



Learning about risk prevention in Peugeotland

In the town of Montbéliard, deep in the heart of a car industry belt, educators are running an ambitious training project in workplace risk prevention. With the backing of the European Union, they are hoping to spread the word throughout France and fire interest across Europe.

There is nothing in Montbéliard's small main-line station to suggest that passengers have just alighted in one of France's biggest industrial zones. But outside, it is a different story. On the corner of a pedestrian precinct, the frontage of an art deco building bears seven white letters: PEUGEOT. Welcome to "Peugeotland". The Montbéliard hinterland abounds with reminders that the heart of this region in eastern France, not far from Switzerland, has beat for close on a century to the roars of the lion, the symbol of Franche-Comté and the renowned French car manufacturer. The air of sleepy rurality given off by the old town is deceptive. Montbéliard is the hub of a galaxy of factory towns. Sochaux, obviously, which since 1912 has been home to one of France's biggest factories. But also a string of "court" towns – Audincourt, Exincourt, Bethoncourt – where exhaust, bumper, seat and other production plants have developed. It is an area where everyone lives from and for Peugeot.

This industrial landscape where the car is king is where the "Bilbao project", as its originators like to call it, was born. "Three years now I've been

beavering away at this project!", enthuses Françoise Lignier, a veritable powerpack of a teacher at the Lycée Jules Viette vocational secondary school and an equally militant CGT trade union activist. In the school, where students learn motor manufacturing trades, Bilbao has become a synonym for safety at work, because the project – named "Promotion of a culture of collective prevention and safety and health at work for future young workers" – is supported by the Bilbao-based European Agency for Safety and Health at Work.

This year, the theme of the Agency's traditional European week for health and safety at work is young workers. They are a particularly high-risk group if the European figures cited in a recent Agency report are anything to go by – 714 000 work accidents resulting in at least three days unfitness for work and 400 fatal accidents among workers aged 18-24 in 2002. If these figures are to be brought down, a prevention and safety culture must be instilled into them before they ever start work. Françoise Lignier has managed to win the Jules Viette's principal,

Montbéliard vocational school students getting to grips with the job



teaching and community health staff – nurse and welfare officer – around to this way of thinking. “Rallying everyone’s support for a European-scale project, and getting it going right from the start of the new school year, was a lot of hard work”, says the French and history-geography teacher. Especially as she did not exactly choose the soft option. The project covers different streams and age groups, from BEP to BTS¹, and shuns a strictly technical approach to the matter by enlisting input from a philosopher and a psychologist.

Philosophy and psychology on the syllabus

Ginette Francequin and Sidi Ahmed Barkat, respectively an industrial psychologist and philosopher at the national school of engineering and technology in Paris, had their first encounter with the students from Viette and Fernand Léger, the other college in town involved in the project, at the end of September. Starting with a description of a journey as a metaphor for the world of work, and a discussion on the five senses, was to say the very least a strikingly different way of getting the students to think about work-related risks by putting people as sentient beings back at the centre of the production process.

In early October, the psychiatrist, philosopher and teachers joined forces again for a more practical exercise. The Jules Viette students were handed a risk spotting guide, with the instruction to observe their fellow 2nd year BTS car maintenance and product support (MAVA) students, some of whom were busy logging the on-board computer data from a 607, while others were stripping-down a clutch system on a 307. The idea was to identify safety failings, like not wearing safety shoes and the main garage hazards (noise, temperatures, dangerous products, etc.). It looked a pretty straightforward proposition for these 1st year BTS MAVA students, all about twenty-ish. Naturally, they knew what a garage was, and had already learned in their technical and theoretical courses how to guard against the risks of the job. They seemed industrious, but not unduly interested. “I don’t see myself getting oily hands”, observes one youth sporting a trendy jacket and jeans. Most of these students have upper secondary diplomas in industrial technology and science, rarely in vocational subjects. They see their futures more in suits and ties than dirty overalls. Trained in the most recent motor vehicle technologies, but also schooled in management sciences and the “customer approach”, their ambitions lie more in landing a back-room or sales engineer’s job with one of the biggest car makers. “80 to 90% will have got a job within a year of graduating”, confirms one teacher.

An hour on the dot. Barely a couple of minutes left for the discussion with Ginette Francequin and Sidi Ahmed Barkat. Not enough. The bell goes, bringing the students automatically to their feet.

Nothing eats into the hour’s break. Next up is the 1st year BEP bodywork class. They are aged about 14 or 15, and even at that tender age have had rocky school careers. “Some actively chose bodywork, but others have just sort of ended up here”, admits one member of staff. Ginette Francequin starts off with some seemingly ingenuous questions: “I’ve had a car accident and my door’s got dented. What can you do for me?”. Clearly surprised, one youngster has a stab: “You need to sand it down”, then “knock the dents out”. A question and answer session sets in. “Was it noisy?” “No”, the youngster replies, “but I did see one of the students doing an oil change without safety goggles.”

Busing Romanians in

Throughout the day, class after class goes through the same exercise, some enthusiastically, some distinctly less so. The 1st year upper secondary diploma class in industrial product design and specification comprises ten students, all around 20 years of age. Things get off to an unpromising start: the students won’t be filmed. Part of the Bilbao/Viette project is to make a film for dissemination as a teaching aid throughout the European Union. André Baratta, a veteran of film reports on health and safety at work, has to stow his camera away. The discussion with the psychologist and philosopher goes little better. “What’s the point of all that? Nothing to do with me!”, proffers a rebellious-looking student sporting a bomber jacket and bleached hair. Another raises the tone: “We’re training to be draughtsmen, not brickies”. “There’s nothing wrong with being a bricklayer. My son’s a bricklayer and he’s proud to be building nurseries and houses”, counters Ginette Francequin. “Well, my brother’s a brickie. He’s 30 years old and his back’s done for”, retorts the student.

What should have been a discussion on personal protective equipment ends up as a fraught but illuminating give-and-take on insecurity. “Bosses only care about profits, not safety. Say anything, and they’ll just bus in a load of Romanians, and then all you can do is keep your trap shut and accept it”, complains one youngster. Another is unsure whether he will stay in Montbeliard as he fears being on too-low a wage to be able to build a house.

Mostly from working-class backgrounds, these youngsters have a disillusioned view of the world of work and their future place in it. It is as if their concerns reflected the fears of their elders, Peugeot’s renowned skilled workers, who once formed a proud community with political clout, but who now seem to have lost confidence in collective action.

This gloom is now almost tangible throughout “Peugeotland”. In the late 1970s, the Lion Brand car-maker employed over 40 000 workers; now it has barely 17 000. When questioned, many local people feel that although low-profile, the immensely

¹ The BTS (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur) is an advanced vocational training certificate received after two years of higher education on an advanced technicians course (STS). The BEP (Brevet d’Etudes Professionnelles) is a secondary school vocational training certificate. It is a qualification for employment or further study.



powerful Peugeot family remains very much at the helm and will not forsake the region. However, the recent closure of the Coventry plant in the UK and massive investment in Eastern Europe leave the future of the car industry in the Montbéliard region shrouded in uncertainty, and gives a job with Peugeot fresh appeal in the eyes of a growing number of young people. "Ten years ago, young people wouldn't give Peugeot a second thought because it was assembly line work. Now, a lot would jump at the chance of a job in the Sochaux factories if it was offered them", says Françoise Racine, the Viette college welfare officer.

The young woman also tends to the students at Fernand Léger – a 400-student vocational secondary school drawn mainly from a more socially and economically vulnerable community than its bigger neighbour. The clear evidence of this is the overwhelming majority of North African heritage youths who fill the production engineering, mechanical engineering and machining workshops. In Montbéliard as elsewhere, this "ethnic dimension" carries heavy consequences. "It's a lot harder for them to get work experience training", notes the welfare officer.

For those who do get their first taste of working life in the nearby factories, the first brush with industrial reality can be an ordeal. "I did three weeks work experience at Faurecia (car equipment manufacturer – ed.), mainly sweeping floors, putting faulty parts in the crusher, and sticking on thousands of self-adhesive strips. I was shattered and I ached all over", testifies one plastics technology student. "Some of the younger workers tried to show us how the machine presses worked, but the older ones just gave us the rubbish jobs", adds another. Yet another says that while they were issued with protective gloves on the first day, nobody made them wear them afterwards. Such situations may not be the general rule – other students found their work experience more closely

matched their expectations and training – but this anecdotal evidence does illustrate the gap that separates vocational training and workplace reality. And there may be an even more fundamental disconnect between the safety rules learned in the classroom and working conditions in many garages and factories, as Françoise Lignier well knows. "It's no coincidence that we decided to tackle 1st year students who are just discovering the world of work and technology. It's so we can follow them right up to their work experience in June. Part of the project is to include a prevention-health-safety aspect in the training period reports. Students will have to identify potential hazard situations and analyse how they work. It's a pretty hard-line exercise, because they will be up against what can be the painful reality of shop-floor working conditions".

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Most of the above works can be found at the ETUI-REHS Documentation Centre (www.labourline.org). ■

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