

Editorial

Ringling the changes on working conditions is a start to exiting the crisis

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Working life has got worse in Europe of late. Greece is a graphic example, and a poster child for a wider rolling back of rights. Labour law reforms have watered down both individual and collective rights. Sackings have been made easier. There is enforced flexibility of working time with the amount of authorized overtime pushed up and payment for it forced down.

There is wholesale use of casual hire-and-fire. In the Netherlands, new permanent employment contracts fell from 83 000 in 2010 to 2000 the year after. In Spain, the revamped sandwich training contract can now be extended... up to the age of 34. Collective rights are bypassed or cut back. The number of workers covered by collective agreements has gone down. In Estonia, only 6% of firms with five or more workers have collective agreements in force.

Social security is also affected. Most European countries have re-written their pension schemes to raise retirement age or increase the contribution record required for a full pension. Those who do physically grueling jobs are finding it harder to access early retirement. The picture for unemployment benefits is no brighter: eligibility requirements have been tightened, amounts too low to live on, a trend towards forcing claimants to take any job going.

Health care has so far been spared the general onslaught in face of the evidence that a health system based on strong social protection performs better than a private insurance-based one like that of the USA. But a new tendency has emerged in different areas of labour law: special rules that are less good for workers are being brought in for smaller firms. The UK has led the way, and the European Commission seems to have no gripe with the idea of a "two-tier" labour law.

These "counter-reformations" of labour law are fuelling casualisation. The force of law is compounded by economic pressure: rising unemployment militates against the assertion of rights. Fear of being made unemployed can combine with something akin

to guilt-tripping: how can you demand your rights when others are out of a job?

These conditions have contributed to declining union memberships almost Europe-wide. In Sweden, a new breed of organization has popped up: a private firm that aims to replace the trade unions. It does some of a union's job through individual case management for its members, but is against any form of organized action, representation or collective bargaining – a form of "unionism-light" created in collaboration with an employment agency and an insurance company.

From the earliest days, discussions about the EU's policy agenda have been tied into a social model which – even allowing for differences in countries' industrial relations systems – was based on the idea of a European capitalism that was distinctively different from other parts of the world.

The current crisis arguably challenges this basic given. For the first time, we are witnessing employment standards being forced

down at the same time in most EU countries. Some European institutions are trying to push down social/employment rights. The crisis interventions in Greece, Spain and Portugal have given the Commission a bigger whip-hand, with the bailout in each case made dependent on dismantling social and employment rights. The European Court of Justice has attacked the right to strike which is accused of hindering the free movement of businesses.

This bleak political context makes it all the more important to act on working conditions. They stand at the interface between individuals' activity and broader political, economic and social determinants. They translate the brutality of relations of power and subordination in society into people's daily lives. The struggle to improve working conditions is also a learning experience in collective action. It is the stuff that dreams and the shaping of a different society are made of. ●

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