

Subcontracting and quality in a nuclear power plant

Interview with Gilles Reynaud, President of the association "My controlled zone"



As with most industrial sectors, the nuclear industry uses subcontractors to operate its power plants. However, the role of non-statutory employees has evolved considerably and includes specific elements that contribute to the safety of a nuclear power plant. Interview with a subcontractor.

How important is subcontracting in nuclear power plants?

The major companies in the nuclear sector (the "principals") have certain jobs carried out either by their own statutory employees or by employees of other companies (the "subcontractors"). In turn, these may subcontract to even smaller companies ("cascading" subcontracting). The 160,000 employees of the subcontracting companies thus play an invisible but crucial role in the production of electricity, carrying out 80% of the activities in various fields including sanitation, maintenance, logistics, radiation protection, waste treatment and dismantling.

How is the sector changing?

We are concerned about the aging of installations and the financial situation of the major employers, as this directly affects the duration of contracts to external contractors. This is currently between 1 and 6 years, which in our opinion is too short for stable recruitment: this encourages a massive and carefully organized recourse to subcontracting.

Our work is related to the metallurgy or public building-works sector. However, we are increasingly subject to the so-called "Syntec" collective agreement for the design and engineering sector. This is inappropriate, but 30% cheaper for the operator^(a). Similarly, the collective agreement for cleaning is applied to employees carrying out sanitation operations, which is less costly. In this way, the use of less socially-responsible companies is often aimed at circumventing the statutory benefits of the employees of large contractors.

Not only is this illegal (it is called "labor lending"), but we also see the direct repercussions of this purely economical decision on the ground. The employees, who are rapidly replaced, are demotivated and the final quality of the work carried out seems to us to be declining.

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How are subcontracting and quality linked?

First of all, we argue that, for several years, the major companies have not sufficiently monitored the activities of their subcontractors. Secondly, as a result of subcontracting and not having sufficiently anticipated the loss of several key core businesses, the operator is gradually, but irretrievably, losing control of the production base. Finally, depending on the sites where we operate, specific training or retraining is given to prospective employees. In the past, essential questions relating to radiation protection, safety, security and quality were addressed: why are they no longer being addressed?

A dedicated committee has done a great deal of work^(b) to identify the wide variety of incidents, classify them, analyze their causes (organizational, technical or human), and propose improvements. On the positive side, according to the ASN, there are virtually no workers posted in restricted areas, nor any examples of dose levels being exceeded. On the other hand, due to a lack of adequate operational procedures and a lack of human resources, the basic rules are sometimes flouted. There is an increase in incidents during routine maintenance, internal contamination, subcontractors who reach the dose limit and are then sent to other sectors, and so on.

What lessons have been learned from Fukushima?

The accident highlighted the vital skills of subcontracted employees at another site, Fukushima daini, 40 km from Fukushima daiichi. This site, also by the sea, had also lost the power source for the backup circuits. TEPCO's emergency response teams were unable to restore power to the site. The subcontractors, who were familiar with the installations, were able to connect the cables properly.

Following the Fukushima accident, safety assessments were conducted throughout the French fleet. They included the staffing aspect and subcontracting. In 2012, this led to a new code of employers' obligations which obliges companies taking over a contract to also take over its employees. Despite this protection, the company taking over the contract is not obliged to safeguard the previous status of employees (seniority, qualifications, collective agreement). In practice, employees are paid less, have less security, and are less recognized for their skills and professional expertise, which reduces their motivation.

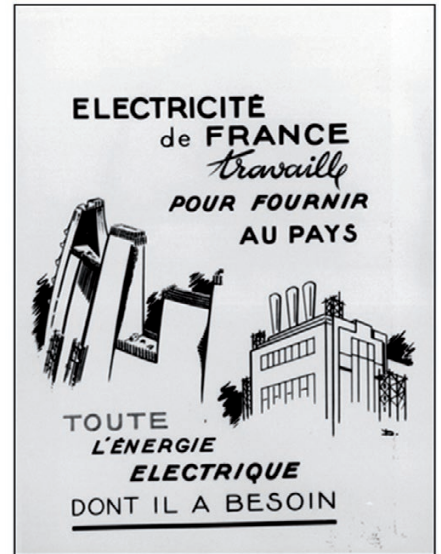
What do you propose?

The close ties that should exist between operator and subcontractors, which have been eroded by economic factors, must be restored. For example, we consider it necessary that the permanent employees of the subcontracting companies join, on a voluntary basis, the Internal Emergency Plan teams of the various operators. They will be able to demonstrate their professional responsibility and civic commitment, including by raising alerts in time and taking action in the event of an accident.

We are calling for, at a national level, the dedicated and protected status of all employees doing the same work. In this sector, which is in the throes of reorganization, the possible extension of the lifespan of power plants, as well as their future decommissioning, can only be done when the professionalism of these employees is finally recognized. ■

a. In a note published on July 31, 2018, EDF indicated (p. 12) that according to its calculations, the change in the collective agreement represents a 12% decrease for the highest wages, and even a 1.2% increase for the lowest wages. In the same note (p. 4, p. 5 and p. 14), EDF indicates that the number of subcontracting levels is limited to 3, and that "significant safety events" are decreasing (600 per year, of which 50 are attributable to subcontractors). Source: www.edf.fr/sites/default/files/contrib/groupe-edf/producteur-industriel/hydraulique/Notes%20d%27info/note_info_pompili.pdf

b. *La sous-traitance en situation de fonctionnement normal : organisation et conditions d'intervention*, Comité sur les facteurs sociaux, organisationnels et humains (COFSOH), January 2017.



Translation
EDF is working to provide all the country's electricity needs



Translation
30 years of EDF reports
1970 You're absolutely safe
1980 You're in very little danger
1990 Hopefully, we'll get through this

To find out more

- C. Dubout, *Je suis décontamineur dans le nucléaire*, Ed. Paulo Ramand(2010).
- G. Reynaud, *in Nucléaire et territoire*, livre blanc de l'ANCCLI, January 2017, p.26.
- See also the website of the association, www.ma-zone-controlee.com Its purpose is to encourage exchanges between employees, whether statutory or mainly subcontractors, in high-risk industries (nuclear, chemical, petrochemical) to improve the operational safety and overall security of the facilities, for future generations and the environment.