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► **To cite this version:**

Laurence Lizé. Working conditions in subcontracting: a research on cleaning and security employees. Claire Edey Gamassou and Arnaud Mias. De-liberating Work Democracy and Temporalities at the Heart of Occupational Health Issues, Teseo Press, 2022. hal-03903250

**HAL Id: hal-03903250**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03903250>**

Submitted on 16 Dec 2022

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Lizé L., 2022, « Working conditions in subcontracting: a research on cleaning and security employees » in Claire Edey Gamassou and Arnaud Mias (coordination) (2022) *De-liberating Work*, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Teseo, p. 197-218. URL:<https://www.teseopress.com/deliberatingwork>

# Working conditions in subcontracting: a research on cleaning and security employees

Laurence Lizé<sup>1</sup>

While subcontracting in the industrial sector is the subject of regular and relatively numerous studies (Perraudin *et al.*, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), this type of organisation of production and work is much less often analysed in the services sector. Moreover, studies on subcontracting often focus on 'labour demand', the relationship between principals and contractors or the organisation of cascading subcontracting. The contribution of this paper is to look at the 'labour supply' side and more particularly at the working conditions of subcontracted employees. Since the 1980s, subcontracting has been analysed as an instrument of labour flexibility at the service of principals, allowing the outsourcing of certain jobs and functions in order to adapt production to the vagaries of the company (variations in demand, economic situation, etc.). Since then, relations between principal and contractor companies have been renewed, the balance of power between companies has increased and labour flexibility has become multidimensionally extended.

Our questioning concerns the use of forms of labour flexibility in subcontracting and their possible links with the evolution of job segmentation, bearing in mind that certain flexibilisation practices are intrinsic to the existence of these modes of work outsourcing and that others seem more innovative. Our interest in this issue is motivated by the evidence of the deleterious effects of increased work flexibility on the working conditions of outsourced employees (Algava and Amira, 2011; Desjonquères, 2019). These companies have a particularly strong need for labour flexibility to reduce their costs and remain very quickly responsive to the demands of their principals. They pass on these constraints to their employees in different ways: by imposing a high degree of multi-tasking or by increasing time pressure, which results in an intensification of work (Askenazy, 2006; Coutrot, 2016).

Working conditions refer to the material conditions under which work is carried out at the workstation (work tools) and in relation to its environment (noise, light, temperature, etc.) They also refer to temporal conditions, such as quickness, deadlines, and schedules. Physical constraints are also taken into account (inconveniences, rhythms, repetitiveness, fatigue, physical posture, etc.), as well as the mental load (contact with customers, for example). They also concern potential

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psychological pressures (pressure on production or sales targets, competition between employees, feeling of usefulness, isolation, autonomy in work, quality of the work group). Given the number and variety of working conditions, not all of them will be addressed here. Our interest will be focused on the characteristics addressed in the qualitative research<sup>2</sup> and which we can relate with the employer's outsourcing position.

After presenting our hypotheses and the methodological approach in the first part, the results of the exploratory qualitative research will be presented in the second part. Three axes emerge: working conditions can be marked, first, by a 'traditional' but particularly intense flexibility of work in subcontracting; second, by a flexibility that is renewed by relying on work incentive schemes; and third, by a flexibility that activates new mechanisms to put employees under pressure and attempt to divide the work collective.

## **1. Subcontracting and working conditions: hypotheses and methodological approach**

### 1.1 How does subcontracting fuel labour market segmentation?

The links between working conditions in subcontracting and the companies' search for flexibility (principal and/or contractors) are long-standing, strong, and under constant renewal. As early as 1984, Atkinson hypothesised that the flexibility of the 'periphery', with unstable jobs or with the remote circle of subcontracting, made it possible to keep 'a core' of stable jobs, which constituted an assumption of complementarity between these two forms of employment. From this perspective, these types of flexibility are assumed to concern different employees. In our times, Atkinson's *core-periphery* segmentation emerges as a questionable hypothesis for subcontracting, as now this also affects the company's core activities. In our opinion, studying the working conditions of subcontracted employees allows us to better understand how these complementary relationships have been renewed, or even transformed, into substitution relationships.

The use of subcontracting was also part of the search for external quantitative flexibility for the principals (Boyer, 1986). Since Bruhnes' typology (1989), four main forms of labour flexibility are usually distinguished. Companies can impose four types of flexibility on employees: a) 'external quantitative', which generally involves short employment contracts; b) 'internal quantitative', by varying working hours (range of hours, overtime, split or flexible part-time work, etc.); c) 'internal qualitative', by playing with functional flexibility and the versatility of tasks; or d) 'salary', by modulating salaries and bonuses according to performance or objectives. The various forms of flexibility that weigh particularly heavily on subcontracted employees reflect the ability of principals to put pressure on their contractors. Said pressure, which is passed on to employees, is particularly evident in their difficult working conditions. They are part of the profitability requirements, which involve a high rate of

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<sup>2</sup> See Lizé, 2020, interview guide. These annexes are not reproduced here.

production and reducing the cost of labour. As Askenazy (2004) points out, the search for versatility, multiple skills, or just-in-time are practices that operate in clusters and are often present simultaneously in the same company<sup>3</sup>. These demands for reactivity are one of the signs of a new productivism described as ‘reactive’ by this author.

Our questioning focuses more specifically on the secondary segment of the labour market, which was already very flexible before the movement of company financialisation in the 1990s and is even more flexible today. On this subject, Favereau (2016) puts forward the idea that the secondary segment acquires a ‘*new look*’, combining a strong flexibilisation for employees with contractual innovations based on employment policies. He refers to these innovations as an ‘institutionalisation of marketisation’, which involves the massive use of special forms of employment and ‘light jobs’ such as *mini jobs* in Germany, *zero-hour contracts* in the United Kingdom, or certain assisted contracts and the *Active Solidarity Income* (RSA) in France. The renewal of the forms of segmentation identified here shows that ‘dualism no longer stems solely from the practices of employers or employees. It also stems from contractual innovations initiated by the public authorities’ (2004, p. 25). This secondary segment still involves employees and companies different from those present in the primary segment, but it tends to extend into or border on the primary segment by crossing the same companies<sup>4</sup>.

These hypotheses lead to question the nature of this secondary segment. In the seminal work of Doeringer and Piore (1971), this secondary segment was described as an ‘unorganised market’. In contrast, for the radical American socio-economists who studied industrial jobs at the time, it was already the result of a social and political construction (Marglin, 1974; Edwards *et al.*, 1982). The increase of subcontracting jobs was, then, based on the creation of a cheap working class, consisting of women, immigrants or people who were supposed to be docile and hardworking at work because of their vulnerable position in the labour market. At present, the ways in which subcontracting companies mobilise labour do not seem to be breaking down, but quite the contrary.

#### 1.2 Approach: an exploratory qualitative research

The qualitative research presented in this study was developed following quantitative work that exploited the 2013 DARES Working Conditions survey (Bruyère *et al.*, 2017). The results showed how the meaning of work for employees can vary according to the economic context, in particular the fact of working in a subcontracting or ordering company (Bruyère and Lizé, 2020). The questions of this exploratory survey are an extension of that research.

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, see the analysis of Peroumal (2008), which focuses specifically on security personnel.

<sup>4</sup> Process already mentioned by Piore (1978).

The field studied in our research concerns subcontracting in the business services sector, more specifically cleaning and security<sup>5</sup> (principals may belong to other sectors, but this aspect is not investigated here). The cleaning sector is dynamic: its turnover has increased by 65% in ten years due to the massive outsourcing of corporate support functions. This growth is significantly higher than that of all business services (Souquet and Geay, 2018). Although support activities are traditionally outsourced functions, certain core business functions may also be concerned, particularly in the hotel industry.

Our qualitative research proposes a visibility of working conditions based on interviews with employees. It is a qualitative survey based on semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in 2018 with 12 people<sup>6</sup>. It aims to identify contrasting cases of career paths marked by employment in subcontracting and does not claim to be representative. The survey was enriched and completed by interviews with trade unionists (a staff delegate and a union leader).

Employee portraits illustrating specific work situations were thus drawn up. The initial question is open-ended and broad, and the interview guide includes numerous items used (or not) as a stimulus to complement or refine the analysis of the work situation. The questionnaire includes a cross-sectional section on working conditions and employees' experiences at the time of the survey and a section on their individual career paths. Discourse analysis was performed manually and, due to the size of the survey, it did not require the use of textual analysis software. People's words and their feelings are at the heart of the survey. The aim is to reproduce them as faithfully as possible. The portraits presented here are those of people who voluntarily agreed to take part in the survey and to devote as much time as they could to it —at least half an hour, if not several hours.

## **2. Working conditions and flexibility in subcontracting: results**

The interview survey sheds light on how the flexibility imposed by subcontracting companies can lead to difficult, even degraded, working conditions and unrequited hardship.

### **2.1. Particularly intense internal and external quantitative labour flexibility in subcontracting companies**

Working conditions marked by the intensive use of traditional flexibility mechanisms in subcontracting will be presented here.

#### *2.1.1. From wage employment to non-employment... The case of subcontracting in cleaning*

Cap's portrait is that of a 29-year-old woman working in a very small company with four employees that provides cleaning services for social housing. Her work requires a high degree of autonomy and self-organisation, combined with difficult working

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<sup>5</sup> In 2015, the cleaning sector employed 485,288 people, 66% of whom were women, and the security sector had 151,100 employees. Source: Carif-Oref (2018, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Lizé, 2020, Annex 1 (summary table of interviews) and Annex 2 (interview guide).

conditions in a work collective marked by high turnover. Cap describes a combination of external and internal forms of quantitative flexibility: her employment contract is a part-time fixed-term contract, getting paid the minimum wage per hour (€900 net per month). The hours were negotiated over four days but without any notice period. To take up this type of precarious employment, Cap explains that certain ‘qualities’ are required, particularly those women capable of withstanding the working conditions.

Q: Are resignations frequent? If so, what are the reasons?

Yes! It’s not even resignations. People often leave during the trial period, they don’t even stay a week. This work is too hard. [...] There are almost only women, barely one man. But the work is too hard for him, too tiring. He stayed one afternoon: he said it was ‘a too physical work’.

Q: Do you have difficult or tiring working conditions?

Yes, the working position on the floor with the brush, the bucket, always bending down. We have to load the buckets, bend down in each corner, take the equipment out each time. It’s heavy... It’s such a relief when you leave the equipment in the evening! On top of that, the temperature is low: the tiles are frozen. We have to clean them and they freeze again... The premises are not heated... No toilets, it was not nice!

Q: Do you come into contact with dangerous products?

Yes: hydrochloric acid, ether... Very strong products, not found in the shops.

Q: Any risk of injury or accident?

Yes, when you have to clean the windows outside, there’s no scaffolding... She [the boss] was not allowed that...

Q: Any perceived poor working conditions?

We cleaners are denigrated, even more so being women... cleaning ladies...

Q: Do you think you will be able to do the same job as now until you retire? If so, do you want to?

No, [laughs] no, impossible, it’s exhausting. There’s dust everywhere, my back, my hands... I undress at the entrance of my house when I arrive. (Cap)

The company’s position as a subcontractor at the bottom of the chain is an additional constraint in terms of deadlines and work pace: “I have to redo certain things. Obviously, that isn’t to my liking... It’s imposed by the client” (Cap).

Cap’s professional situation shows a clear downgrading in relation to her level of study –she has a degree in modern literature and would have liked to become a teacher – but which is not felt as such. She has finished her fixed-term contract but has not asked for a renewal, preferring to remain unemployed, so as to bring up her young child and prepare another life project.

### *2.1.2. Part-time work: a common and long-standing practice in subcontracted cleaning*

The portraits of Sy and Cat reveal working conditions marked by a particularly intense flexibility of internal quantitative work, accentuated by subcontracting relationships. Cat, a 51-year-old woman, and Sy, a 43-year-old woman, are employed

as service staff in a subcontracted industrial cleaning company with 300 employees. The principal company is a public administrative establishment. Their employment contracts are permanent, split part-time contracts with a maximum daily working time of 13 hours, not including commuting time. The two interviews are about office cleaning.

Cat, working for three different employers, manages to accumulate 25 hours a week for a salary of less than 1,000 euros net per month.

Q: What might be bothering you in your work?

Schedules, transport, commuting time... I live in [A. Sud], to get here I already travel 20 minutes by bus to the shopping centre, and then my colleague picks me up by car. There is no other means of transport. Otherwise, you have to walk. If you could see the journey...! I make arrangements with my colleague... (Cat)

Cat does not express herself spontaneously. She does not criticise her work, does not complain, and accepts what she is asked to do. Her relationship with work is distant and non-claiming: she does not know whether her company has representative bodies, has no opinion on the company that employs her, and does not consider cleaning products to be 'dangerous products'. Her limited opportunities for professional and geographical mobility, her meagre financial resources, her social isolation, and her flexibility with regard to working hours are all assets for subcontracted cleaning. She represents a particularly 'employable' employee profile for her company because she is 'hard-working' and particularly financially constrained, which generates a suffering stability. Cat entered this job after a maternity leave: 'I found this job quickly. I signed up with [Company x] and about a week later I was working... I've been there since 2003' (Cat).

Sy's portrait shows the same constraints of subcontracting: she also has three jobs, which allows her to work 35 hours a week. She earns between 1,200 and 1,500 euros net per month. The working conditions are well accepted by Sy for various reasons, in particular because 'there are worse things and, above all, because she cannot stop working under any circumstances. Sy has worked in this company since 2000. Her words show great restraint. She does not complain and wants to 'keep her job'. Sy does not feel overloaded, the rhythm is considered satisfactory and the instructions for the tasks are presented as well-organised. What she finds particularly difficult are the evening hours. This is what causes her the most problems: 'The timetable is fragmented between different workplaces: from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. and then here [company x] from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.... Besides, I go home in between' (Sy).

*2.1.3. How do the needs for versatility and functional flexibility affect employees in subcontracting?*

M., a 31-year-old man, is a security guard. Since the beginning, he has been on a permanent contract with a 150-employee subcontracting company. The principal

companies are shops or building sites. M.'s duties involve 'guarding, securing goods and equipment'. These are *a priori* 'classic' subcontracting relationships, with the flexibilisation of certain tasks and a transfer of flexibility to the employees of the subcontracting companies. The most novel about this is the renewal of the skills required for the job of security guard and, for the principals, the presence of substitutable tasks between internal employees and subcontracted employees. The subcontracting company, in a subordinate position within the value chain, makes employees change jobs according to its needs within the framework of an imposed versatility. The principal companies exert strong pressure on the subcontracted employees, in terms of the type of tasks to be performed and the schedule. In this respect, M. mentions the constant changes he has to deal with, for example when the location of products in the shops is changed, which means an extra workload for security: 'Security guards grow impatient there. We know which are the expensive products and we are obliged to adapt... I am often not informed of the changes by the shop. They usually do this in the morning. We're never told anything...'. M. has to accept, in spite of himself, tasks that are outside his professional competence, contradictory injunctions on the use of force, exposure to the risk of verbal and physical aggression, a work rhythm that is difficult to maintain, and a long and painful standing position.

Q: What does your job involve?

We have contracts with shops. The bosses were canvassing for parking boxes, back office, night work, reception, dispatching goods for shops. It was secretarial work, telephone work. It was a security post at the entrance to the box, screening lorries... I work at the weekend. Their employees who work during the week do the same job (M.).

In some situations, the work content of in-house and outsourced employees is the same, except for the atypical working hours of the latter. In other words, they are substitutable rather than complementary employees. On the subcontractor side, time flexibility is essential, and M. says he is always available, at any time, as there is no notice period. He points out that in the event of unforeseen personal or family circumstances, it is difficult to be absent from work, even for a few hours, due to understaffing. Hence, security guards suffer a lot of pressure to fulfil the principal's performance, pace and quality of service requirements. For these levels of qualification, the employees seem *a priori* easily replaceable (they are 'spare wheels', according to M.) But in practice, replacements are difficult because they disorganise the team and impinge on the quality requirements of the service. As a result, M.'s profile is well adapted to the recruitment criteria sought by this company, where there is little turnover and the 'regular' employees are re-hired. A former soldier who joined the army at the age of 18, M. knows the rules and discipline of the security profession. However, having a technical baccalaureate and more than enough

knowledge and education to carry out the tasks assigned to him, he considers himself to be 'employed below his level of competence'. M. has since resigned from this job and become inactive, with future plans that are totally different from this professional activity.

## 2.2 Mobilising a particularly flexible workforce to make 'work pay'

J.-M.'s portrait is that of a 58-year-old man, a subcontracted employee at a company specialised in cleaning dog and cat cages. He works in a 15-employee subcontracting establishment, part of a group of 34,000 employees, working for a large food group (principal). That site carries out tests on pet food. The labour flexibility weighing on J.-M. is both the most classic form of transferring a maximum of external quantitative flexibility to subcontracting employees, so as to reduce the principal's production costs, and a newer form based on work incentive schemes associated with social benefits<sup>7</sup>. J.-M.'s employment contract provides for a monthly minimum of guaranteed hours and a high degree of flexibility, as he is required to answer calls without notice and must be available at all times, masking a *call worker* situation. The precariousness of J.-M.'s work is due to the great uncertainty about his working hours and salary: he does not know when he will work (hours and duration) or how much he will earn.

Q: What is your employment contract?

It's a fixed-term contract, I'm rehired... At first it was five hours, then three days... The hours are from 7 a.m. to 12 p.m. or from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. but sometimes it's all day. It depends... I'm replacing someone who is on maternity leave, I think... The fixed-term contract I signed is for a minimum of two months. I do Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. And during the week, it's 'If I need you, I can call you'... From one day to the next, I'm told 'You're working', you can't say no!... In general, I'm informed on the same day... (J.-M.)

Combined with the activity bonus, which supplements the professional income received, this type of employment makes 'work pay', as per a logic of work incentives encouraged by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2003). It should be noted that the arrangements resulting from the combination of part-time work and the activity bonus leave people such as J.-M. in a situation of working poverty (he earns the minimum hourly wage). Social policies and workforce management strategies combine here to feed this segment of degraded employment.

The subcontracting is carried out on the principal's site and the content of the tasks of internal and subcontracted employees are complementary. J.-M. explains that the principal 'has ceased to undertake some work, so there has been an increase in the workload at the bottom of the ladder, on the subcontractor'. J.-M.'s working

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<sup>7</sup> This is the activity bonus which has replaced the "RSA activité" since 2016.

conditions attest to a pace intensification and a time pressure specific to subcontracting.

Q: How have the demands of the company changed since you joined? Is there an increase in profitability requirements?

Yes, yes! I've been told I'm 'too slow', even though I never stop, but I'm 58 years old now... My boss told me 'you've got two and a half minutes to do a panel'. You'd think you were at Renault making cars. At [the principal], it's the animal handlers who organise the work: at such and such a time, they feed the cats, so you have to respect the schedule, you have to finish cleaning. They're always in a hurry... Even on Sundays, it's worse! Yesterday [Sunday] I was at the dogs, [the principal's animal handler] wanted to bring the dogs in even though we hadn't finished the cleaning and it was not the hour yet. On Sundays, they want to go home earlier. (J.-M.)

#### On the organisation of work, J.-M. adds:

There are calls for tender to other subcontractor companies, there is pressure... If there is a cheaper company, they have to negotiate all this. Otherwise, it [the principal] would look for another company if it took too long. [...] I feel a problem of pressure, we're rush working. But if we don't do it, another company will do it... (J.-M.)

These poor working conditions in subcontracting also involve isolation and a lack of a collective. J.-M. does not know whether there are representative organs in his company, and he cannot ask for any help if he needs it. The work collective is badly affected, or even non-existent. The effects of this cumulative flexibilisation of work on J.-M.'s working conditions can be seen in his comments, in which he expresses great loneliness: 'I have no bonds, I don't see anyone anymore... Sometimes the neighbours... Fortunately, I have the activity with the RSA. On Mondays, there's the computer workshop, on Tuesday there's the garden. There's only Wednesdays...' (J.-M.). J.-M.'s low employability does not keep him away from this type of job. On the contrary: his age, his low qualifications, and his difficult background are important recruitment criteria and are sought after by the employer as a guarantee of docility. This job was found through his neighbourhood network, and he was hired immediately, after a very quick interview.

#### 2.3. Why are some 'core activity' jobs in the hotel sector outsourced?

The subcontracting of cleaning in the hotel industry is certainly used to reduce the wage costs of hotels (principals). But beyond these strictly economic reasons, it also

makes it possible to ensure the availability of employees and to divide up work collectives.

### *2.3.1. Non-recognition of qualifications*

The interview with T., a 30-year-old trade union leader, took place in the context of a social conflict between the employees of the subcontracting company and the principal hotel<sup>8</sup>. T. is a full-time employee of a hotel trade union with a permanent contract. She has an MA in sociology and is very involved in working conditions in subcontracting. For T., the context of subcontracting is essential if we want to understand these practices of flexibilisation and employment management in this sector. She insists on the need to put pressure on the principal to negotiate and obtain improvements in working conditions with subcontractors: ‘There is a commercial contract... The budget allocated to subcontracting decreases every year, the principal reissues calls for tender, it takes the lowest bidder. We are talking about social dumping...’.

The reduction in labour costs implies a non-recognition of qualifications in subcontracted cleaning jobs. In addition to this practice, there are significant differences in wage policy between in-house and subcontracted employees, and in the type of subcontracting negotiations, since site agreements obviously limit the possibilities of extending the benefits obtained.

All cleaning workers, including chambermaids, have the status of cleaning assistants (CA). There is a collective agreement for CA employees, the salary scale is a little bit higher. CA is like a sweeper. [...] Subcontracted employees do not have the same status as hotel employees. There are two different agreements: those who belong to the hotel-gastronomy sector are paid food expenses, but cleaning employees are not. [...] In reality, there are no benefits in subcontracting, they are only obtained on certain workplaces. At the hotel [X], they won the food expenses, but it’s only there, for the 600 employees of the [subcontracting] company. It’s barely a company agreement’. (T.)

The de-qualification of jobs is accompanied by labour selection criteria that are consistent with this search for flexibility. According to T., illiteracy in cleaning companies is part of the hiring criteria of employers, who will retain ‘a woman who can neither read nor write’. T. also explains that the principal hotel could very well, like many others, do the cleaning with in-house staff. For T., the choice to subcontract cleaning is explained by the fact that the majority of employees are of African origin, very hard-working and people whom the hotel can exploit more than others. These practices are confirmed by the words of L., a chambermaid (CA) aged 42 on a part-

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Lizé, 2020, annex 3.

time fixed-term contract, subcontracted by a company with 4,000 employees in the hotel industry: 'For recruitment, if you can't read or write your name or address, it's better, and also if you don't speak much... They aren't calling you back otherwise'.

In addition to the low wages in the sector (minimum wage per hour) and the special system of social security deductions, the system of payment by room allows subcontractors to underpay their employees:

In concrete terms, it's three rooms per hour at the hotel [principal]... You'll never finish the three rooms, even if you're a *superwoman*. Given the quality requirements, it's a miracle if you manage to do two rooms in an hour... It's very hard! And you put off the third room until the next hour and so on... This is a specificity of cleaning that has marked me. (T.)

The employment contracts are part-time, with schedules that are not respected. T. cites a 5-hour contract paid at 10 euros gross per hour but requiring seven to eight hours of actual work (that is, two to three hours of unpaid work). The employee then earns between 600 and 800 euros per month. To achieve its ends, the subcontracting company indicates on the pay slip: 'unjustified absences' or 'hours not worked'. These were hours worked but not paid. In another subcontracting company of the sector, payment by the room is the norm. T. cites the case of a part-time contract where the employee worked 56 hours a week and which was reclassified: 'We obtained 30 hours to avoid the bogus 3-hour hours' (T).

Mobility clauses are widely used in this sector. The subcontracting companies in the hotel cleaning sector are seeking to increase the versatility of workers and the flexibility of the work organisation. T. explains how companies use this to transfer employees and push them to resign, by resorting to forced mobility or transfers: 'You live in Sarcelles. You work at night and they send you to Ivry' (T.): a distance of more than 30 kilometres in the Paris suburbs, which are very poorly served by public transport, *especially* at night. T. adds that these clauses are used to move employees from one hotel to another when they cause trouble, so as to 'destroy solidarity'.

### *2.3.2 Importance of the work collective to resist the working conditions in the hotel subcontracting industry*

Two portraits will be presented here: that of F., a 51-year-old woman, a housekeeper in a luxury hotel (principal) who works for a subcontracted cleaning company with 4,000 employees, and that of Sa, a 40-year-old housekeeper, a staff representative in the same subcontracted company who works in the same principal hotel as F.

F. has been employed on a full-time basis since 2005. She has worked for various subcontracting companies over the course of her long professional career. When I met her, F. was taking part of a strike to defend her colleagues' rights. The demands concerned the integration of subcontracted employees and the working conditions: the pace (number of beds to be made), the arduousness (lifting heavy loads), and the

insufficient or inadequate equipment provided by the subcontracting company (the principal subcontracts the cleaning equipment). The tasks performed by in-house or subcontracted housekeepers and chambermaids are identical, so the employees are substitutable.

Q: What does your job involve?

I have to control the rooms, it's a team leader's job... A housekeeper manages a floor, a team, six rooms.

Q: How do you view the company that employs you? Does it affect your daily work?

It's a market strategy, [my company] has been there since 2017, it's the most recent. There were four other subcontracting companies before in this hotel. The client changes subcontractors whenever it wants, they come and go, but we stay. It's the rotation: the companies leave but the staff stays in the hotel, their seniority is retained, the law allows it. This is an important protection. Otherwise... I have been in subcontracting since 2005, but just recently with [my current company]. (F.)

To the open-ended question about the work group, F. answers:

On this site, we are a close-knit team. If there's a problem, we can say no, and that takes pressure off. We manage it! Before, we didn't have a delegate, there was a lot of pressure, too much work. Some colleagues left... We were given two floors... yes! The boss threatened us, we couldn't say anything. (F.)

On the subject of the demands for the of the hotel to incorporate the staff who work as subcontractors, Sa, a representative, explained that this was a request that concerned all 60 employees. The hotel refused and offered to take 15 of them to another hotel. According to Sa, the hotel wants to break up the work group and its solidarity by dispersing the employees and dividing the situations and working conditions, since they have different salaries and work contracts depending on whether they are subcontracted or internalised. Besides, she wonders why the core activities of the hotel industry, such as housekeepers or room maintenance, are subcontracted (unlike surveillance tasks, which she considers not to be part of the core activities). Is it because it entails a higher cost for the hotel? This argument is not convincing for her: 'The hotel does not want to incorporate [the subcontractor's] staff, saying that the cost is too high... But it is the only luxury hotel that subcontracts core activity employees! They want to divide us' (Sa).

## **Conclusion**

This exploratory investigation has made it possible to verify the intensity of internal, external, and wage flexibility that exists in subcontracting and to identify particular forms of this configuration. In relation to the hypotheses posed by Atkinson (1984), a clear evolution can be observed: the 'core' and the 'periphery' can coexist within the

same company, merging and mixing, but maintaining distinct statuses. This can be seen in the portraits of cleaning staff in the hotel industry, where there is subcontracting of the core activities, or in other configurations where the tasks of subcontractors and principal employees are also equally substitutable. This secondary segment of the labour market therefore seems to be even more flexible at present. While it is not necessarily a 'watertight' segment, the fact remains that the possibilities for employees to move to better jobs are very limited. These jobs are therefore outside the logic of the queue or possible entry points to internal markets. The qualitative survey also shed light on how, at the bottom of the social ladder, the selection criteria for the workforce are consistent with the subcontracting companies' need for flexibility and the difficult working conditions.

If new mechanisms of flexibility are emerging in subcontracting, can we consider it to be a profound transformation of the secondary segment? Yes, in part, because in addition to the massive recourse to special forms of employment in France and Europe, certain employment and social policy measures have been added that extend the possibilities of combining part-time employment and social benefits. Our results converge with recent work on this issue (Gautié and Margolis, 2009; Favereau, 2016; Devetter and Puissant, 2018).

However, the modes of employment management by companies retain a structuring effect in the segmentation of jobs, which leads us to analyse the developments at work as an extension rather than a real renewal. This prompts us to continue the discussion on the nature of the secondary segment, a question that divided the founding authors of the labour market segmentation theory from the outset. According to the testimonies collected, the practices of subcontracting companies would continue within the secondary segment in terms of organisation and management of employment (Edwards *et al.*, 1982; Marglin, 1974; Caroli and Gautié, 2009).

These initial exploratory results have many limitations. They should be extended by a larger-scale survey that would allow the trends identified through these employee portraits to be explored in greater depth. In addition, the hypotheses concerning the link between the employment management methods of principal and subcontracting companies could be tested on qualitative or quantitative company data to deepen these initial results.

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