

# At Work Solidarity and Ecological Solidarity

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## ABSTRACT

While research has considered the relationship of trade union organizations to the new social protest movements through the critique of liberalism, which is common, the problems linked to the theme of industrial risk have hardly been the subject of ongoing research. Some authors have certainly insisted on the limited openness of the labor movement to the demands of anti-nuclear groups, but only in an ad hoc manner.

The present text thus responds to a gap, which is all the more problematic in view of the fact that protests against major technological projects (GMOs, nanotechnologies, etc.) or land-use planning (creation of major facilities: new airports, dams, etc.) are developing and that the positions of trade union organizations are becoming more differentiated, on the one hand, from each other and, on the other hand, from the positions of the associative components of the civil society. In this perspective, the principle according to which trade unionism could play two roles should be explored: social partner and shaper of societal values.

We will put forward the idea that, on a societal theme such as industrial risk, trade unionism occupies almost exclusively the role of social partner and not that of shaper of societal values, bearers of general solidarity. If these two roles have been held in the field of reproduction and maintenance of the work force, on the other hand, on the problem of the mode of development, historical trade unionism is led to privilege professional relations and to distance itself from contestations.

**Keywords:** Citizenship; Ecology; Nanotechnology; Research; Risks;

## Introduction

In his fundamental theory of the dual society of advanced capitalism (Habermas 1987), Jürgen Habermas addresses the relationship between "system" and the lived world through the relationship of civil society to the political system (Habermas 1997), the problem of crises (Habermas 1978), and the difficulties of controlling economic expansion (Habermas 2000), while putting the trade union movement to one side or the other.

Habermas thus indicates that the class struggle has been pacified and is no longer a driving force of history (Habermas 1987: 367). In one of his few attempts to identify civil society practically, Habermas sees its core as the fabric of voluntary, associative, trade union and cultural groupings, debating clubs, forums, professional organizations, parties, alternative institutions, independent of and in solidarity with the system (Habermas 1992: 185). These groupings - which could be described as "non-systemic" - are outside the sphere of the state and the economy, in the sense that they have neither the functional power nor the money to impose a decision or buy (compensate) a service.

However, the multiplicity of types and groups listed necessarily leads to questioning the presupposition that it would be sufficient to consider the confrontation between the "effective" civil society and the "system". By construction, this ignores the possibility that conflicts between non-systemic forces may arise.

However, the rise of contestation carried by the "new social movements" (Melucci, 1978; Offe, 1997) or "new movements of contestation" (Luhmann, 1993: 125-143), dealing in particular with themes linked to a mode of development considered "unsustainable", calls into question trade unionism, whose claims and actions are historically centered on the maintenance and reproduction of the work force.

In this perspective, the particular theme of "industrial risk", i.e. a catastrophic risk - chemical or nuclear - likely to go beyond the confines of an installation, necessarily affects the trade union organizations. The questioning of high-risk industries raises questions for them, both because of their - still strong - historical presence in factories of this type, and because of the societal tensions that run through them. Trade unionism is all the more hesitant to respond to these questions because the environmental question has only very unevenly been the subject of active demands in the workers' movement (Daumas and Mioche, 2004), with the relative exception of the CFDT at the confederal and federal levels, but not really at the level of the plants. Thus, in the mid-2000s, new tensions arose over the revival of the nuclear program, partly supported by the CGT, supported by Force Ouvrière and the CFE-CGC, and viewed with more distance by the CFDT, at least at the confederal and federal levels.

While research has considered the relationship of trade union organizations to the new protest movements through the critique of liberalism, which is common if not joint (Agrikolianski et alii, 2005: 291-316), the problems linked to the theme of industrial risk have hardly been the subject of ongoing research. Some authors have certainly insisted on the limited openness of the labor movement to the demands of anti-nuclear groups (Touraine et al., 1984), but only in an ad hoc manner.

The present text thus responds to a gap, which is all the more problematic in view of the fact that protests against major technological projects (GMOs, nanotechnologies, etc.) or land-use planning (creation of major facilities: new airports, dams, etc.) are developing and that the positions of trade union organizations are becoming more differentiated, on the one hand, from each other and, on the other hand, from the positions of the associative components of the civil society. In this perspective, the principle according to which trade unionism could play two roles should be explored: social partner and shaper of societal values (Hymann, 2001).

We will put forward the idea that, on a societal theme such as industrial risk, trade unionism occupies almost exclusively the role of social partner and not that of shaper of societal values, bearers of general solidarity. If these two roles have been held in the field of reproduction and maintenance of the work force, on the other hand, on the problem of the mode of development, historical trade unionism is led to privilege professional relations and to distance itself from contestations which escape it.

To the civic denunciation of industrial risks, trade unionism thus opposes its demands and its achievements on safety and approaches the technological question mainly through its effects on employment and work. In order to base this approach, it refers first and foremost to a kind of "workers' control" (Montgomery, 1979), a control of risky activities exercised on

the job, rejecting public criticism of the existence of industrial hazards. In other words, trade unionism tends to "protect" existing installations, whether in relation to industrialists seeking productivity gains, notably through automation, or to groups in civil society refusing any "risk culture".

In this sense, the theme of industrial risk constitutes a pointer to the problems posed by the relationship of trade unionism to civil society, in its founding dimension of joint contestation of the "system" and the formation of universal principles. To the theme of industrial risk as a danger, trade unionism responds in the field by emphasizing the professionalism of employees, their ability to control as closely as possible the exercise of work and the functioning of workshops.

In order to develop this point of view, we will rely, in a synthetic way, on several investigations - completed or in progress - carried out, for one, on the chemical pole of Toulouse-Sud where the AZF factory disaster occurred (September 2001) and, for the others, in various "risky" industrial sites: natural gas extraction and chemical (Lacq) or nuclear (Golfech). On this basis, it can be shown that trade unionism does not fit in with the observable trend towards the politicization of production (Offe, 1984: 176) and concentrates its practices in professional relations as close as possible to work interactions, neglecting the problem of ways of producing, and limiting its moments of mobilization to the occurrence of events, whether incidental/accidental or linked to a drop in the workforce.

### **1. From the Politicization of the Industrial Risks Issues...**

Public contestation of polluting industries (tanneries, metallurgy, etc.) or even dangerous industries (powder mines, gas plants, etc.) is not new: it is concomitant with the industry itself (Williot, 1997), which was protected very early on, as early as 1810, against the multiplication of complaints from local residents (Lascoumes, 1989). However, since the 1960s, the contestation of industrial pollution or dangers has had original dimensions. Indeed, the location of factories is not or no longer the main focus of a challenge that now also concerns products (insecticides, pesticides, etc.) and/or production methods. Progressively, the contestation of risky factories threatens their establishment or their durability, as shown by the highly politicized examples of politico-administrative closures of installations: in 1997, the "Superphénix" nuclear power plant at Creys-Malville, justified only in part by technical and economic reasons; in 2002, certain activities of the Toulouse establishment of the Société Nationale des Poudreries de l'Etat, following the conflict provoked by the AZF factory disaster.

#### **1.1 Environmental policy**

Although little research has been explicitly devoted to the way in which trade unionism has taken on the environment, and although it appears that the labor movement has shown little interest in it, we can nevertheless consider that the relationship of trade unionism to this theme is not neutral. In other words, the absence of actions on the environment does not imply that this aspect has played no role in trade union life, especially for historical/worker trade unionism.

On the one hand, when the protest reached a high level in the 1980s, there were company union practices that took the environment into consideration, such as the creation of an "environment" commission within the works councils of the Grande Paroisse company, of which the AZF plant in Toulouse is an establishment. Launched on the initiative of the

CFDT, which has a majority in the company, and implemented in Toulouse by the CGT, which has just (re)gained a majority on the works council, this type of commission does not mobilize. However, it does reflect the fact that ecological pressure is being taken into account, even if this pressure affects industrialists more directly than trade unionists.

On the other hand, it can be observed that environmental demands "worry" the factory trade unions and the employees. For the chemical industry, this concern is particularly evident in relation to the Regional Directorate for Industry, Research and the Environment (DRIRE), which is responsible for inspecting "classified installations" that generate environmental problems, and more particularly Seveso-type plants that are at risk of major disasters. For the trade unionists, a visit from the DRIRE is unwelcome because it "represents" the environmentalists or, where applicable, the local residents complaining about nuisances. The unions tolerate, or even accept, management practices aimed at putting a plant in order when an inspection is announced, and no contact is sought with this administration (nor vice versa). It is not, therefore, in the field of "industrial risks" of the Seveso type that the problem of an employers' policy is posed, even though it is directly linked to it. If there is a problem, it is in terms of occupational hazards, and it is the labor inspector, not the DRIRE inspector, who is called upon to settle a dispute concerning industrial safety, such as the gradual elimination of the jobs of permanent specialized firefighters (organic or subcontracted) and their replacement by teams composed of somewhat trained operators. Trade union recourse to the DRIRE is exceptional in the chemical industry and is accompanied by the utmost caution.

Of course, the relationship with the administration is not always identical from one activity to another, particularly because of history. In the mines, in this case natural gas extraction, the election by the workers of a "miner's safety representative" transforms the latter into a representative of the DRIRE and makes him independent of the manufacturer. As a result, relations with the DRIRE are very specific, since the trade unions, in fact the CGT, can use the administration directly to influence a director. In the nuclear sector, the Autorité de Sûreté Nucléaire (ASN), a ministerial department responsible for monitoring the operation of nuclear power plants and nuclear activity in general, appears to be an industrial rather than an environmentalist organization in a public service configuration. Insofar as the labor inspectorate and the nuclear inspectorate are confused, there is no possible selective choice, but it is on labor issues, including subcontracting, and not on environmental issues that the competent authority is seized.

Whatever these variations, the environmental issue does not constitute the basis of an active, well-established demand in the trade union movement. Thus, the cross-industry structures neglect the environmental and industrial risk dimension and often leave it to the factory activists to deal with. The proposal, put forward by the CFDT Chemistry-Energy, and sometimes put into practice, that the CHSCTs become CHSCTEs (environment) remains a relatively isolated approach, which is not systematically encountered even where the CFDT is represented.

Insofar as the administrative constraint has contributed to a strong reduction in the volume of pollution, thus satisfying environmentalist demands, and where industrialists have accepted the principle of less pollution, this limited consideration of the environment by the trade union movement does not lead to an explicit conflict with the associative milieu. It is true that trade unionists sometimes question the high cost of environmental policies, evoking a possible relocation of industries, at least in the chemical sector. But, more and more often,

the old practices of strongly increased polluting discharges at night are no longer appropriate, neither for the industrialists, nor for the employees. As the need to respect the environment is generally accepted in factories, it is on the theme of accidental risk that the most conflictual crossroads are occurring between trade unions and environmental associations.

## 1.2. The ideology of risk

Even though the new protests deal largely with the extent of technological dangers and their uncontrollable nature, which is reflected in the idea - debatable - of a "risk society" (Beck, 2001), the majority of trade unionists tend to value the capacity of employees to make installations safe. This line of cleavage strongly marks the confrontation between the supporters (overwhelmingly trade unionists and employees) of maintaining the chemical cluster in Toulouse, where the AZF-Grande Paroisse plant disaster occurred, and a collective of associations (local residents, victims, environmentalists), trade unions (of the civil service: Sud and FSU), and political organizations (ecologists and extreme leftists), demanding the complete closure of the site (Suraud, 2007). The union assertion of additional security through new technical devices added to the installations is matched by the refusal of the risk engendered by unchanged processes, in terms of the organization of production and the reduction of storage of highly toxic gases. From this point of view, the AZF conflict is a turning point, by its duration, its intensity and its result, since, for the first time in France, an industrial activity is stopped without any reason of economic profitability being mentioned.

This disaster has brought the question of industrial risk, originally linked to the development of civil nuclear power, back into focus, while revealing its complex dimensions. Civil nuclear power creates divisions both between the trade unions themselves, or if necessary, between the levels of the same confederation, and between trade unionism and the associative movement. The problem is not new, and the "anti-nuclear prophecy" has proven to be realistic. The concentration of the anti-nuclear movement against certain types of installations, such as the "Superphénix" breeder reactor at Creys-Malville, has had the effect, not of uniting the union movement, but of revealing its differences or divisions: the political-administrative decision to close Superphénix did not lead to any protest movement at the Bugey nuclear power plant, three kilometers away as the crow flies, any more than at the other nuclear power plants. In the CFDT, the local section defends the breeder reactor, and thus the technological principle at least as much as the jobs concerned, against its federation and confederation.

If trade unionism finds it difficult to establish itself as a component of civil society, capable of developing demands of general scope, as it can do in its demands for social protection, this is partly due to its relationship to technology. In the French tradition, especially that of the CGT, sophisticated industrial technology has a "fascinating" side, especially when highly qualified work is developed there: this is the case with the Concorde - nicknamed "the CGT's plane" - at the Sud-Aviation factory in Paris. This was the case with the Concorde - nicknamed "the CGT's plane" - at the Sud-Aviation factory in Toulouse, and with the civil nuclear program. The CGT thus saw itself as one of the co-promoters of the French program, despite the turbulence caused by its relaunch in the mid-1970s. It is possible that some plant directors were close to or members of the CGT or CFDT, a phenomenon that is difficult to envisage in the chemical industry. This version of industrial development leads to a focus, in the public debate on the EPR program, on energy policy (often including a reference to national independence), the demand for public control (especially of safety and security problems) and the need for jobs. Nevertheless, this position can be strongly nuanced

at the level of the secretaries of the power plant unions, taking a certain distance from the confederation, when they exercise a "duty to alert" on the situation of the power plants.

However, in the latter, trade unionism only indirectly addresses the problem of safety. The CHSCTs deal mainly with safety in the workplace and "human" accidents, and the Joint Production Committees only consider safety through an annual report, which is rarely commented on. Safety appears to be under control when the results of a plant or of the entire fleet meet internationally decreed event-based indicators, as if prescription were more important than effectiveness. This "safety at work rather than industrial safety" approach can be linked to the technical nature and opacity of the processes, but it is being challenged by the growing pressure of regulatory change. The latter is manifested by the fact that trade unions are increasingly being asked to participate in public consultation bodies, open to associations, companies, and the public authorities.

### **1.3. Public debate**

The active inclusion of trade unionism in the public arena is linked to crisis situations (a major incident or accident) or to tensions arising from the establishment of a public debate as a preliminary, at least formally, to an industrial and administrative decision. Conversely, union initiatives for public debate on industrial safety and risks are rare. In many cases, for the CGT or Force Ouvrière more than for the CFDT, participation in public consultation bodies (Permanent Secretariat for the Prevention of Industrial Problems, or S3PI, Local Information Committees, or CLI, around nuclear power plants) is to date uneven. The same is true for the involvement of trade unions in the creation of Local Information and Consultation Committees, set up under a law of July 30, 2003. It is the administrative authority (the prefecture) which, in good understanding with the industrialists, draws the outlines and composition of these committees, without any sustained demands from the trade union structures.

When participation does take shape, the link with the associative milieu is not specifically sought, including in the field by the CFDT, nor is it sought by the associative groups with respect to the trade union organizations. From then on, two practices developed: one was that of the "non-empty chair", but which, at least in the chemical industry, did not lead the union structures to reveal internal problems in a factory, especially in the presence of industrial management. Whatever the organization, taking this step remains problematic, with the pressure of employees and certain unions, eager to "live in hiding", playing a strong role. The second practice aims to make public debate a means of strongly supporting an industrial program, as was the case with the debate on the EPR or in the post-AZF disaster period.

If factory or professional union structures are unequally involved in public consultation mechanisms, the same is true for inter-professional structures. The latter sometimes contribute directly to public debates, in cases where the stakes are high, such as the conflict over the future of the Toulouse chemical cluster or the launch of the EPR. However, as a general rule, the cross-industry unions, with the exception of the CFDT, most often delegate to the plant unions the task and responsibility of participating in consultation mechanisms. In other words, unlike public service defense operations, the inter-professional does not cover the positions expressed by components of civil society.

This internal dichotomy within trade unionism is a further dimension of the professionalization of the treatment of industrial risks.

## 2. ...To the Professionalization of Industrial Safety

If safety at work and professional risks are themes of demands that can lead to collective agreements, on the other hand, the theme of "industrial risk", as a threat of destruction extending beyond the factory premises, is approached in a much less systematic or explicit manner. Even when it concerns high-risk companies, safety in the workplace is the foundation of safety in general, including the safety of installations and processes. In other words, even though industrial risks are public problems (Gilbert, 2003) posed from outside the company, industrial safety or nuclear safety as responses to risks are part of a traditional, albeit specific, industrial relations dynamic.

In fact, trade union practices differentiate between two types of problem: what can be controlled on the job in the context of the operation of the workshops, as close as possible to the way work is done; and what concerns the types of processes used, which is the responsibility of industrialists, except in the case of transformations affecting employment and work. Therefore, since industrial safety is controlled through safety at work, the potentially destructive characteristics of the processes are not to be considered as such. In this perspective, on-the-job control of safety involves defending what already exists, employment and working conditions, and any policy of modifying installations, which results in a significant reduction in the workforce, is opposed, both because it massively eliminates jobs and because it removes the workers' capacity for control.

### 2.1 Controlling on the job

In the 1970s and 1980s, technological changes, marked by the increasing automation of installations, greatly modified the configuration of processes. On the one hand, the work became increasingly concentrated in centralized control rooms, even if there were still rounds in the installations; on the other hand, the evolution of classifications pushed all employees towards the coefficients and statuses of supervisors, without holding hierarchical functions. These two characteristics have not significantly shifted the relationship of these employees, even if they have been "promoted", to management, whether industrial or managerial. In this sense, as they themselves generally declare, workers are - still - workers.

It is true that automation has led to an increase in the level of training, both at the time of hiring and throughout one's career, and to a work practice centered on digital (or electro-mechanical) control. Nevertheless, in the chemical industry, this evolution has not abolished a kind of "worker control", "on the job", allowing the workers of a workshop to assume the decisive task of operating very demanding installations in terms of continuity. Highly sensitive technologies are globally mastered, but they constantly give rise to unforeseen events, a seemingly trivial problem, but whose stakes in terms of risks are different from those of "classic" industries. A breakdown or malfunction may not simply lead to the shutdown of the installations: it may lead to a runaway reaction and, therefore, to a catastrophe.

Paradoxically, union practices turn out to be relatively classic. They "make do" with the incidents, only some of which give rise to strong demands. Thus, in chemical companies, the daily leaks from hundreds of kilometers of pipes and thousands of fittings or flanges are dealt with on an ad hoc basis, for example by "throwing" ammonia to make the chlorine smoke, and employees are often led to disregard safety rules. Similarly, in a given plant, the majority of employees and some trade unionists can tolerate a de facto leak of nitrogen oxide (NO<sub>x</sub>, a very dangerous gas) in a chamber for seven weeks, until the shutdown normally scheduled

for maintenance of the installation takes place. Only some trade unions use the register of serious and imminent dangers (a document formalizing a risky situation), and not necessarily in all plants. The right of withdrawal, which allows employees to refuse to work in certain circumstances, is only used very, very exceptionally, if at all. Sometimes, a staff representative with a strong personality imposes the shutdown of a workshop, but this is dependent on the presence of personalities and, therefore, on circumstances that cannot be generalized.

Pour expliquer cette démarche, on peut le cas échéant évoquer la pression patronale et les rétorsions possibles, mais cette explication demeure en elle-même insuffisante, au moins pour les grosses usines, dans la mesure où les syndicalistes pourraient solliciter les procédures internes, le droit, les administrations chargées de la sécurité, ou encore les élus locaux et l'opinion publique. S'il n'en est pas ainsi, c'est que d'une certaine manière, la question des installations industrielles, de leur marche et de leurs dysfonctionnements est un problème d'un autre type que celui de la reproduction et de l'entretien de la force de travail. Il s'agit, non pas d'une sorte de connivence des syndicalistes avec les industriels, mais plutôt d'une manifestation de l'appropriation, la possession d'une certaine façon, des moyens de travail par les ouvriers.

Ceci explique que les revendications concrètes sur la sécurité industrielle / sûreté nucléaire soient irrégulières.

## **2.2 Claiming on the basis of events**

Even if they are opposed, automation and centralized process control have, according to the trade unionists, increased safety and reduced the number of accidents at work due, for example, to valve manipulation. This number is not as low as the official statistics would have us believe, but the decrease is undeniable. This ability of technology to limit dangerous situations does not, however, alter the idea that on-the-job inspection is, together with maintenance of the installations, the key to safety.

The main characteristic of trade union demands on safety is that they are paradoxical: the more they are made public, the more they feed the criticism of associations; the more they sound the alarm, the more they draw attention to industrial dangers and, if necessary, fuel opposition to a productive activity. As a result, these claims rarely leave the factory or the company and they are all the more circumstantial and cyclical (elections, drop in the number of employees or incidents/accidents). When it is a question of electing, by direct suffrage, "workers' safety delegates", as was the case until 1992 in a former "poudrerie" (military powder factory) in Toulouse, or "miners' delegates" in the extraction of natural gas (Lacq), safety is at the center of the campaigns. Even in establishments subject to more traditional regulations, every professional election is a time to remind people of the importance of safety, and this reminder is not a simple clause of style. However, if the safety body does not characterize an influential relationship between organizations, it may not be a major issue. It regularly happens that the CHSCT is left to, or even proposed to, another organization than the one occupying the position of works council secretary, and the militants designated as members of the CHSCT are rarely the most visible. In this sense, the CHSCT is not considered as a political institution by the trade unionism.

Apart from these strong moments, the claims on safety are essentially linked to two types of events. One of these events is a downsizing measure, either net or caused by the use of subcontractors to outsource an activity previously carried out by factory staff. In this case,

and in the particular conditions of high-risk establishments, safety appears, more than elsewhere, to be a lever for putting pressure on management. This is frequently illustrated not only by the abolition or progressive subcontracting of specialized firemen's jobs in chemical plants, but also by the subcontracting of maintenance. The questioning of subcontracting is also that of the lesser capacity of "non-status" employees to control their activity, especially in the conditions of cascade subcontracting, even if the latter is to be institutionalized in inter-company CHSCTs.

The other event is the occurrence of an accident or incident, in the plant or in the group or elsewhere, especially in cases of high severity, such as the La Mède refinery disaster (1992) or that of the AZF plant. These incidents or accidents were the subject of mobilizing leaflets, denouncing the employer's policy and its "inadequacies", and sometimes of a walkout action, but not beyond. More generally, the intervention of a safety representative or a CHSCT secretary is limited to the workshop and is only rarely centralized by the union. Insofar as trade unionism makes on-the-job control the basis of safety, this questioning refers above all to maintenance defects (especially in the nuclear sector), to the lack of training, but not to the organization or the processes used, i.e. to the most political aspect of production.

Thus, a distinction must be made between two types of incidents/accidents, depending on whether they are human or material, with trade unionism closely monitoring the former, and closely monitoring the latter, even if it means keeping to official indicators. The question of nuclear safety, which is the responsibility of the joint production committees of EDF and not of the CHSCTs, which until a law of June 2006 were confined to safety at work, is limited to an examination of these indicators in the annual safety report, without this discussion being fleshed out. Moreover, in the chemical industry, no steps have been taken to ensure that a department complies with the obligation to report certain industrial incidents to the DRIRE. One could certainly qualify this assertion by multiplying the observations: for example, some CGT unions group together around medias display of events concerning the operation of nuclear power plants, playing, as a union delegate from another plant put it. Nevertheless, as a general rule, this administrative declaration is not a union concern, especially in the chemical industry.

From this point of view, because of their localized and circumstantial character, because of the on-the-job control exercised by the workers, industrial relations on industrial safety are neither really cooperative, not creating a (con)fusion of roles, nor really conflictual, not producing permanent mobilization.

### **CONCLUSION: TWO ROLES?**

The theme of industrial risk and, more generally, of so-called sustainable development appears to reveal the systemic and non-systemic conflicts in which trade unionism is "caught". The confrontation of the latter with the new contestations carrying a criticism of the technological risk could be considered as a key of evolution. At this stage, there is no way of knowing whether alliances will be formed between trade unions and industrialists (as was the case, on occasion, after the AZF disaster), without eliminating the traditional problems of maintenance and reproduction of the workforce; or whether an alliance will be formed between the "old" and the "new" protest movements. We can affirm that "political constellations" (Habermas, 2000) are being constructed, partly coherent, partly competing.

Therefore, in the hypothesis that conflicts between non-systemic forces are likely to spread, it is necessary to theorize this type of social relationship, as well as the one that is established between trade unionists and "industrialists", who will be distinguished from "bosses". Inversely, if an overcoming of the non-systemic conflicts is emerging, renewing the old and the new movements of contestation by bringing them together, it remains to conceptualize the historical significance of this overcoming.

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