, which is at the heart of the Socialist Party's social project, the PS section of the 5th has set up a working group to reflect on the development of telework, identify its main impacts and identify the major axes of proposals and demands that the Socialist Party should make publicly.

The thematic contribution is the result of the group's work. It focuses on three key issues:

1. The **conditions of teleworking** at home,
2. **Compensations**, in other words the participation of companies in the expenses of employees related to telework,
3. **The supervision of teleworking**, which appears absolutely necessary to guarantee its implementation under good conditions and not remain in the current situation of weak regulation.

The thematic contribution is intended to **come from the field, in touch with the lived reality of teleworkers**. In order to do so, the working group relied on feedback from activists and their relations, in different sectors of activity.

## 1. The conditions of teleworking

Feedback from the first months of the strong extension of teleworking linked to confinement, starting in mid-March 2020, reveals a number of recurring themes concerning working conditions at home.

First and foremost, it is clear that the reduction in travel time, particularly in large urban areas, is clearly experienced as an improvement in quality of life.

But on the other hand, a certain number of difficulties arise. In a number of cases, the position of firms is that the gains in quality of life and savings from reduced transport alone outweigh all the constraints they face. This position, which excludes from the outset the question of compensation, is not satisfactory.

The constraints are of several orders.

### Telework rules

Most of the time, they are established unilaterally by the company or organization with little or no consultation with employee organizations.

### The pace of teleworking

The number of teleworking days set up often goes beyond what employees would have liked, in order to maintain a good balance between face-to-face work and teleworking.

### The space

Most employees telework from home. They do not always have the necessary space, including a room dedicated to work. Work is often carried out in a common room where other members of the household may themselves be teleworking or tele-schooling, with all the interference this generates.

### The furniture

Home furniture is not office furniture: tables, chairs, etc. are not always suitable and this can lead to discomfort or fatigue, for example due to inappropriate postures.

### Digital tools

This is an important point. The teleworker generally uses a computer provided by the company, but we have seen the case of people who have had to buy one. Beyond that, they use the Internet connection equipment (Wifi) at home which, when it exists, does not always have sufficient capacity to support all the members of the household who use it to telework or tele-study.

### Schedules

There is a trend towards longer hours. This is mainly due to the elimination of transportation, which tends to be seen by management or colleagues as an extra time available for work. This availability, which is becoming permanent, makes some people say that the teleworker is "a teleworker".

"Corvéable à merci".

### **Fatigue, stress**

In addition to the extension of the working day, additional fatigue also comes from the immobility, all day long, at one's workstation and the disappearance of breaks or micro-breaks between the different activities that follow one another without interruption, even if only due to the change of location. The increase in stress may come from the isolation of the teleworker who no longer has colleagues around him or her for

answer a question or help him/her. If you have physical problems related to poor posture and unsuitable equipment, you can really talk about the drudgery of teleworking.

### **The porosity between the professional space and the private domain**

Teleworking increases the porosity between professional and private life. Many teleworkers report the disappearance of the boundary between the two areas, which results in particular in the cumulation and simultaneity of professional and domestic tasks: working, answering questions from children doing homework, preparing meals, etc.

### **Inequalities observed between men and women**

- Inequality in the jobs performed by women, which cannot be done in isolation, such as care work.
- Inequalities between men and women who telework: women are still more involved in household chores
- Presence of domestic violence

The list of topics raised, in relation to the working conditions of the teleworker at home is not exhaustive but reflects the most frequent concerns of teleworkers.

## **2. The compensations**

The question of compensation is a direct result of and very concretely related to the concerns listed above.

Generally speaking, they will be economic in nature, but not only.

From an economic point of view, it is a question of identifying the main financial impacts of telework for the teleworker, thus defining the items of expenditure that can be the subject of negotiations on compensation.

The **financial counterparts** will mainly concern

- Office furniture and equipment expenses
- Internet access and computer equipment expenses
- Restoration expenses
- Overheads such as electricity, heating...
- And some others

With the quick overview in the previous chapter of the impacts of teleworking, it is clear that the position of some firms, which consider that the gains in quality of life and financial savings from reduced transportation alone offset all the constraints encountered, is not balanced and is not sufficient to dismiss this topic from negotiation.

In a "face-to-face" mode, the company provides its employees with the means, tools and environments that enable them to carry out their work. The **employer's obligation to provide these resources** must be maintained in the context of telecommuting and cannot be erased on the sole pretext of a gain for employees in the area of transportation.

It should also be noted that teleworking justifies a reduction in office floor space and leads to a reduction in their costs. This therefore frees up resources to finance compensation by the employer.

At a higher level and beyond the strict financial counterpart, compensations must also serve to **correct a form of inequality specific and inherent to telework**, which stems from the difference in the personal means of teleworkers: premises, digital means, etc.

For these different reasons we support and endorse the request of employee organizations to enter into negotiations on the issue of compensation. This is first of all an **economic need**, but it is also, beyond that, a **need for equity in the means and working conditions of employees**.

Since the conditions for negotiation vary greatly depending on the size of the companies and the level of employee representation, some of these negotiations will have to take place at branch level rather than at the local level of each company.

The president of the MEDEF recently expressed his agreement to negotiate with the employees' trade unions a framework for telework, but the State has not yet supported this negotiation. It must do it imperatively.

### **3. The necessary supervision of telework**

With telework, there may be a fear that work will eventually "flatten" and divide into micro-tasks for which, like the shopping of an Uber, each worker would be paid. A worldwide competition could then take place where each Frenchman or Frenchwoman behind his or her computer would be in direct competition with an Indian. The risk of isolation and the loss of the collective to which telework pushed to the extreme would lead us to affirm the need for a framework for telework.

Telework must be an object of social dialogue between companies and employees and be the subject of a collective agreement within companies. In order to encourage social dialogue on this subject, we support the idea that a periodic obligation to negotiate should be introduced in companies with more than 50 employees.

Double volunteering seems to us to be one of the essential conditions for the well-being of the workers to be imposed. With the exception of the period of confinement we have just experienced, telework cannot be established under constraint but must only be able to take place according to the will of the company and the employee.

This framework must also take into account the number of days and duration of telework. The first risk reported is that of burn-out. The right to disconnection must absolutely be guaranteed so that working days do not become infinitely long and that the possibility of taking breaks as in the office is also guaranteed. The other risk identified is also that of social isolation. It can lead to a feeling of abandonment, lack of emulation but also of derealization: by dint of being alone behind his computer screen, the employee can end up no longer seeing the meaning and purpose of his work and the reality of his effort to a collective program. Alternating between telework and face-to-face work should be favored in order to avoid the phenomenon of isolation of the teleworker and the associated professional risks such as psycho-social risks.

Within the framework of the agreements and collective agreements must also be defended the right to training in the tools necessary to carry out work at home, the methods of reimbursement of the expenses to which the teleworker has exposed him/herself for the exercise of his/her professional activity (telecommunications, heating, electricity), the possibility of teleworking outside his/her home but close to it. Beyond the material aspects, the preservation of the health (working postures, psychological balance) of the workers must also be at the heart of its conventional discussions.

## **Conclusion**

We want the Socialist Party to strongly and publicly support and back the proposals of the trade union organizations for a framework for telework so that it does not remain in a grey area and that it really is a progress.

Because teleworking can really also promote autonomy at work and cooperation, while reducing travel times and CO2 emissions and also allowing a new planning of our territory. But on one condition: that employees are closely involved in the organizational and technological choices of their working conditions. The Macron ordinances of 2017, which abolished the CHSCTs, do not go in this direction.

More generally, if telework can be an opportunity and a step forward, it is the nature of the relationship between employees and management and their subordination that needs to be rethought. If the hardest forms of management persist, if the meaning of missions remains non-negotiable, if deadlines and procedures are incompressible, telework will not be the miracle solution to alleviate discomfort and suffering at work.

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