

They Call It 'Mobbing'

A new kind of workplace harassment, or an old one with a new name? Either way, Europeans are upset.

BY KAREN LOWRY MILLER

THE DETAILS VARY, BUT THE cases have a common theme. In Germany, Klaus, a nurse, had a fight with his boss; she then tried to fire him for giving unauthorized medication (a doctor had approved), for hitting a security guard (who denied it) and for sexually harassing a patient (no victim was produced). Klaus says he won his job back in court but only after thoughts of suicide and months with no pay. In Paris, Dr. G. tells how a new administrator at the ministry where she worked felt threatened by her, and responded by keeping information from her and instructing secretaries not to act on her requests. Depressed, Dr. G. sought therapy and quit. In Scotland, colleagues at Theodor's biochemistry lab were envious that his research was going so well. Offensive comments were whispered and experiments were sabotaged; when he spoke out he was branded a troublemaker and lost his post. And in an organization in Geneva, where Gillian had worked for 18 years, budget-watching bosses tried to drive her out with overwork. That failed, so they axed her position while she was on holiday. She says she gained 10 kilos and developed signs of diabetes and abscesses on her skin from the stress.

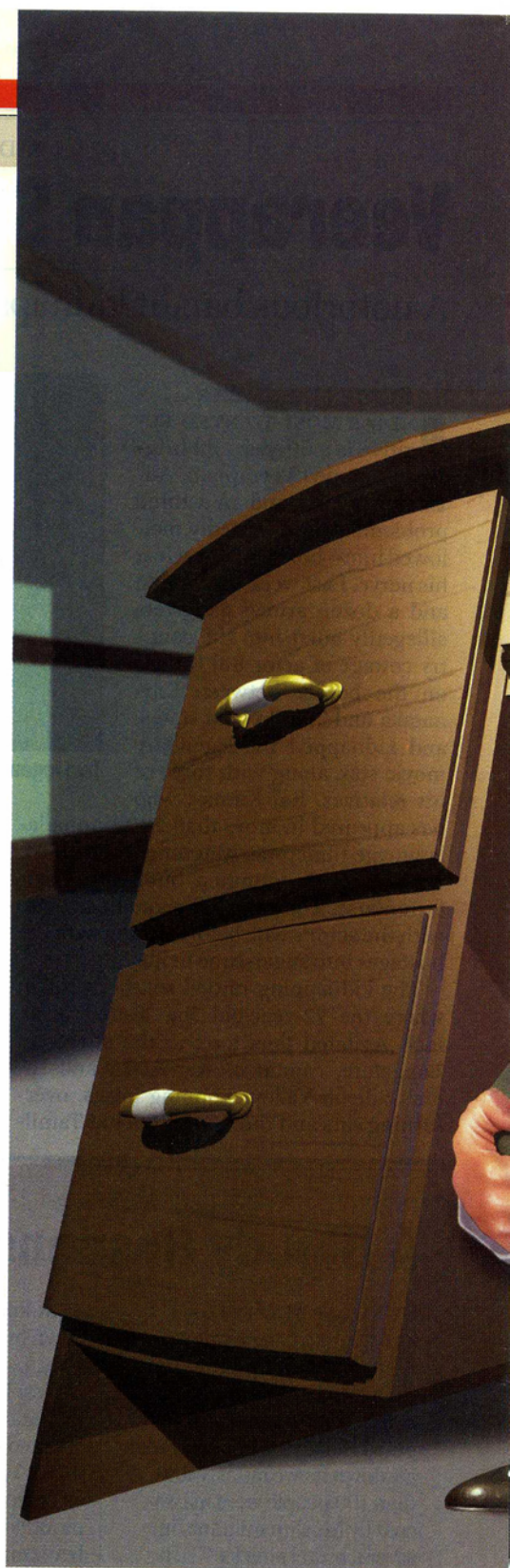
Judging the merits of these complaints isn't easy. The self-described victims don't give their full names and offer only their side of the dispute. Still, if you've held a job for a few years—particularly in certain sectors of the economy—you've probably heard stories that aren't all that different. What you may not have come across yet is the growing number of researchers and activists who say that such cases are examples of an ugly, hitherto little-recognized workplace problem

that's as corrosive as racial discrimination and sexual harassment. They call it mobbing: repeated attacks that humiliate, isolate and belittle, to the point where the victim can no longer function. Mobbing, these activists say, can be perpetrated by bosses, peers or even subordinates. And it seems to be on the rise—not so much in high-tech businesses, where jobs are plentiful, but in the Old Economy and the public sector, where tight budgets and downsizing are the order of the day. Says Dieter Zapf, a professor of labor psychology at Frankfurt's Goethe University: "When there are no jobs to escape to, mobbing will rise."

It has certainly risen on the list of public concerns. Mobbing help-lines run by unions, churches and former victims have popped up throughout Europe, and a number of self-help books and Web sites (box) have appeared. Big companies like Volkswagen have drawn up rules meant to stamp out mobbing. The Swiss Red Cross founded a sort of "Mobbees Anonymous," and in Sweden one can cite mobbing in making health-benefit claims. Britain prefers the term bullying (more on that later) and has its own Web sites and activists. Authors and academics in the United States are using both terms, and running Web sites detailing the woes of postal workers and others. In July the International Congress of Psychology in Stockholm included its first speaker on mobbing. And the American Academy of Management, at its annual gathering in Toronto this month, will add a seminar on workplace bullying. Germany, France and Italy are even looking into the tricky task of drafting antimobbing laws.

Any legislation is a long way off, though—not least because the prospect of it makes many people nervous. "It is extremely diffi-

cult to produce a legal definition clear enough so that a lawyer could work with it," warns Peter Friedhofen, a labor-court judge in Bonn. And especially in Britain, business leaders are on watch. "[A law against bullying] is terribly P.C.," worries Ruth Lea, head of policy at the Institute of Directors. "If we're not careful, we'll stop people from being natural." Lea argues that existing employment law and company policy are ade-





quate to deal with the problem. Even mobbing activists warn against diluting the concept. "We can't make the definition too broad, nor just take alleged victims at their word, or it will become a movement to excuse sniveling at work," says Canadian sociologist Kenneth Westhues, author of a book on mobbing in academia. Harald Ege, a German psychologist who runs a mobbing clinic in Bologna, worries that the concept

is getting so fashionable that unqualified counselors are preying on victims. "Some people see someone forget to greet them and think they are mobbed," Ege adds.

Still, corporations and unions alike are taking this form of harassment seriously. Zapf wanted to conduct a big study in Germany in 1994 but companies flat-out rejected the idea. Now human-resource managers are flying him in for seminars.

who includes mobbing in his report on Violence at Work. "We have to put the right question."

The first one to put the question was a German psychologist named Heinz Leymann. While working in Sweden as a family therapist in the 1980s, he noticed that battles on the home front were often the result of high stress at work. Studying the phenomenon, he estimated that 3.5 percent

Already employees at Volkswagen can be fired for offenses such as spreading rumors or withholding work-critical information. Employee counselor Georg Volk says VW's rules, adopted in 1996, make good business sense; a 1 percent drop in sick leave saves the company about \$50 million a year. In Britain, the non-profit Industry Society is promoting a concept it calls Dignity at Work, and offers a video on bullying, in partnership with the Trade Union Congress. Industry and trade unions funded a Manchester Institute of Science and Technology survey of 5,500 people from a cross-section of the economy last year and found that 10 percent had been bullied in the previous six months.

Such survey results raise a key question: is the workplace really getting meaner—or are people just more willing to speak up? Probably a bit of both, says Alfred Fleissner, a University of Hamburg scientist preparing to study the body's biochemical reaction to work-related stress. There are no statistics to prove that more people are abusing their co-workers than before, but appeals for help are certainly rising. Tim Field, once a customer service manager at a British software company, was bullied into a stress breakdown in 1994. He set up a hot line in 1996 and has since advised some 4,000 callers. As with sexual harassment, providing a label can help people start talking. "It's a matter of discovery," says Vittorio di Martino, an International Labor Organization official



Voice of experience: Tim Field, once bullied into a breakdown, now runs a U.K. hot line

of all Swedish workers had been victims of a form of harassment he dubbed mobbing. He publicized his work in Germany in the early 1990s, inspiring other researchers who went on to report that 1 percent to 4 percent of German workers have been mobbed. The widely reported suicides of two German policewomen in 1997 and 1998—both were intimidated and ostracized for their go-getter attitudes—heightened public awareness. This year the magazine *Stern* ran a cover story on the phenomenon, along with advice on what to do if you're mobbed. And now Burkhard Werner, a former engineer at a Deutsche Telekom subsidiary, is petitioning Berlin for a law against mobbing. He says his colleagues began to systematically attack him starting in 1995, when he came back from vacation to find someone else at his desk. He hung in there to get his pension, but after a co-worker reported that he had badmouthed Telekom, he was fired in 1997. Deutsche Telekom says it doesn't comment on individual employees.

British researchers acknowledge Leymann's work. But they seem more focused on the nasty boss who menaces the entire staff—one reason they prefer the term bullying. The Continental mobbing camp doesn't like the schoolyard reference, nor the implication that mobbing can be a one-time incident. Some authors use the terms as synonyms. After all, most mean groups start with a single bully—either a boss or a peer, but with a boss especially effective at getting others to go along.

The distinction between mobbing and

bullying means little to Kai, a German psychologist who says he was publicly belittled after challenging a decision by the head of his clinic; his colleagues stopped lunching with him, fearful of associating with a marked man. Euro Disney employee Rolande Romain complains of a verbally abusive boss who once coaxed co-workers to claim they feared working with a

woman who "practiced voodoo." In 1998, when she was working as a cashier, her cash drawer went missing over the weekend. So, she reports, did the videotape of the end of the Friday shift and the documents signed whenever a cash box is moved. Euro Disney pressed charges but Romain won on appeal. A spokeswoman says that Euro Disney has "taken account of the situation." But Romain has been demoted to dishwasher and plans to sue for abusive treatment. "I cannot forgive what they did to me," she says.

Most of the victims who share their suffering on Internet mobbing sites don't sound very forgiving either. Many seem to view the work force as easily divisible into bullies and targets. But recognizing the malady they call mobbing could still make work more humane. Perspective is everything. Gerd Arentewicz, a psychologist handling mobbing cases for employees of the University Clinic in Hamburg, says that only about 20 percent of the reports he hears really involve mobbing; the rest are ordinary disputes. And anyone can be a bully, adds Susan Marais-Staidman, head of the Foundation for Workplace Trauma in South Africa. She was hired to solve a mobbing situation at the same large corporation where she had been bullied early in her career. "They said, 'We're sorry for what we did to you, now will you help us?'" she says. If only it were always that simple.

With GINNY POWER in Paris

Think You've Been Mobbed? Help Is at Hand.

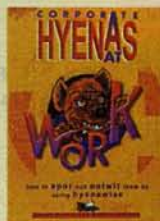
A number of books help victims see the light and fight back. They range from empowerment tips to leftist polemics to serious scholarship—sometimes all in the same volume.



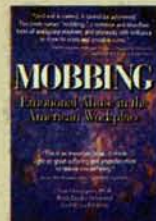
France: A psychiatric view, coming out in English as 'Stalking the Soul'



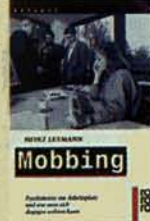
Italy: Author Ege teaches industrial relations at the University of Bologna



South Africa: A generous serving of self-help, empowerment and metaphors



U.S.: A 1999 book brought Leymann's concepts to the New World



Germany: Leymann's research on 'psychoterror' inspired others

The Net is perfect for the antimobbing community. Victims share experiences; experts debate new research and squabble over terminology. A Web-site sampler:

bullybusters.org
ifrance.com/achp

mobbing-zentrale.de
successunlimited.co.uk