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## **Stakeholders' Influence on French Unions' CSR Strategies**

### **Abstract**

Labor unions are key stakeholders in the field of corporate social responsibility but researchers have paid surprisingly little attention to their CSR strategies. This article extends stakeholder theory by treating unions as having stakeholders that influence their CSR strategies. Drawing on qualitative data from a longitudinal study on selected unions in France between 2006 and 2013, this paper analyzes the underlying reasons for the differences in their approaches. It finds connections between the unions' CSR strategy, and the perception of and cooperation with stakeholders.

### **Keywords**

Corporate social responsibility, unions, France, stakeholders, government, NGOs.

## Introduction <sup>1</sup>

Corporate social responsibility (CSR), i.e. the integration of social and environmental challenges in companies' strategies and management practices, has become a major issue in management research and public debate. To respond to current or future expectations of stakeholders, companies must invent and implement more responsible strategies, business models, management practices and rules of governance. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the impact of CSR strategies on trade unions (Preuss et al., 2006), and to unions' strategies in this field. Unions are major stakeholders because they both directly affect and are affected by the changes in companies' strategies and management practices. They evidently play a role as external stakeholders and may thus exert pressure on individual companies or influence the broader political debate and even legislation. Moreover, in continental Europe, unions are involved in the decision-making process via mandatory information and consultation procedures related to social and economic aspects (Hall, 2005), and via co-determination procedures in countries such as Germany (Weiss, 2004). Depending on their perceptions of CSR and their strategies, unions may thus be either a driver for or an obstacle to the development of CSR, be it at the national, at the sectoral or at the company level, and consequently offer an interesting field of research.

Although the development of international standards and the activities of international players has homogenized debates and practices in CSR, national differences remain very strong in this area (Matten & Moon, 2008; Berthoin Antal & Sobczak, 2007, 2013). The legal, cultural, economic and social aspects of contexts shape the way the relations between business and society are perceived and the way companies' responsibilities are defined. It is therefore fruitful to look at the question of how unions formulate their CSR policy in their national context. This contribution focuses on the

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example of France and draws on data generated in a longitudinal qualitative study of selected unions. It extends our presentation of the variation in French unions' perceptions of CSR and related strategies (Sobczak & Havard, 2013) by analyzing the underlying reasons for the differences in these unions' CSR approaches.

In France, much more than in other countries, the role of central government, and to a lesser extent of regional governments, has been crucial to the development of CSR practices within companies, and has drawn civil society into this debate (Berthoin Antal & Sobczak, 2007). Over three decades ago it was the first country to mandate the preparation of corporate social reports with an extensive list of indicators, and it also required management to discuss the report with the works' council and to document their response (Rey 1980). In 2001, France adopted legislation on mandatory CSR reporting for companies listed on the stock market (Delbard, 2008) thus creating a strong incentive for the largest companies to develop responsible business practices that they can highlight in their annual publications. Ten years later (2011), this legislation was extended to all companies with more than 5,000 employees, and from 2013 on it also covers those with more than 500 employees. Moreover, the government has launched various stakeholder consultation processes in sustainable development and CSR to reach consensus about the social and environmental challenges within the country and to define common strategies to face these challenges (Stanziola, 2008; Whiteside et al., 2010). These processes have pushed the various societal actors to invest in acquiring knowledge in these areas and to formulate clear policy statements in order to be able to influence national legislation or strategies.

In a similar vein, regional governments in France have developed several initiatives to encourage and support companies in the definition and implementation of responsible business practices. Some regional governments integrate social and environmental criteria into their public purchasing

policies, creating an advantage for companies that develop responsible business practices (Streurer et al., 2007). Certain regional governments have also created regional platforms for stakeholder dialogues that are particularly useful for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that have difficulty bringing together external stakeholders (Sobczak & Cam, 2012).

This specific context has inevitably influenced the CSR strategies and activities of French unions. Indeed, through mandatory CSR reporting French unions have gained access to considerable social and environmental information allowing them to identify both responsible and less responsible practices within companies. Further, the quality of social dialogue is one of the criteria companies must report on, which may favor the negotiation of agreements on CSR. Finally, unions, like other stakeholders, are frequently invited by national and regional governments to take part in consultations on CSR. While unions are free to develop critical approaches toward the CSR concept during these consultations, it is difficult for them to refuse to attend these consultations given the strong role of governments in France.

In France, several unions co-exist and increasingly compete for members and for recognition by public authorities. Since the 1960s, five French unions have been considered as representative at the national level, which means that they are allowed to take part in collective bargaining and national consultation processes: CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail), CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail), CGT-FO (Force Ouvrière), CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens) and CFE-CGC (Confédération Générale des Cadres). Other unions represent the industry or company level. In 2008, the French legislature introduced important changes to union representativeness rules: representativeness is now based on the results of workplace elections. Although the five unions have maintained their representativeness at the national level (Andolfatto & Labbé, 2012), this new rule has created pressure on the smallest unions and has

fueled competition among the unions, particularly regarding CSR. While some unions consider CSR as an opportunity to change companies' behavior and play a more important role in their governance, others remain skeptical and see CSR as a marketing tool that companies use to avoid real change in their management practices.

To analyze the reasons underlying the strategies and activities French unions develop in the area of CSR, this article draws on and extends stakeholder theory. While this theory is usually used to understand companies' strategies and practices, we apply it to other kinds of organizations to better grasp the interactions between organizations and other actors. This article therefore seeks to make two kinds of contributions to the field: (a) to shed light on the influence of stakeholders on French unions' CSR strategies and activities, and (b) to illustrate the value of taking a less corporate-centered view of stakeholder theory by showing its fruitful application to unions and industrial relations.

The remainder of the article is organized in five sections. Firstly, we briefly describe French unions' CSR strategies. Secondly, we explain how the use of stakeholder theory can contribute to a better understanding of unions' strategies and activities in the field of CSR. In the third section, we detail our methodology based on three series of interviews with French union leaders on their perceptions of CSR and their activities in this area. In the fourth section, we present and discuss the results of our study related to stakeholders' influence on unions' CSR strategies. The conclusion summarizes the contributions and limitations of this article and outlines avenues of future research.

### **French Unions' CSR strategies**

An exploratory study showed that the strategies the five major French unions have developed in the

field of CSR differ quite significantly along several dimensions (Sobczak & Havard, 2014). Table 1 presents how the five unions perceive CSR, the human resources they dedicate to CSR, and the CSR-related communication and training activities they pursue.

*Table 1: French unions' perceptions and activities in CSR*

| <b>Unions</b>  | <b>Perception of CSR</b>  | <b>CSR teams</b>                          | <b>Communication on CSR</b>                              | <b>Training activities related to CSR</b> |
|----------------|---|---|--|---|
| <b>CFDT</b>    | CSR is the application of the sustainable development concept at the company level – integrated vision of CSR | 4 full-time employees                     | Debates, internal circulars                              | Training sessions and seminars since 2005 |
| <b>CFTC</b>    | The success of a company depends on its stakeholders – integrated vision of CSR                               | 2 part-time employees                     | Debates, communication on CSR in the supply chain        | Training sessions                         |
| <b>CGT</b>     | Distinguishes CSR and sustainable development - integrated vision of CSR                                      | 4 part-time employees and a working group | Website, debates, creation of a network                  | Training sessions                         |
| <b>CFE-CGC</b> | CSR corresponds to the social pillar within the sustainable development concept – competing vision of CSR     | 1.5 full-time employees                   | Wants to create a network, sustainable development guide | Expected training sessions for 2013       |
| <b>CGT-FO</b>  | Skeptical vision, CSR is only a communication strategy for firms, and weakens worker's interests              | 1 employee                                | Internal circular  | No training                               |

To describe the strategies these French unions develop in the field of CSR, we draw on the Reactive-Defensive-Accommodative-Proactive (RDAP) scale that Clarkson developed for companies, which distinguishes between reactive, defensive, accommodative and proactive strategies towards CSR (Clarkson, 1995:109). Unions, like companies, may have different perceptions of CSR, they must also define their position on the topic and communicate their strategy for addressing it. This is particularly true in the French context, where unions are frequently consulted by the government on possible legislation related to CSR and by companies on initiatives in the field of diversity

management, training or restructuring. Unions must therefore decide whether and to what extent to support or to challenge the principles of CSR and their implementation. Table 2 summarizes the CSR strategies of the five major French unions. Our research has revealed that although the strategies of the five French unions changed little during the period under study (Sobczak & Havard, 2006 and 2013), they have been expressed increasingly explicitly in union publications. For example, CGT-FO published an overview about the union's position on CSR (Le Pen, 2011), and disseminated a circular on the subject (Pavageau, 2012); CGT (2011) produced a report on Human Sustainable Development; CFTC (2011) published a manifest on the social footprint; CFE-CGC (2011a) drafted a charter on sustainable development in 2011; and CFDT asked a consultant to analyze CSR reporting and disseminated the study largely (Chabrol O. and Cosette (2012)). Only in one case, namely the CGT-FO, did the CSR strategy shift from a reactive one to a defensive one in 2012-2013. Over the period, the four other unions tried to implement and their positions toward CSR.

*Table 2: French unions' CSR strategies based on the RDAP-scale (Clarkson, 1995)*

| <b>Rating</b> | <b>Posture or strategy</b>        | <b>Performance</b>               | <b>French unions</b> |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reactive      | Deny responsibility               | Doing less than required         | CGT-FO (2006-2011)   |
| Defensive     | Admit responsibility but fight it | Doing the least that is required | CGT-FO (2012-2013)   |
| Accommodative | Accept responsibility             | Doing all that is required       | CFTC, CFE-CGC        |
| Proactive     | Anticipate responsibility         | Doing more than is required      | CFDT, CGT            |

It is interesting to note that French unions' CSR strategies do not reflect the traditional demarcation line opposing unions committed to collective bargaining (CFDT, CFTC, CFE-CGC) and those more



reluctant to sign collective agreements (CGT and CGT-FO) (Pernot, 2005). In particular, CGT, which was traditionally seen as radical and opposed to negotiations with employers (Le Queux & Sainsaulieu, 2010), has adopted a proactive CSR strategy.

### **Analyzing Unions' CSR Strategies from the Stakeholder Theory Perspective**

Stakeholder theory originated as an alternative theory of the firm, arguing that managers should be responsible not only towards shareholders but to all stakeholders, i.e. all individuals or groups that affect the companies' activities and/or are affected by them (Freeman, 1984). Companies are understood as being part of a political-economic system of stakeholders that interact and influence management practices. Each stakeholder tries to optimize and protect its interests (Frooman, 1999; Savage et al., 1991). Management research based on stakeholder theory can clarify how different stakeholders influence companies' decisions and strategies (Frooman, 1999; Frooman & Murrell, 2005; Elms et al., 2010), and how companies can manage the relations with their stakeholders (Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001; Savage et al. 1991; Rowley, 1997; Burchell & Cook, 2013).

Research has underlined the merits of distinguishing different categories of stakeholders to allow managers to decide which stakeholders they should give priority to when defining their strategies and activities. The best known distinction opposes primary or contractual stakeholders (such as shareholders, employees, clients and suppliers), and secondary stakeholders (such as NGOs, public authorities, media and competitors) (Carroll, 1989; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Beyond this formal distinction, several authors suggest that managers should take the specific characteristics of each stakeholder group into account. Savage et al. (1991) contend that managers should assess each stakeholder's potential to threaten and to cooperate with the company in order to determine the kind of relations the company may develop with it. Mitchell et al. (1997) suggest that each stakeholder group's power of influence be evaluated, along with its degree of legitimacy and the urgency of its

claim on the company. Girard and Sobczak (2012) add a new dimension by underlining that stakeholders' influence on companies' CSR strategies depends not only on the way the company perceives its stakeholders, but also on the stakeholders' strategies and in particular on their commitment towards the company and towards the principles of CSR. Indeed, a stakeholder that is not committed to the company or to the CSR concept is less likely to influence the company's CSR strategy, even if the company perceives it as powerful and legitimate. Table 3 summarizes the factors that may explain the impact of different stakeholder groups on companies' CSR strategies.

*Table 3: Factors explaining stakeholders' impact on companies' CSR strategies*

| <b>Cooperation with stakeholders</b>   | <b>Stakeholder attributes</b>   | <b>Stakeholder commitment</b>   |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stakeholders' potential to cooperate with the company (Savage et al., 1991)</li> <li>- Contractual relationship with the company (Carroll, 1989)</li> <li>- Stakeholders' commitment to the company (Girard &amp; Sobczak, 2012)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stakeholders' power of influence (Mitchell et al., 1997) / potential threat to the company (Savage et al., 1991)</li> <li>- Degree of legitimacy/urgency of stakeholders' claim (Mitchell et al., 1997)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stakeholders' commitment to CSR principles (Girard &amp; Sobczak, 2013)</li> </ul> |

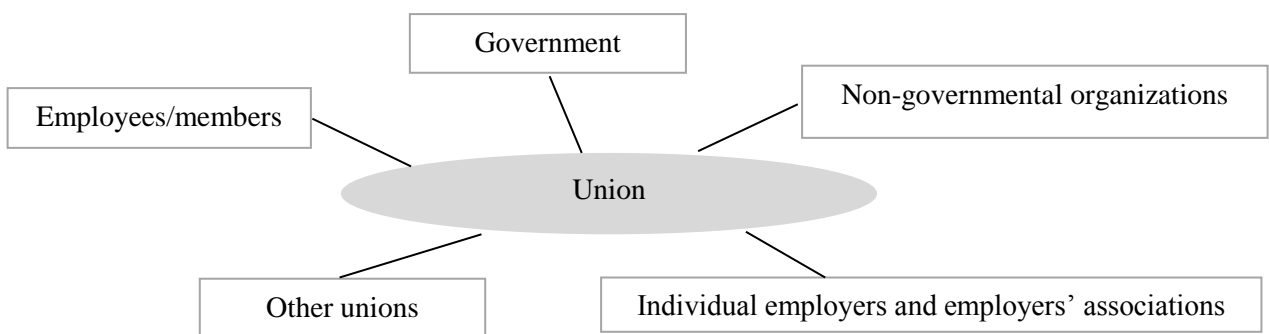
Even if not all companies involve unions in their stakeholder dialogue on their CSR strategy, there is little doubt that unions are relevant stakeholders for companies (Dawkins, 2010), particularly in the French context, where they remain powerful despite a low rate of unionization (Wolff, 2008). It would be naïve and dangerous to consider that the integration of economic, social and environmental challenges could be handled by companies alone. The development and implementation of more responsible business models and management practices is a concern for all kinds of organizations, leading some to prefer the broader terms "social responsibility" or even "global responsibility" to the term "CSR" (Berthoin Antal & Sobczak, 2004). We therefore propose to consider unions as focal organizations that must develop CSR strategies and activities while

managing stakeholder relations.

Several researchers have indeed shown that the principles of stakeholder theory developed for companies (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008; Jamali, 2008) may be transposed to other kinds of organizations (Knox & Gruar, 2007; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Arenas et al., 2009). We build on this work and take what we call a multi-focal approach to stakeholder theory in order to do justice to the fact that unions' strategies towards CSR are necessarily influenced by and influence other actors. The analysis of the relations each French union develops with other stakeholders and how they perceive the attributes of each stakeholder group may thus contribute to a better understanding of the different strategies and activities unions develop in the field of CSR.

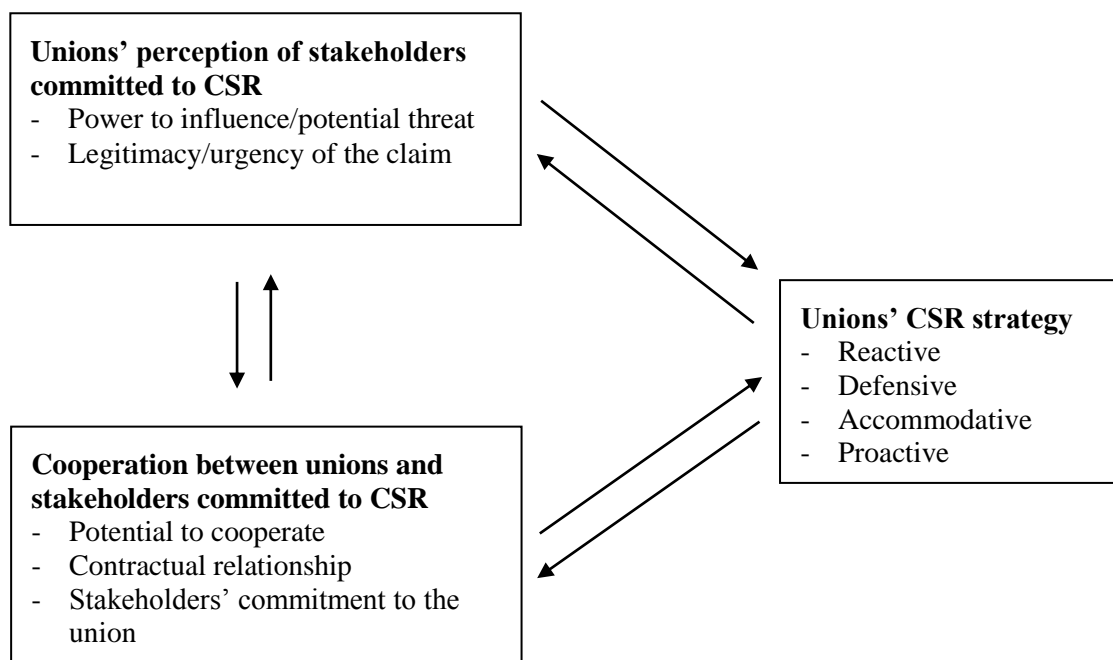
To analyze stakeholders' impact on the CSR strategies of the five major unions in France, we first identify unions' main stakeholders. According to the most common definition of stakeholders, unions' stakeholders are all groups or individuals that can affect and/or are affected by the attainment of the unions' objectives (Freeman, 1984). This includes union members, individual employers and their associations, public authorities, other unions, and, more specific to the CSR context, NGOs (figure 1). Consequently, unions' stakeholders are mostly identical to those of companies.

*Figure 1: Unions' main stakeholders*



Given that only stakeholders committed to CSR may have a real impact on unions' CSR strategies, we concentrate on this category. The second step thus consists of analyzing how each of the five unions perceives the stakeholder groups committed to CSR and what kind of cooperation it establishes with them. The aim is to create a link between these elements and the CSR strategy developed by the union. For example, unions with a proactive CSR strategy may perceive a higher potential to cooperate among stakeholders that are committed to CSR than unions that have a reactive or defensive strategy. In a similar vein, unions with a reactive approach to CSR may not perceive the legitimacy of stakeholders defending CSR-related claims. Figure 2 summarizes our theoretical framework.

*Figure 2: Impact of unions' perception of and relations with stakeholders on their CSR strategies*



### **Methodology to Analyze Stakeholders' Impact on Unions' CSR Strategies**

To understand the impacts of stakeholders on unions' CSR strategy, we used data obtained in our first exploratory study and reinterpreted specific data from a grounded perspective. Grounded theory is an appropriate method to explain interesting phenomena that are not yet framed by a specific theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Saunders and al., 2009). Consistent with Suddaby's (2006) description of misconceptions on grounded theory, our aim is not to test stakeholder theory to analyze the impact of union's stakeholders on their CSR strategy. Instead, we explore stakeholder theory in light of the data collected in our exploratory study.

In 2006, we launched an exploratory study to understand French unions' positions on CSR, which had not yet been analyzed. We used a qualitative method to collect and analyze data on this new phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2009). We interviewed eight representatives of the main French unions (CGT, CFDT and CGT-FO) at the national level and at the sectoral level (metallurgy, energy, and chemistry) (see Table 4). At the national level, the interviewees were in charge of CSR, sustainable development or economic affairs within their unions. The respondents at the sectoral level had been involved in the negotiation of transnational company agreements on CSR. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and wide ranging open questions were used, covering themes such as perceptions of sustainable development and CSR, internal structures adopted to deal with CSR, activities developed to promote CSR among union members, unions' involvement in the negotiation of collective agreements related to CSR, and relationships with other unions, NGOs and government in the field of CSR. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed. This first exploratory study helped us to identify the positions of the three main French unions toward CSR.

In 2012 and 2013, we undertook a second research phase, with two more waves of data collection (again with a qualitative methodology, Creswell 2013) in order to understand the evolution, if any,

in unions' positions toward CSR, and their relations with other stakeholders. We conducted 8 interviews in 2012 and 6 in 2013, focusing both times on the national level by talking with representatives of the five major French unions considered as representative according to the last union elections and thus invited to take part in the consultation processes organized by the central government (see Tables 4). In this phase we included the smaller unions (CFTC and CFE-CGC) because after the "Environment Grenelle" organized by the French government in 2007, they, too, developed clear positions on CSR.

*Table 4: Overview of interviews with union representatives in 2006, 2012, and 2013*

|              | First exploratory data collecting |                                | Second period of data collecting |               |          |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------|----------|
|              | 2006                              |                                | 2012                             |               | 2013     |
|              | National                          | Sector                         | National                         | Sector        | National |
| CGT          | 1                                 | 2<br>(Energy & Metal industry) | 1                                | 0             | 1        |
| CFDT         | 1                                 | 2<br>(Chemicals & Energy)      | 1                                | 0             | 1        |
| CGT-FO       | 1                                 | 1<br>(Energy)                  | 1                                | 2<br>(Energy) | 1        |
| CFTC         | 0                                 | 0                              | 2                                | 0             | 2        |
| CFE-CGC      | 0                                 | 0                              | 1                                | 0             | 1        |
| <b>Total</b> |                                   | <b>8</b>                       |                                  | <b>8</b>      | <b>6</b> |

In 2012, all the union representatives that we had interviewed in 2006 had changed responsibilities, so our respondents were different from the first sample. But in 2013, the interviewees remained the same as 2012 in all cases except the CFE-CGC (due to internal reorganization). In 2012, all but one of the interviews were conducted face to face (one was a telephone interview), whereas the follow-up interviews in 2013 all were conducted by phone. The interview protocol for 2012 concentrated on unions' definitions of CSR, their positions concerning CSR and sustainable development, their organizational design in the field of CSR, as well as the actions developed to increase awareness of

CSR among members, the training of unionists or the negotiation of CSR-related agreements and the relations with different stakeholders. We also wanted to analyze the possible evolutions of the unions between 2006 and 2012. In 2013, our follow-up interviews aimed first at updating the information on the various actions the unions developed in the field of CSR (information, training, or collective bargaining) and the organization design. We then posed questions about the influence of external stakeholders and the importance of CSR in the unions' strategy. Again, each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed.

In addition to the interviews, we analyzed various CSR-related union publications and position papers, as well as general union publications and websites. We thus gained a broader view of their perceptions of CSR and activities in this field than we could through the interviews conducted with the union representatives in charge of CSR.

Following the rules of qualitative data analysis (Cresswell, 2013), the transcribed interviews from both studies were read several times to form a comprehensive picture of data and to code and recode the data according to the various research steps. We used a template analysis, which combines “a deductive and an inductive approach to qualitative analysis in the sense that codes can be predetermined and then amended or added to as data are collected and analyzed” (Saunders and al., 2009: 505). First, every phase of the analysis was conducted individually by each author. Second, we discussed the ideas and interpretations that emerged. This kind of triangulation putatively increases the credibility of analysis (Patton, 2002). We use quotations from interviews in the main body of the text to make it easier for the reader to evaluate our interpretations.

After each series of interviews, the results were published in French academic or management journals (Sobczak & Havard, 2009; 2013) and the publications were transmitted to the interviewed

unions. This created trust and eased our access to more detailed information with each wave of interviews. We subsequently solicited the interviewees' reactions and tested the reliability of our research (Saunders et al., 2009).

### **Findings: Stakeholders' Impact on Unions' CSR Strategies**

Our study focused on the impact of four external stakeholder groups on the CSR strategies of the five major French unions, i.e. central government, NGOs, individual companies and other unions. In our interviews, the union representatives did not mention employers' associations. Further, the impact of members on unions' strategies was difficult to measure, even if unions portrayed their CSR strategies as resulting from their members' decisions. Gathering this information would have required a quantitative study of the members of different unions. We describe how each of the four stakeholder groups is perceived by the unions and the forms of cooperation developed.

*"Confrontation with other stakeholders will help us evolve our positioning." (CFDT, 2013)*

#### ***Impact of the Central Government on Unions' CSR Strategies***

In recent years, the French government has developed two kinds of CSR promotion initiatives that clearly influence unions' CSR strategies. One is legislative, the other is procedural.

(1) Since 2001, companies listed on the French stock market must integrate a list of social and environmental indicators in their annual report to shareholders, which is largely available to internal stakeholders and the general public (Delbard, 2008). In 2012, the French government decided to progressively extend this obligation to companies that are not listed on the stock market, but have a minimum of 500 employees. This legislation encourages managers to think about companies' social and environmental impacts and to develop performance indicators to measure progress in these areas. This reporting requirement guarantees the French trade unions and workers' representatives extensive information about companies' CSR strategies, practices and performances, thus enabling



unions to control companies and develop CSR activities.

*"The best tool to launch societal dialogue or dialogue with union teams on subjects other than the perimeter of the classic social dialogue is certainly regular reporting, which accounts for the social and environmental objectives the business has set (...) CGT, CFDT, are quite convinced of the value of this." (CFDT, 2012)*

*"The question of the particular decree on transparency of business operations is an element that we view as also one of mobilization because as soon as there are things that are in the law and that there are obligations for businesses, it's easier for us to give our militants the necessary information so that they can be actors in the company." (CGT, 2012)*

(2) Since 2007, the French government has organized various stakeholder consultations on CSR. The landmark national consultation process called "Grenelle de l'Environnement" brought together representatives from the national and the regional governments, and from businesses, unions and NGOs to jointly analyze the major environmental challenges and to define future policies in this area (Stanziola Vieira & Bétaille, 2008). Over a period of three months in 2007, these stakeholders met in six working groups on subjects such as climate change, biodiversity, sustainable production and consumption, green jobs and competitiveness. Each working group was composed of 40 members, i.e., 8 for each stakeholder group. Their task was to propose measures in favor of sustainable development and to identify obstacles to their implementation. Despite much criticism about insufficient translation of the conclusions from this consultation process into legally binding regulations, there is a broad consensus among experts on the positive impact of this stakeholder dialogue on the level of awareness of environmental challenges among all involved actors, and on the potential for innovation in this field (Whiteside et al., 2010). This consensus is shared by the respondents in our interviews:

*"The event led us to clarify our proposals, work on its content etc. including working on others' proposals, so it was a time of accelerating our reflection and related practice." (CGT, 2012)*

*"The fact that governance is at 5 has completely changed the culture of the debate very quickly, and for one of the rare times, the common good prevailed over categorical claims. (...) We did not reach a consensus but fabricated reality collectively. And from this viewpoint it was very interesting." (CFTC, 2012b)*

*"Le Grenelle was a catalyst because we had to take a stand, so it let us, in a sense, demonstrate that this theme was one on which unions should take a position and not just say 'okay, it's good.'" (CFE-CGC, 2012b)*

*"The Grenelle de l'Environnement represents an advance because a few commitments were made. Very difficult to implement after that because the realization process is very complicated." (CGT, 2013)*

Similar consultation processes were organized in recent years on a smaller scale, leading in 2013 to the creation of a multi-stakeholder CSR platform at the prime-ministerial level. These consultations have encouraged cooperation between central government, unions and the other stakeholders, in particular companies and NGOs.

*"Le Grenelle was undoubtedly a real federating event, particularly on links and relations that we have with a whole series of associations, it's a federating force, that's very very clear." (CGT, 2012)*

*"It notably let unions and NGOs see their areas of convergence and divergence, a bit according to their positioning." (CFE-CGC, 2012b)*

They are raising the level of awareness of CSR among the unions and pushing unions to allocate human resources to these consultation bodies and to defend their positions in discussions with other stakeholders.

*"At the time of Grenelle, there weren't enough hands and brains, so we attracted people, who after being involved kept defending these interests." (CFDT, 2012)*

All five unions recognize the power of the central government and its legitimacy to develop activities in the field of CSR and expect the government to do more to encourage and guarantee responsible business practices. At first glance, there seems to be no connection between unions' perception of the central government and their CSR strategy. However, in-depth analysis of the interviews shows that CGT-FO, the union with a reactive and presently defensive CSR strategy, highlights the legitimacy of the central government to address social and environmental challenges more than the other unions do. This union thinks the government should be the only actor to deal with these issues via its legislation, while the other unions consider the government as one actor among others and acknowledge their responsibility for promoting CSR principles.

*"We have a fairly strong concept of the social republic. Maybe a little too legalistic, I really don't know, but anyway it suits us fine that there is a legal framework that guarantees equal treatment over the whole territory, it's not the company head who decides alone in a corner, who will start negotiations on a given subject, the law requires him to do this, so he has to do it whether he wants to or not" (CGT-FO, 2012a).*

CFTC and CFE-CGC, the two unions that adopted the accommodative CSR strategy, recognized

the importance of participating in the consultation processes organized by the government, but sometimes found it difficult to find human resources to participate in these consultations. They explain that the number of meetings and working groups set up by the central government has strained their limited resources.

*"For us it was a real problem during Grenelle (...) It was a monstrous task of solicitation, I don't know how many meetings, anyway we couldn't follow everything anymore, so we appealed to the people to choose" (CFE-CGC, 2012b)*

CFTC and CFE-CGC admit that if they attend these consultation processes, it is because of the power of the central government and their willingness to try to influence decisions that will have a major impact on companies, along with their fear of being excluded from future consultations on CSR or other subjects. In contrast CFDT and CGT clearly welcome these consultations and actively take part in them.

The differences among the five unions appear more clearly in their degree of cooperation with central government in the field of CSR. CFDT, the union with the most proactive CSR strategy, clearly affirms its commitment to the CSR consultation processes organized by the government. CFDT highlights its efforts to prepare for meetings in order to make the debate more efficient and encourage the adoption of effective decisions. This is also true for CGT, the other union that favors a proactive CSR strategy. Both unions also use common think tanks with NGOs to prepare for the consultation processes organized by the central government and to support the government's commitment to CSR, for example regarding the extension of the legislation on mandatory CSR reporting to companies that are not listed on the stock market. In 2012 and 2013, CFTC and CFE-CGC, the two unions pursuing an accommodative strategy, tried to promote specific projects related to CSR that could differentiate them from the government's perspective. CFTC developed the concept of "social footprint," aimed at showing the consumer the social and environmental impacts of products throughout the whole supply chain. CFE-CGC asked the government to start negotiations to put CSR on the work council's agenda.

*"For two years, through public powers, we have demanded negotiations to put sustainable development and hence its social component CSR at the heart of social dialogue with bodies that represent the personnel." (CFE-CGC, 2013).*

These two unions perceive central government as an actor that can support their projects in the field of CSR.

### ***Impact of NGOs on Unions' CSR Strategies***

While most NGOs concentrate on their own activities or try to lobby the government, an increasing number of NGOs aim to influence the behavior of companies and thus promote the principles of CSR (Doh & Guay, 2006; Burchell & Cook, 2013). The perception of NGOs and of the potential to cooperate with NGOs varies widely among the five major French unions.

In our interviews, representatives from all five unions implicitly or explicitly recognized the power of NGOs and consider them a potential threat to unions. Often, NGOs are more effective than unions at engaging the media and attracting the young generation to join them. Indeed, NGOs are given the most weight in the consultation processes organized by the government. NGOs may thus be viewed as competitors of unions.

*"In sustainable development, NGOs are rising in power, so we can't just pretend that they don't exist" (CFE-CGC, 2013)*

There seems to be no specific link between the fact that the unions recognize the power of NGOs and their CSR strategy. On the contrary, there is a clear link between the perceived legitimacy of NGOs and unions' CSR strategy. CFDT and CGT, unions with a proactive CSR strategy, but also CFTC and CFE-CGC, explicitly recognize the legitimacy of the most significant NGOs and their expertise, not only in environmental areas but also in social domains that go beyond employment and working conditions. These unions are ready to ask relevant NGOs to denounce companies' irresponsible practices.

*"There are a number of reliable NGOs, social-Christian networks are fairly well installed, but beyond all the possible and reliable networks" (CFTC, 2012a)*

Conversely, CGT-FO, which developed a reactive followed by a defensive CSR strategy, openly questions the legitimacy of NGOs. CGT-FO union denies NGOs' expertise and legitimacy on social issues. For this union, NGO leaders often only represent themselves, while unions communicate on behalf of their membership and appoint their leaders and define their strategies according to a transparent process. These major differences justify, according to CGT-FO, excluding NGOs from the traditional bilateral social dialogue between employers and unions.

*"Often, the NGOs represent only themselves (...) and go about expressing themselves on the so-called social pillar (...) it causes great damage because you have associations that allow themselves to express their ideas in fields that are clearly not their own. Not to mention that we can ask the question that the unions have asked us since 2008, that of the representativeness of these associations" (CGT-FO, 2012a)*

These differences among the five unions also appear when it comes to cooperation with NGOs. CGT-FO refuses to cooperate with NGOs, believing that they have different priorities.

Conversely, CFDT and CGT, which favor proactive CSR strategies, have developed close cooperation with NGO's on environmental issues for several years. CFDT has established a partnership with the environmental NGO France Nature Environment (FNE). CFDT maintains that this NGO has a reformist approach similar to its own. Both organizations consider that it is useful to make compromises and prefer to sign agreements allowing them to achieve most of their aims rather than expect the other party to accept all their priorities. Moreover, FNE has a huge number of members, which distinguishes it from other NGOs that are mainly supported by donors. For the moment, the partnership mainly concerns the national cross-industry level, but some projects have also emerged at the sector or the regional level. CGT does not want to conclude a partnership with a specific NGO. It prefers to discuss with all NGOs and to launch concrete projects with those that are interested.

*"With NGOs, yes, the fact of having concrete actions with them effectively changes and anchors a things with NGOs a little bit more than before." (CGT, 2013)*

Most of these contacts emerge in the Citizens' Forum on CSR, which CGT and CFDT created with

several French NGOs in 2004.

*"We discuss timely topics, we try to understand each other, to bring our points of view closer together, even to take a common position, or write things in common, that's essentially at the national level." (CFDT, 2012)*

*"We work in the Citizens' Forum and in other places to try to clarify our concepts." (CGT, 2012)*

Similarly, CFTC cooperates with several NGOs, particularly on projects in emerging countries. To monitor compliance with social norms within global supply chains, CFTC cooperates with NGOs that operate internationally.

*"We have found a favorable echo in the Secours Catholique and its international arm Caritas, of course, which is actually a very very very big sounding board on the global scene" (CFTC, 2012a)*

These three unions underline the common culture between unions and NGOs and the fact that many of their members are also involved in NGOs. They consider cooperation with NGOs as a way to access expertise, particularly on environmental issues, and sometimes as an opportunity to renew their image or even to recruit new members.

CFE-CGC, the other union with an accommodative CSR strategy, had started to develop partnerships with NGOs at the beginning of 2000s, but did not continue until 2012, because they perceived NGOs as primarily interested in environmental protection. Now, however, CFE-CGC is willing to dialogue with NGOs in public forums and to consult them when producing a guide on sustainable development.

*"We have established partnerships with Amnesty International, with the Guilde Européenne du Raid in the early 2000s, but maybe we didn't cultivate them enough (...) we intend to reactivate them with nongovernmental organizations, particularly environmental ones" (CFE-CGC, 2013).*

There is thus a clear link among unions' perception of NGOs, the kind of cooperation they develop, if any, and unions' CSR strategies. Unions that adopt a proactive CSR strategy perceive NGOs positively and have developed longstanding close cooperation with them, while the union that adopted a reactive and presently a defensive CSR strategy has a critical approach to NGOs and refuses to cooperate with them. However, the link is less evident for the two unions that favor an

accommodative approach: they developed later or less cooperation with NGOs.

### *Impact of Individual Companies on Unions' CSR Strategies*

The commitment of individual companies to CSR principles evidently varies considerably. According to Clarkson's scale (1995), which we have adapted for unions, companies' CSR strategies may be reactive, defensive, accommodative or proactive. Companies that adopt reactive or defensive CSR strategies may have an indirect impact on unions' strategies, pushing them either to distrust the CSR concept or to adopt a reactive strategy. By contrast, more proactive unions may push companies to change their strategies and practices. We focus mainly on unions' perceptions of and relations with companies adopting proactive CSR strategies, in particular those that decide to negotiate collective agreements on CSR.

CGT-FO, which adopted a reactive and later a defensive CSR strategy, has a very negative perception of companies' CSR activities. This union argues that the CSR concept is used to weaken the role of unions, because it replaces the traditional bilateral dialogue between employers and workers' representatives by a multi-stakeholder dialogue where unions are one among many actors. Further, investment in improving the environmental performance of companies is seen as not leading to wage increases or better conditions for workers.

*"When you see an ad for Total [the oil and gas multinational company] it's so nice, no one's more environment friendly than Total, on TV it can really make you cry, it's so magnificent. So obviously in the marketing plan at the Total head office, yes there are beautiful sheets of glossy recycled, recyclable paper. Yet when you go visit a Total refinery, in France, the working conditions and standards for employees tell a very different story!" (CGT-FO, 2012a)*

The four other French unions that adopt proactive or accommodative CSR strategies perceive companies and their CSR activities more positively. This perception is based on the idea that is possible to create management practices that allow companies to reinforce their economic, social and environmental performance simultaneously. Unlike CGT, CFTC and CFDT accept that CSR can contribute to business competitiveness.

After understanding these perceptions, it is important to analyze the cooperation between unions and individual companies. Our study shows that CSR has become a subject for social dialogue between French unions and employers. Since the end of the 1990s, some French companies have started to negotiate transnational company agreements on CSR with workers' representatives (Schoemann et al., 2008). These agreements cover only a small number of multinational companies concentrated in certain sectors, while most workers' representatives have largely ignored the CSR concept and its potential impact on union activities (Sobczak & Havard, 2008). During our interviews, each of the five unions reported that they participated in the negotiation of agreements on CSR with companies, at the transnational, national or site level. In general, these negotiations are conducted locally without any intervention from the national unions, which are often unaware of all the initiatives.

*"We have testimonials from teams that are engaged in questions of CSR because they have negotiations planned" (CGT, 2013).*

This explains why even CGT-FO representatives take part in such negotiations and sign agreements, although the union moved from a reactive to a defensive CSR strategy. All unions are also involved in CSR negotiations at the sector level, particularly in the chemical, energy and car industries.

*"It's at the federation level that CSR agreements are followed up, not the national level" (CFTC, 2012a).*

In addition to negotiating such agreements, some French unions have developed common CSR initiatives with individual companies. One example is the CSR think tank ORSE (Observatoire sur la Responsabilité Sociétale des Entreprises [Observer for Corporate Social Responsibility]), which several companies and NGOs as well as three unions created in 2000. Surprisingly, CFE-CGC, a union with an accommodative CSR strategy, was one of the first actors to promote the creation of this think tank. CFDT and CGT, the two unions with a proactive CSR strategy, joined the project immediately. The aims of this think tank are to create a network of stakeholders



committed to CSR, to favor exchange of information among them, and to collect, analyze and disseminate information on CSR. The unions' participation in this think tank allowed them to develop their awareness and their expertise in CSR and to meet individual companies in a context other than that of social dialogue. CFTC and CGT-FO decided not to join the think tank, but instead have closely monitored its studies and often agree to be interviewed for its studies.

Again, there is a clear link between unions' CSR strategies, their perceptions of individual companies, and the forms of cooperation they establish with them. Unions with proactive CSR strategies have a better perception of companies' legitimacy and have established various relations with companies ranging from collective bargaining to the creation of common think tanks. However, even unions with accommodative, defensive or reactive CSR strategies are willing to deal with individual companies. As partners of social dialogue, they necessarily interact with companies, particularly at the sector and site levels. Nevertheless, at least for the union that adopted a reactive followed by a defensive CSR strategy, these relations are far less developed.

### ***Impact of Other Unions on Unions' CSR Strategies***

In the period covered by our study, unions' CSR strategies have changed little, but are affirmed with increasing clarity. Our interviews show that union representatives are aware of the other unions' CSR strategies. CSR-related consultation processes organized by the central government bring unions together and enable them to hear or read their counterparts' positions. Unions also meet in the process of negotiating collective agreements on CSR at the sector or site level, where they learn the priorities of the other unions. Until now, knowledge of the strategies of the other unions has not led the five major unions to adopt a uniform CSR strategy or even to bring their points of view closer together.

*"Each one conveys something in CSR, we do not all say the same thing, if you will. We converge on points because we all seek to have the most clout vis-à-vis businesses on a number of issues,*

*particularly questions of employment and the environment. But at the same time each is defending their own issues." (CGT, 2013)*

On the contrary, the adoption of proactive CSR strategies by CFDT and CGT has lead CGT-FO to entrench its reactive and presently defensive position, and CGT-FO's reactive or defensive position has confirmed CFDT and CGT in their proactive strategy.

*"That's what differentiates us mostly, I think, from the CGT and the CFDT. We do not claim to be co-managers or co-executives, we are a union organization, we know how to stay at our level of responsibility" (CGT-FO, 2012a).*

CFTC and CFE-CGC, the two smallest unions, both of which adopted an accommodative strategy, clearly perceive the power of the bigger unions that have more substantial resources to develop their CSR proactive strategy. The accommodative strategy these small unions pursue can also be partly explained by the context of increased competition that they faced. When the French legislator changed the rules for union representativeness, based on the results of workplace elections, these two unions feared for their survival. To distinguish themselves from the other unions, the smaller unions developed the idea of "social footprint" (CFTC) and created the sustainable development charter (CFE-CGC) to be more marketable to government, employees or other unions.

*"We have successfully demonstrated that if we did not position ourselves, first, our competitors would, and forged alliances, because for example the CFDT formed an alliance with an NGO, there was an agreement, etc. We said, hey, watch it." (CFE-CGC, 2012b)*

*"We at the CFTC have been too accustomed to having ideas that were not bad, which were even good, I think, we discussed them with others, and we saw them [stolen outright] by other organizations. It's quite annoying." (CFTC, 2012a)*

Our interviews show that the French unions that adopt reactive or defensive CSR strategies, and to a lesser extent those that adopt accommodative CSR strategies, have established various forms of cooperation with one another. In 2002, four French unions, i.e. CFDT, CFE-CGC, CFTC and CGT, created a committee on employees' savings to develop a label for socially responsible funds and to encourage union members at the company level to invest in these funds. In 2005, CFDT, CFTC and CGT signed the "Union Charter for Equal Treatment, Non-Discrimination and Diversity". These federative actions illustrate the cooperative attitude French trade unions can develop in the field of

CSR. Further, in 2004, CFDT and CGT joined several NGOs and academics to launch the "Citizens' Forum on CSR," whose aim is to develop common positions and to jointly defend them in discussions with companies or policy makers.

*"The main crucible for exchange for us is the Citizens' Forum. It's a fairly important crucible because we sometimes have exchanges that include debates, there may be a few nuances, even a few divergences sometimes that arise. It's there where we actually delve into a number of subjects" (CGT, 2013).*

Finally, CFE-CGC, CFDT and CGT, together with individual companies and NGOs, have created the CSR think tank ORSE. Among the major French unions, only CGT-FO declined to take part in these initiatives.

There is thus a link between unions' CSR strategies and the kind of cooperation they establish with other unions. French unions adopting proactive CSR strategies, and to a lesser extent those with accommodative CSR strategies, develop various forms of cooperation with other unions. The union with a reactive and presently defensive CSR strategy barely cooperates with other unions regarding CSR. This lack of cooperation may be linked not only to a lack of interest, but also to the fact that the other major unions do not share that union's CSR strategy.

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\* \*

To summarize, Table 5 provides an overview over the CSR strategy, stakeholders' perceptions and cooperation with stakeholders for the five major unions. This table shows clear connections between these three elements for unions with a proactive, defensive or reactive CSR strategy. For the unions with an accommodative CSR strategy, the links may seem less evident, which can explain the weak status of this strategy.

*Table 5: Unions' CSR strategy, their perception of and their cooperation with stakeholders*

| Union   | CSR strategy           | Perceptions of and cooperation with stakeholders               |  |  |  |
|---------|------------------------|--|--|--|--|
|         |                        | Central Government   | NGOs   | Companies  | Other unions                               |
| CFDT    | proactive              | perceived as powerful and legitimate; close cooperation        | perceived as powerful and legitimate; close cooperation      | perceived as legitimate; close cooperation                             | perceived as legitimate; close cooperation |
| CGT     | proactive              | perceived as powerful and legitimate; close cooperation        | perceived as powerful and legitimate; close cooperation      | perceived as legitimate; close cooperation                             | perceived as legitimate; close cooperation |
| CFTC    | accommodative          | perceived as powerful and legitimate; cooperation if necessary | perceived as powerful and legitimate; some close cooperation | perceived as legitimate; some cooperation                              | perceived as legitimate; some cooperation  |
| CFE-CGC | accommodative          | perceived as powerful and legitimate; cooperation if necessary | perceived as powerful and legitimate; some cooperation       | perceived as legitimate; some cooperation                              | perceived as legitimate; close cooperation |
| CGT-FO  | reactive and defensive | perceived as powerful and legitimate; cooperation if necessary | perceived as powerful but not legitimate; no cooperation     | perceived as illegitimate; local cooperation without national approval | perceived as legitimate; no cooperation    |

The links are the most evident between unions' CSR strategies and their perceptions of NGOs, and between unions' strategies and their cooperation with NGOs. Unions that adopt proactive CSR strategies (CFDT and CGT) perceive NGOs as potential partners rather than potential threats, while the union that adopts a reactive and presently defensive CSR strategy (CGT-FO) perceives NGOs as competitors or even as threats. Unions that adopt an accommodative CSR strategy (CFTC and CFE-CGC) have more complex perceptions of NGOs. Both unions have cooperated with NGOs, sometimes rather closely, but their limited resources presently do not allow them to develop more ambitious activities.

The link among unions' CSR strategies and the way they perceive the central government or other unions and their cooperation with these actors is less evident, but not lacking completely. The union that adopts the most proactive CSR strategy (CFDT) cooperates the most with central government and with other unions. CFDT considers it crucial to help the government promote CSR and to develop related activities. The union is thus particularly involved in the working groups set up by the central government and dedicates huge resources to supporting these initiatives. Similarly, CFDT insists on the importance of acting in partnership with CGT in the area of CSR to avoid being perceived by its members and other employees as the only union that endorses voluntary initiatives. CFDT is thus willing to share some of its expertise in the field of CSR to favor its broader acceptance. However, it would be difficult to conclude that the unions that are less involved in CSR are necessarily less open to partnerships with central government or other unions. On the contrary, CGT-FO, the union adopting a reactive CSR strategy, limits its cooperation with the government and other unions to the strict minimum.

The links between unions' CSR strategies, their perceptions of individual companies and their

cooperation with companies are much less visible. Indeed, all unions cooperate with companies in some way, and take part in collective bargaining on CSR. This apparent contradiction for the union that adopted a reactive followed by a defensive CSR strategy may be explained by the fact that this cooperation takes place at a decentralized level without the involvement or even the information of the national union. This element highlights the need to develop further research on how union members at the sector and company levels are involved in the development and implementation of unions' CSR strategies and how they perceive these strategies.

### **Conclusions**

This article explored the influence of stakeholders on French unions' CSR strategies, which range from reactive to proactive. It extended stakeholder theory, which is generally applied to companies, and adapted it to the analysis of unions as focal organizations of stakeholder relationships. Using a qualitative and longitudinal methodology, we analyzed the links between unions' CSR strategy, and the perception of other stakeholders, and their willingness to cooperate with such stakeholders on CSR.

While our research clearly confirms the existence of these links for the main stakeholders, it is more difficult to understand whether the perceptions of and cooperation with the stakeholders influence unions' CSR strategy, or whether it is the CSR strategy that influences unions' perception of and cooperation with stakeholders. An argument in favor of the second option is that unions' CSR strategies have changed little in recent years, unlike interactions with stakeholders. Our theoretical framework suggests that there are probably reciprocal influences between unions' CSR strategy, their perceptions of stakeholders and the kind of cooperation developed with them. Future research is needed to clarify the precise nature of these links and the nature of stakeholder dialogue

(O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008).

A next step in the research agenda would entail investigating the impact of union members and of employers' associations on unions' CSR strategies. Further research should take a network perspective in order to move beyond the bilateral relationships between unions and each of their stakeholders. Finally, this analysis of the impact of stakeholders on French unions' CSR strategies is highly embedded in the national context, both related to CSR (Berthoin Antal & Sobczak, 2004) and to industrial relations (Preuss et al., 2014). It would therefore be important to conduct similar studies in other countries to test the validity of the findings in other national contexts.

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