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Where’s “work” in the Euro-elections?

Think about it. How many clear proposals to improve working conditions and tackle insecurity have you heard in the European Parliament election campaign?

Laurent Vogel
ETUI
Wide divergences and heated debates abound in the current European election campaign. For many candidates, work is like sex for the Puritans. They see it everywhere, but will not talk about, preferring to "harp on" about immigration, environment, growth, citizenship. Nothing easier than to twist the word "security" to fit every occasion ... while accepting the spread of casual hire-and-fire.

Britain's PM David Cameron has unleashed a war of words against Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants, while his government spearheads a fierce campaign against any legislation to harmonize working conditions in Europe. He advocates naked self-interest while feigning regret at its consequences. It would be wrong to disregard the danger of such a discourse which goes far beyond the confines of any one political party.

**The European project in crisis**

The European Union as we know it derives from a political plan shaped by the "economic boom decades" – that period of reconstruction which began in the aftermath of World War Two and ended in the mid-1970s in economic crisis, labour unrest, and the slow disintegration of the Soviet bloc. During this time, economic liberalism was tempered by big concessions to labour in the founding states of the European Union. Sustained growth was underpinned by the dominance of European industry in high added value activities (car making, chemicals, aerospace, etc.). Organized labour struggles achieved a less unequal distribution of wealth than in the preceding and subsequent periods.

The time was right for a culture of compromise. Social security was developing, collective labour relations became institutionally entrenched. Quantity came before quality of employment. The creation of the European Economic Community can be seen from two angles: 1) an internal Western European process of states coming together around a shared plan, 2) the affirmation of a Western European distinctiveness in its alliances which marked it out from the United States and was the antithesis of the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe.

The 1958 Treaty of Rome prioritized "four freedoms", translating enforced competition between workers, goods, companies and capital into law. Social policy was focused on establishing a common labour market and its consequence – the coordination of social security schemes. Equal pay for men and women was conceived as an economic requirement to avoid unfair competition.

It was not until 1974 that a first Community social action programme was adopted in the wake of the tidal wave of violent clashes that had swept Europe in 1968. The urgent issue to be addressed was how to get labour/social conditions in different countries more closely aligned. The European Union’s budget was dwarfed by the sum of national budgets, so the chosen policy instrument was law. It had a ripple effect in pushing Member States to espouse the Community goals. It could be supplemented by other means (social dialogue, cohesion funds, defining statistical indicators, etc.), but there was no economic mechanism for a large-scale redistribution of resources between states. Nor was there any strong "economic governance" with industrial policies, planned investment or the creation of public services at European level. So legal rules had to be created in order to take it beyond a simple free trade area. And that is what happened between 1974 and 2004.

It was a time of relative stop-go. A body of Community social law and a system of collective labour relations were gradually built up. Whole areas remained untouched but working conditions were prioritized with the adoption of more than thirty Directives.

In the past decade, this form of governance has hit the buffers. EU enlargement has made it more difficult to adopt common rules. The policy direction taken by the Commission in Mr Barroso’s two terms of office has also played an important role. Increasingly

David Cameron advocates naked self-interest while feigning regret at its consequences.
Worsening working conditions

Worsening working conditions do not stem from these political factors alone, but are bound up with the rise of social inequalities worldwide – a process well-documented in a recent book by French economist Thomas Piketty which shows that the gap between workers’ fundamental rights into a straitjacket where they cannot inhibit economic competition.

Canadian journalist Naomi Klein has examined how disastrous events have been used to foist on people a policy that goes against the interests of the majority. In Europe, the crisis has been used to justify deregulation and austerity policies that got under way well before the 2008 crisis. It is a vicious circle: more austerity leads to more crisis; more crisis serves as a pretext for more austerity. In countries where the troika enables the European Commission to act without a political counterweight, the disaster in social and employment terms is undeniable.

Gender equality

Germany is held up as a model of economic recovery. Lower unemployment, good manufacturing performance, a trade surplus, etc. Chancellor Angela Merkel was re-elected in September 2013 with a near-overall majority. Her coalition with the Social Democrats assures her of broad support in parliament. The German “miracle” is often cited as a means of magicking pessimism away. One of its features is the massive rise in female employment rates. At what price? In 2010, a third of women had to settle for low pay (against 14% of men). Part-time work (about half of women) has exploded with some of the shortest working hours in Europe (around 18 hours). This means not enough income to be financially independent, fewer promotion and training opportunities and less job discretion. Part-time work reinforces structural inequality in the family. Women’s free time goes only into unpaid work in the family (household chores, child care, etc.)

Ageing

Many attacks on social security are excused away by population ageing. The ideology of employers is that longer life expectancy means people should expect to work longer in life.

This reasoning overlooks two things: 1) the less well-off categories have no hope of added healthy life years, largely because of their employment and working conditions, 2) the wealth produced has increased dramatically in thirty years. A more equal distribution of that wealth would pay the steadily rising social protection bill.

Unless working conditions improve, raising the retirement age will only result in unthinkable exclusion for the categories of workers exposed to the worst risks. Work intensification and individualization make longer working lives a double bind. Overwork wears workers out and makes them want to stop working as soon as possible, while creating inter-worker rivalry destroys team cohesion and the informal allocation of work according to individual

Worsening working conditions do not stem from these political factors alone, but are bound up with the rise of social inequalities worldwide – a process well-documented in a recent book by French economist Thomas Piketty which shows that the gap between workers and capital owners has widened over the last thirty years.

This decline does not appear as a sudden meltdown, but remains barely perceptible, like the outline of an island in the mist. It does not hit all categories with equal intensity, whence the difficulty of tackling it politically. The picture is clear for employment – job insecurity and joblessness are the two jaws of the pincers. For some physical risks, though, the picture is no different or even slightly better. So the bigger picture is mixed. What stands out most is the worsening inequalities within the world of work itself.

2. The Commission is not solely responsible for this development. All the institutions involved in the legislative process (Council, Parliament and Commission) were in agreement.

3. A central reference among the “classic” justifications for this tipping point in Community policies is Wim Kok’s November 2004 report, Facing the Challenge: The Lisbon strategy for growth and employment.


5. The troika refers to the experts who represent the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund who keep regular watch to see that countries which the EU has put under financial assistance programmes meet the requirements set in exchange for the assistance.


A vicious circle settles in: work more to consume more; consume more because work is overwhelming and eats into life.
abilities, bypassing management’s dictates. An increased concentration of work is only superficially more productive. It results in burnout, uncorrectable failings and prevents the handing-on of experience.

“Sustainable Development”

Few now deny the scale of the ecological crisis, in sharp contrast to the United States where industry lobbies are carrying much of the Republican Party and many voters into climate change denial.

Recognizing the importance of the issue is not enough to frame an effective policy. The question of working conditions features nowhere in the debates on environmental issues when many environmental problems (greenhouse gas emissions, squandering of resources, pollution, etc.) are inextricably linked to our relationship to work. Work intensification and enforced competition produce dissatisfaction with work: the feeling of being unable to do a proper job, reduced sociability among workers, work spilling over into home life, etc. All these factors are apt to turn us into compulsive consumers. Lacking recognition at work, the acquisition of possessions raises our self-worth. Advertising shamelessly exploits this “need” to compensate. The real usefulness of a product becomes secondary. The object’s symbolic importance is all: it makes us appealing, attractive or superior to others. It gives us class. A vicious circle settles in: work more to consume more; consume more because work is overwhelming and eats into life. Rather than tackling it head-on, many “green” policies swing between unproductive guilt-tripping (“we are all responsible”) and commoditizing environmental awareness through a proliferation of green labels. People do not vote with their wallet. Consumer influence on industrial choices is marginal.

Democracy

Democracy is an underlying issue in many debates. Falling turnovers among working class voters, the rise of parties led by a “man of the moment”, the feeling that it is the “us” of society versus the “them” of institutions.

High heels and cancer

A European agreement was reached in the hairdressing sector in April 2012. Trade unions and employers called for a directive to prevent allergies, skin diseases and musculoskeletal disorders. Many hairdressers suffer from these health problems, and some have also contracted bladder cancer from the chemicals used for colouring hair. For the first time since 1996, the Commission has failed to respond to the joint call from the European social partners to turn a framework agreement into a directive with binding effect.

Why? There is a timeline to the reasons. Britain’s right-of-centre Daily Mail newspaper ran a headline on 9 April 2012 “High heels to be cut down to size under new EU proposals forcing hairdressers to wear non-slip flat shoes” reporting that “Employment Minister Chris Grayling vowed: ‘We should be creating jobs, not killing them. This kind of stupidity has to stop. It makes no sense and I will do everything I can to stop it.’”

In point of fact, the agreement between hairdressing sector unions and employers says nothing about banning the wearing of high heels. It merely recommends the wearing of “shoes with non-slip soles”.

On 2 October 2013, the President of the Commission, Mr Barroso, drove the point home in an interview on German television’s ARD network. He saw no reason to adopt EU rules on “hairdressers’ shoes”, using the feminine gender and betraying the disdain: they get given a “low risk” job and whinge about trifles.

The same day, the European Commission adopted a Communication entitled REFIT announcing a freeze on the proposed new laws on musculoskeletal disorders and improving the fight against occupational cancer. No further proposals will be put forward during its current term of office.

Historians are wont to place the birth of democracy in ancient Greece. We should heed what this province of the world has to tell us. In a poem written in 1904, Constantin Cavafy imagines the various authorities of an ancient city paralyzed by waiting for the barbarians to come. The Senate has ceased making laws; the Emperor is preparing to welcome the invaders by ennobling them. The tension builds throughout the poem. The ending is abrupt. The barbarians do not come. Some even claim that they do not exist. “And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians? They were, those people, a kind of solution.”

Politics today is less vivid than in the poem. But the question remains relevant. If work is not seen as a core focus of politics, many issues lose all real substance. They become invisible barbarians, the anguished waiting for whom precipitated the fall of ancient cities.
Waste and recycling: workers at risk

Special report coordinated by Aïda Ponce Del Castillo, ETUI

The Commission wants Europe to become a “recycling society” – one that reduces and uses waste as a resource – by 2020. The idea is that this “circular economy” will better protect the environment and create new jobs. But will they be inherently “sustainable jobs”?

This report suggests they may not. From collection to recycling, waste workers face many risks. They have more work accidents than builders. Musculoskeletal disorders are taking a toll and modernisation of sorting facilities generally speeds up work paces. Workers are exposed to noise, extreme temperatures, dust and toxic products.

Historically, refuse collection is done by local authorities, but they are increasingly outsourcing it to private operators in fierce competition to win the contracts. And as local councils tend to select the lowest bidder, workers see their working conditions and bargaining power eroded.

As Europe struggles to exit the crisis, that this industry gives jobs to the most vulnerable is welcome news. But should accessing work be an argument for ignoring the conditions in which those who turn our waste into a new resource have to work?
Working towards decent ‘green’ jobs in the waste industry

The waste industry is facing many changes due to globalisation and higher demand for waste re-use and recycling. The focus in the industry is shifting from disposal – ‘how to get rid of waste’- to reuse – ‘how to make the most of waste resources’. The transition from collecting and landfilling to sorting, selecting and recycling is taking place in many European countries. This ‘greening’ process changes work organisation and the characteristics of jobs in the sector. But are ‘greener’ jobs always better jobs?

Jerry van den Berge
European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)
Waste generation varies considerably between countries and richer countries tend to produce more waste per person. For example, the municipal waste generated per person ranges from 294 kg in the Czech Republic to 801 kg in Denmark. The next lowest levels after the Czech Republic are in Romania, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia. Of the municipal waste generated in the European Union (EU), 42% is sent to landfill, 38% is recovered (recycled or composted) and 20% is incinerated. The poorer countries are those most likely to send waste to landfill, while the richer countries are the biggest users of incineration. The highest amount of waste is landfilled in Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Malta and Poland (90% or more). Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria recycle or compost the most waste (59% or more), while Denmark, Luxembourg and Sweden incinerate the most waste (47% or more in all three cases).

The development of the waste sector in Europe is complex for many reasons, including the number of different markets, evolving legislation, and changing structures and actors. During the last few decades, attention shifted from waste collection to disposal, and later to recycling. As a result, the waste sector is developing three markets – collection, disposal and treatment – the integration of which varies across Europe.

A heterogeneous sector

The sector is experiencing strong concentration: the three largest private companies (Veolia, Suez Environment and Remondis) have a turnover that is 23% higher than the next 13 smaller companies, although this situation does not prevail to the same extent in all European countries (see Graph 1).

There are trends towards convergence with other sectors, for example the utility sector, in which the French multinational companies Suez and Veolia are market leaders. These two major actors were hit by the 2008 recession, which led to a reduction in their industrial and commercial waste market. In the past years, both companies have developed cost-cutting strategies, which include reducing overtime and not replacing workers who leave.

According to the latest Eurostat data, the waste and recycling sectors in the EU provide jobs for nearly 1 000 000 workers. This represents about 0.4% of all jobs in the EU as a whole, although this percentage varies from country to country. About half of the jobs are in the recycling and the production of new materials, but household waste collection and sorting, and civic amenity sites remain the largest areas of stable employment in the sector. At EU level, employment has continued to rise in the past years (see Table 1). If the recession has suppressed demand for recycled...
‘secondary’ materials, which means fewer jobs in the recycling sector, the national and local commitment to implementing EU waste policies has continued to create extra jobs in many European countries.

**Transition to a green/recycling society**

The main developments in this sector are the growing importance of environmental issues, the continuing privatisation of municipal services and the related public procurement problems, and increasing ‘Europeanisation’ of industrial relations. Greening cannot be examined separately; the greening changes must be viewed in the framework of a complex context of service provision through public or private entities and increasing concentration in the European markets.

The ‘green economy’ is high on the European agenda. The European Commission Europe 2020 strategy main objectives in relation to waste management are:

— by 2020, waste should be used as a resource. Waste generated per capita is falling;
— waste recycling and re-use are economically attractive options for public and private actors due to widespread separate collection and the development of functional markets for secondary raw materials;
— waste legislation should be fully implemented. Illegal shipments of waste should be eradicated;
— energy recovery should be limited to non-recyclable materials, landfilling should be virtually eliminated and high-quality recycling should be guaranteed.

These aims should be reflected in the waste hierarchy (see Table 2) corresponding to the European Commission’s 2020 strategy. This will affect employment in various ways: changes in work organisation and creation of new jobs in new activities.

The potential for new jobs is enormous. According to research by Friends of the Earth, an estimated 50 000 new jobs in waste management and 500 000 in recycling could be created in Europe if the green society were to become a reality. This is a challenge for the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) and the trade unions, both in terms of organising workers in the sector and ensuring decent work, good working conditions, and the health and safety of workers. Health and safety is a major concern in this sector. Workers have to deal with all kinds of materials that can pose a danger to their health, and in the treatment process (toxic) substances may be present or be released depending on the type of material (heavy metals, asbestos, dioxin or other gases). These are often not visible and extra precautions are thus needed. The number of accidents is relatively high, too, compared with other sectors, most of them occurring in transport (traffic accidents). However, worker safety must also be a priority in waste collection and treatment. It is essential for workers and trade unions to be involved in the greening process in order to ensure that the new jobs are sustainable. This is reflected in workers’ health and in their commitment to their job. Social dialogue is one way to guarantee the structural involvement of workers.

**Privatisation versus public service**

For a long time, the belief that privatisation could bring efficiency explained the push for the externalisation of public services, including in the waste sector. According to a report by Public Services International Research Unit (Greenwich University), recent empirical research has confirmed that, contrary to common belief, there are no significant differences in efficiency between public and private waste operators.

Analysis in a research project funded by the European Commission shows that the impacts of privatisation relate to:

— work intensification (including in the public sector): the use of public procurement and the introduction of competition mean that the providers of waste collection services are being asked to do the job with fewer staff;
— uneven and difficult representation and social partnership: the lengthening of the value chain makes it more difficult to represent employees’ interests;
— contracts of limited duration: this leads to losses of tenure with a new contract or the need to transfer employees to new employers;
— the diversification also leads to unequal working conditions for new entrants and fragmentation of workforce: in Bulgaria, for example, the employees of the municipal enterprise have open-ended contracts and those with the private provider have short-term contracts.

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<th>Processes</th>
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<td>Prevention</td>
<td>Waste per capita falling</td>
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<td>Re-use</td>
<td>Waste per capita falling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recycling</td>
<td>Separate collection &amp; stimulation of secondary materials market</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recovery</td>
<td>Restrict energy recovery to non-recyclable materials</td>
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<td>Landfilling</td>
<td>Virtually eliminated</td>
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Source: Kirov V. (2011) How many does it take to tango? Stakeholders’ strategies to improve work in Europe, WALQING Project
There is no sector-specific legislation that requires increased privatisation, liberalisation or competitive tendering. However, the growth in the sector has raised corporate interest and the growing use of incineration has led to an increase in public-private partnerships (PPPs), often linked to privatisation. The interpretation of EU procurement and internal market laws has put pressure on local authorities to open up services to tenders from the private sector.

EPSU considers waste/environmental services to be public services. The goal is to serve the public interest and public health through high-quality services, i.e. a high quality of work. We share the view of Municipal Waste Europe (MWE, the federation of municipal waste companies) that waste management should fall within the remit of local authorities, taking into consideration local needs and circumstances. Local authorities are free to choose how they organise the service. Market failures in municipal waste management would cause environmental damage, endanger human health and put a large burden on future generations, which would be unacceptable.

Many European countries have, by law, put their local authorities in charge of collecting and treating municipal waste. This confirms the nature of this service as a service of general interest.

There is a clear logic behind this approach:
— the goal of municipal waste management is a mission of general interest: protecting human health and the environment;
— the continuity and the quality of the service are essential as the citizens are obliged to use it;
— all inhabitants should have equal access to a reasonable waste disposal service;
— municipal waste management is a collective service;
— an essential part of sustainable municipal waste management is engaging the public by promoting and consulting it on how to prevent waste, an activity that can hardly be expected of a commercial undertaking.

Local situations and needs can vary greatly between and within countries, cities and regions, and waste management should be thus be organised on the basis of the local situation. Local authorities should be given the power to choose the best form of waste management to suit the local situation and needs so as to achieve the environmental targets set at EU level.

**Worker representation**

As diverse as the industry is, the same is true for the trade unions. Employee representation is difficult. Unions for the public sector (from municipal workers to utility and transport workers), unions for the private sector (from manufacturing, construction) or large, merged unions (coordination across departments) all operate in the sector. Social dialogue at EU level is not yet formalised in the waste sector. On the employers’ side, there are several organisations that represent different stakeholders, such as Municipal Waste Europe (MWE) for municipal enterprises and FEAD for the private sector (this organisation stresses its business orientation but for the moment refuses to act as an employers’ organisation). On the trade union side, the main organisation is EPSU, the European Federation of Public Service Unions. In the waste industry, it represents the majority of workers. Other trade union federations that represent smaller numbers of waste service workers are the European Transport Federation (ETF) and IndustriAll.

Since 2010, EPSU has made efforts to develop social dialogue and involve employers in order to establish formalised social dialogue. Thus far, these efforts have been in vain; social dialogue at European level is still lacking. EPSU’s priorities in the waste sector are the development of social dialogue, health and safety, skills development, and the valuation of environmental services. EPSU cooperates with environmental organisations to tackle climate change and to advocate a sound European environmental policy that creates decent jobs.

Waste workers are involved in the collection, sorting, recycling, incineration and landfill of household and industrial waste. EPSU supports the European waste hierarchy (see
**Market failures in municipal waste management would cause environmental damage, endanger human health and put a large burden on future generations.**

Table 2). Our members in municipal waste services advise on waste prevention and re-use.

EPSU thinks it is urgent to counter the adverse effects of cut-throat competition. It results in a deterioration of working and pay conditions. Workers’ under-representation in some EU countries and in the SMEs reinforces this trend.

‘Greening’ the economy, an opportunity to improve working conditions

When it comes to greening and the other processes required to improve the quality of work, trade union actions should focus on the following areas.

The first relates to the need to develop a strategy in order to find European answers. EPSU has already begun to focus on the coordination of employees’ interests in the largest multinational companies in the sector. The work on establishing a formalised European sectoral social dialogue is one way of coordinating the action of the employees in these diverse circumstances. The development of social dialogue at EU level would make it possible to identify better ways of tackling diversity in a very heterogeneous sector and transfer good practices among social partners in the different countries.

EPSU launched a project to identify common interests for workers and employers in order to build the first blocks of a sectoral social dialogue. One of the issues that is of joint interest and joint responsibility is health and safety. There is a direct link between the quality of work and the health and safety of workers.

The greening agenda is complex and our next recommendation will focus on the need to analyse critically the effects of greening. The general framework of EU environmental legislation and measures is not sufficient to envisage ‘decent’ work solutions. It is very important for unions to be able to analyse the measures proposed in the different countries and to evaluate possible consequences for the quality of work.

From this perspective, the third recommendation involves exchanges of practices and initiatives that are transferable. It is important to examine the processes against the benchmarks set in other countries and other sectors. For example, the Italian social partners have set up an Observatory specifically to monitor public procurement.

Sectoral trade unions should cooperate with one another in order to defend collectively workers’ interests instead of seeing each other as competitors in recruiting members. The heterogeneous waste industry is a clear example that decent work can only be achieved and safeguarded by coordinated advocacy and united action among workers in the different parts of the industry. Actions are coordinated through the existing European Works Councils (EWCs) but this is something that could be developed further. In parallel with the EWCs, the unions could play a role in initiating EWCs and promoting worker information, consultation and participation in smaller multinational and local companies.

In the waste management sector there is a political focus on job creation and skills rather than on quality. However, ‘greening’ warrants attention. It is not a single process that affects the quality of work; in order to understand the social realities, we need to analyse the privatisation that leads to fragmentation of the workforce and work intensification, the role of public procurement (most advantageous offer versus cost-cutting), etc.

At EU level, EPSU supports the vision that the first priority is to try to minimise waste, and then to try to reuse or recycle wherever possible. From this perspective, EPSU is dealing not only with employers but also with environmental agencies. This strategy may create employment in recycling and reuse, and create better jobs. For example, if jobs are transferred from incineration and landfill to recycling, this may improve employees’ skills and they will thus have better jobs. If the EU can help to move the sector towards better quality jobs and more skilled jobs, this would benefit both workers and the environment alike.

Green jobs must be sustainable jobs. Therefore, health and safety and working conditions in the sector must be ensured and safeguarded. Waste recycling is one element that could generate more jobs in Europe and the move from a wasteful society to a recycling society is expected to result in better jobs. However, at present there is no evidence that waste sorting in itself creates better jobs; this is contingent upon technology and the way in which it is implemented, and it will require a conscious effort by stakeholders.

It is up to the trade unions to monitor and support these efforts together with the working conditions and work environment that will help to establish green and decent jobs in the waste industry in Europe.

This article is mainly based on Green and decent? Working conditions in the waste sector in Europe and implications for trade union policy by Dr Vassil Kirov (ISSK, Bulgaria) and Jerry van den Berge (EPSU), published in International Journal of Labour Research, 2012, Vol. 4, issue 2.
The fatal dangers of working in the recycling industry

The UK’s waste treatment and recycling industry is breaking workplace injury records. Its workers have double the injury risk of building workers. The Health and Safety Executive – the UK’s workplace safety inspection authority – is campaigning to change matters. Trade unions want a crackdown on rule-dodging employers.

Rob Edwards
Free-lance journalist

Constant upgrading of computer technologies swamps recycling firms with mountains of obsolete equipment containing all kinds of compounds, some of them toxic.

Image © Justin Tallis/reportdigital.co.uk
Mark Wright was "a big soft teddy bear of a man", according to his mother, Dorothy. And he was worried about safety standards at the recycling plant where he worked at Saltney in North Wales.

On 12 April 2005 he was told by his boss to put more than 3,500 aerosol cans into a mechanical crusher. They exploded and caught fire, sealing a door and trapping Mark inside. When he was freed, he walked to an ambulance before collapsing with 90 per cent burns.

"In the one act of kindness shown to us, the hospital kept our son on a life support system long enough for us to drive the five hours needed to be there to say our goodbyes," said Dorothy. "He was 37 years old. He had been with his wife since he was 19 and had two children whom he just adored."

Since their son's untimely death, Dorothy and her husband, Douglas, have been fighting for justice. Their long and ultimately frustrating struggle has helped expose the serious dangers of working in the burgeoning waste recycling business in the UK. It has also highlighted deep flaws in the way the country's judicial system handles health and safety at work.

The Crown Prosecution Service initially decided that there was not enough evidence to charge the company, Deeside Metal, or any of its managers with manslaughter. Then after an inquest into the death in 2009, it announced that it was pursuing a charge of manslaughter against the general manager, Robert Roberts.

But this was rejected by a trial judge as an "abuse of process" because it was too long after the accident. Roberts was left to face a lesser charge of breaching health and safety legislation, to which he pleaded guilty and was fined £100,000 (120,000 euros) by Caernarfon Crown Court in December 2010.

At the same time, Deeside Metal was fined £100,000 for breaking health and safety law. Deeside Metal then appealed against its fine, and in December 2011 it was halved by the Court of Appeal. The company from which the aerosol cans had come, Jeyes, was also fined.

The Wrights received an apology from the Crown Prosecution Service for the way the case was mishandled, but the whole experience has left Dorothy deeply disillusioned. She told HesaMag that she has lost all faith in the police, the justice system, and the government's Health and Safety Executive (HSE). "I live with an ever present feeling of betrayal and anger at a country that has treated my son as just another disposable business commodity," she said.
There is no doubt that recycling waste in the UK is a relatively hazardous occupation. In the last nine years, official figures show that 83 workers have been killed, often by moving vehicles or machinery. In 2012-13 twelve people died, which according to HSE is 16 times higher than the average for all UK industries.

More than 3,000 recycling and waste workers are injured every year, a rate four times higher than the average for all industries. HSE has estimated that more than one in 20 recycling workers suffer ill health or injury because of their jobs. This is significantly higher than other reputedly dangerous trades like farming, forestry and fishing, and nearly twice as high as in construction and manufacturing.

At least 140,000 people work in the waste and recycling industry, making up less than one per cent of the UK’s working population. But the industry accounts for nearly three per cent of all reported injuries to employees (see Graph 1). The industry grew by almost five per cent between 2012 and 2013, as central and local government try to recycle more of the 75 million tonnes of waste produced every year in order to meet European targets to cut the amounts dumped as landfill.

Recycling workers also face insidious long-term risks from the dust, toxic metals and infections to which they can be exposed. A 2012 study by the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh pointed out that current safety limits for dust failed to protect workers. “Exposures to dust at many waste-handling sites are likely to give rise to significantly increased risks of chronic respiratory illness,” it concluded.

Exposures to lead, mercury and other hazardous metals at scrap metal yards and electrical waste recycling facilities “may be sufficient to give rise to toxicity,” the study warned. “Workers who have direct contact with waste materials are potentially at risk of infection due to the presence of articles such as disposable nappies and discarded needles in wastes.”

Although the evidence was limited, the institute expressed concern that the industry may be building up serious health problems for the future. “The mobility of the labour force and long time scale over which serious respiratory illness may develop means that there may be a hidden burden of ill-health associated with working in the waste and recycling industry,” it said.

**Hundreds of inspections planned**

HSE, the UK government agency responsible for ensuring health and safety at work, accepted that there was a “terrible toll” from recycling. “The bottom line is that if you work in waste and recycling you are more likely to have an accident, or a fatal accident, than if you work in other industries,” said Wayne Williams, an inspector on HSE’s waste and recycling team.

That was why, along with agriculture and construction, recycling was being targetted as one of HSE’s “priority” industries. HSE inspectors are planning to make visits, mostly unannounced, to hundreds of recycling sites over the next two years. “Anyone who works in the waste industry should not be surprised if they see an HSE inspector knocking on their door,” warned Williams. “If you haven’t seen us for a while, we will be coming.”

He attributed the high rates of injury, illness and death to several factors. The industry was very diverse, it was innovating and it contained a large percentage of small and medium-sized enterprises, which had fewer resources. He also highlighted firms’ reliance on agency workers, who might not be experienced, and migrant workers, who might have language problems.

Along with employers and trade unions, the HSE has set up the Waste Industry Safety and Health (WISH) forum. It works to encourage good practice in waste recycling operations by issuing advice and guidelines, and in 2013 agreed a 24-point action plan. But Williams stressed that there was no “magic bullet” that could solve all the problems.

“A lot of effort is being put in by HSE and the industry to try and improve things,” he said. “But it’s not going to happen overnight.” He expected that the recycling industry would remain a priority for the foreseeable future. He dismissed suggestions that his agency might be short of resources, saying: “HSE works with what it gets.”

The key, Williams argued, was to work with other agencies to engage managers and workers throughout the industry. “This is an industry problem – they have the prerogative...
to sort themselves out,” he said. “There’s isn’t a policeman on every corner.” Would HSE’s strategy succeed? “Only time will tell,” he replied.

**Government cutbacks will have ‘bloody consequences’**

HSE’s approach was broadly backed by the trade union, Unison, which encouraged workers and managers to work together to reduce the risks. “This means that very senior managers within organisations dealing with waste and recycling must take an active role in promoting health and safety,” said Unison’s Vincent Borg. “It also means that employers need to involve their employees.”

Another trade union involved in the industry, Unite, took a slightly tougher line, arguing that employers had the “primary responsibility” for reducing the risks. “Enforcement is a proven and effective driver for health and safety compliance,” said Unite’s Susan Murray. Unite strongly condemned a 35% cut in government funding for the HSE, and comparable cuts to local authority budgets. “This is dangerous for workers and sends the wrong message to those employers who have already have difficulty in complying with their legal responsibilities,” stated Murray.

Professor Andrew Watterson, who heads the Occupational and Environmental Health Research Group at the University of Stirling, warned that HSE’s cutbacks would have “bloody consequences”. He questioned whether the regulatory agency had enough staff to effectively police such a fragmented and hazardous industry, suggesting that its “hotspot inspections” would only be able to cover a small proportion of sites.

“Vague partnerships with disparate stakeholders will not do the trick,” he said. What was needed was “greater surveillance, regulatory enforcement and stiffer fines and prison sentences for those who kill and maim workers,” he argued. “The industry has a whole host of well-established and mainly old disease and injury health hazards and needs far better control than it currently receives.”

Hilda Palmer, acting chair of the UK’s Hazards Campaign, pointed out the real harm being done by the industry was probably worse than that portrayed by the official statistics because many injuries and illness went unreported. “The problems occur across the whole sector from large to small companies, though they’re worse at the smaller non-unionised end,” she said.

20 workers poisoned by mercury

Twenty workers were exposed to dangerous levels of mercury at a recycling plant at Kirkheaton in Huddersfield between October 2007 and August 2008. The mercury came from fluorescent light bulbs.

Ventilation problems at the plant meant that workers breathed in toxic mercury fumes, as well as lead from recycling televisions and computer monitors. They complained of ill health, with one woman alarmed about the risk to her unborn baby.

An investigation by HSE and the Environment Agency found that 20 workers had levels of mercury in their bodies above recommended safety limits. Five of them were said by HSE to have “extremely high levels” of the poison.

“This is a shocking case involving a large number of employees, many of them young and vulnerable, who were suddenly faced with the worrying possibility of damage to their long-term health,” said HSE Inspector Jeanne Morton.

“The risks associated with handling toxic substances like mercury have been known for generations, so it is all the more unacceptable that something like this has happened. The company failed to see the risks created by their recycling work and failed to develop effective plans for safe working.”

The company, Electrical Recycling Group, pleaded guilty to breaching health and safety law, as well as rules governing hazardous substances at Bradford Crown Court on 5 February 2010. It was fined £140 000 (170 000 euros), while its director, Craig Thompson, was fined £5 000 (6 000 euros).
Worker loses arm

Domingos da Conceicao Freitas had to have his right arm amputated after it was trapped at a recycling plant at Barking in London on 17 August 2012. The 28-year-old can no longer work, and struggles to wash and dress.

An agency worker, he helped sort waste on a conveyor belt into different bins by hand. When the mechanism became blocked, he was asked to clear it by inserting a wire between a roller and the moving belt.

As he did so, his arm was caught and crushed by the roller. The procedure should have been carried out by two or three workers, one of whom would have been responsible for ensuring the conveyor belt was switched off.

An investigation by HSE concluded that two openings on the conveyor system should have been guarded to prevent this kind of accident. "Mr Freitas has been left with a permanent, life-changing injury as a result of an incident that could easily have been avoided," said HSE inspector Gabriella Dimitrov.

The company MSK Waste Management and Recycling appeared in Westminster Magistrates’ Court on 23 October 2013 and pleaded guilty to breaching regulations on the safe operation of machinery. It was fined £10 000 (12 000 euros) and was ordered to pay a further £5 944 in costs plus £5 000 in compensation.

"The onus is on companies like MSK to acknowledge the dangers posed by unsafe machines and risky methods of work for clearing blockages, and to take action," added Dimitrov. "Incidents of this kind occur all too often in the recycling sector."

Accidents reduced 70 per cent by some companies

The waste recycling industry is represented by the Environmental Services Association (ESA), which said it covered 85% of the sector. This included major players like Biffa, Cory Environmental, Shanks, Sita, Veolia and Vir - edor, but it left out many smaller businesses. ESA accepted that "historically the industry had "not had the best health and safety re-
cord."

In 2004 ESA set itself the target of redu-
cing the incidence of reportable accidents by ten per cent a year. Though that hasn’t been achieved every year, it has been exceed-
ed in other years, resulting in a drop of al-
most 70 per cent in accident rates at member companies between 2004 and 2011, accord-
ing to ESA. It said it had revised its strategy in recent years to maintain momentum.

While we of course have much further to go, there is little indication that this level of performance has been repeated across the waste sector as a whole," stated ESA’s policy executive, Stephen Freeland. He wanted HSE to publish a more accurate breakdown of its accident data so that the problem areas could be better identified and tackled.

He pointed out that the industry was under-
dgoing a major transformation, as compa-
nies moved away from landfill towards sorting, recycling and energy-from-waste incinerators, sometimes involving investments of hundreds of millions of pounds. "But this brings a set of new health and safety challenges," he said, be-
cause more people were working more closely with heavy vehicles and machinery. "Higher recycling targets will require a greater range of materials to be collected for recycling, po-
tentially increasing workplace exposure to new materials."

Freeland argued that government recy-
cling policies should take greater account of health and safety. "While efforts to collect glass separately from other recyclable materials may help to promote high quality recycling, separate glass collections present their own unique health and safety challenges to workers," he said. "Greater volumes and diversity of materi-
als will be handled in future, so the technology and health risks need to be fully explored."

None of this, however, is of much com-
fort to Dorothy Wright, who helped found the campaign group, Families Against Corporate Killers. "I not only lost my son at the hands of an employer who thought more of money than Mark’s life, but I have lost the ability to feel real joy, pleasure and peace of mind," she said.

"There is not a single day goes by that I do not think of Mark and wish I could have protected him. I’d like to think that by telling his story I can save someone else’s life by changing the attitude to health and safety in Britain."

"The sector shades into unregulated and dangerous criminal activity paying vulnera-
ble workers cash-in-hand for demolition and scrap work where injuries and illness are unreported."
Working the bins in Italy

The unforgettable sight of Naples’ streets littered with rubbish bags was an apocalyptic image that shows how vital the clean-up jobs (refuse collectors, street sweepers) are to keep the town running. The challenge of keeping our streets clean is largely under-funded. Recent research in Italy has uncovered serious health problems related to workloads.

Diego Alhaique
Scientific Officer, Health and Safety at Work Observatory, IRES-CGIL

Our consumption-crazed societies generate untold amounts of waste. Without workers to deal with it, towns would grind to a halt.

Image © Belga/Agefotostock
"Refuse collection in today’s Italy is a harder job than before: as well as the loads to lift, the dirt, the repetitive movements and biological risks there is now greater time-pressure of work. In order to keep a grip on the costs of selective sorting, which is necessary to care for the environment, workers have been put under a lot of pressure, having to do at least four times as much work with the same number of people. Obviously, quality of service suffers. Massimo Cenciotti, national environmental health sector official with CGIL’s public service workers’ union, paints a sobering picture of binmen’s working conditions.

"The risks have gone up, and working conditions have gone down", he goes on. "In 2011, the union recorded 12 workplace deaths — unimaginable a few years ago. Why? Fragmentation of work, faster paces and repetitive movements. Workers bang into things, stumble, fall, all the time loading and unloading. Bags and bins are heavy. Doorstep collections can run up to 600 points, meaning 1,200 bags or bins per round. Binmen are now up in arms. Moving to selective sorting of waste on the same budget as before means taking a big cut in working conditions and endangering workers’ health, and the public preventive services are doing nothing."

Five times more work accidents

The municipal solid waste (MSW) collection sector employs 90,000 workers, an average 75% of whom — 67,500 — are street maintenance workers, and 15% of these are women. The sector is run by some 600 public and private operators. Public enterprises employ 60% of the workforce, and the private sector 40%. It is a widely diverse and complex community, with many outsourced services where prevention often goes by the board and workers’ health and safety suffers. The National Work Accident and Occupational Disease Insurance Agency’s (Inail) figures are telling: between 2009 and 2011, an average of 133 street sweepers’ in 1,000 had a work accident each year — five times more than all other sectors put together (see Table 1).

Where occupational diseases are concerned, Inail’s official figures are just the classic “tip of the iceberg”. There is a much bigger submerged part consisting of diseases whose work-related origin has not been proved, but they include an increased number of musculoskeletal disorders reflecting the risks of handling heavy loads and faster work paces.

Tableau 1 Compensated work accidents. Street sweepers, refuse collectors and allied workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total cases</td>
<td>9,088</td>
<td>9,169</td>
<td>8,543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of which, workers travelling to/from work</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatalities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of which, workers travelling to/from work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Inail, database on occupations

"After seven years’ doing this kind of job, they’re worn out: binmen die young."
Research into the causes of musculoskeletal disorders

The National Work Accident and Occupational Disease Insurance Agency (Inail) recently did two research studies into musculoskeletal disorders among Italian refuse collectors. One looked at 701 accidents occurring between 2008 and 2010 as a result of “physical strain on the musculoskeletal system”. Fifty percent of the accidents were related to an “improper” body movement (mostly trips, leg or ankle sprains) and 26% occurred while moving objects and equipment (mostly when lifting, carrying or standing up).

The second study focused on repetitive movements in manual sweeping. Inail conducted a field survey of Genoa council street sweepers. The ergonomic analysis focused on identifying the risks associated with manual street sweeping, characterized by repetitive actions, handling of loads and walking including in areas where the street is uneven or obstructed by vehicles or littered with refuse. The risks were evaluated by the OCRA Index methodology to assess the upper limb musculoskeletal disorder risk from repetitive tasks.

Of the fifteen tasks analyzed, almost all showed a risk present for workers of both genders. The risk index was generally higher for women. The most gruelling tasks are sweeping brick stairs and small cobblestone surfaces (creuza, typical Genoese alleyways), and where there are leaves and on rissēu (small black and white pebble mosaic). For women, the risk is even higher when the bucket (bulacco) has to be carried on the shoulder as happens especially when cleaning creuza and rissēu.

Sources

Guercio A. et al. (2012) Analisi statistica degli infortuni e studio dei movimenti ripetuti nelle attività di igiene urbana nelle aziende dei servizi ambientali e territoriali, Roma, INAIL.

Guercio A., Todaro N. and Sarto D. (s.d.) Studio del rischio da movimenti ripetuti nelle attività di igiene urbana presso l’azienda AMIU spa di Genova, Roma, INAIL.

Research to reduce musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)

In 2011, the trade unions and employers’ organisations in Federambiente (260 firms) set up the Rubes Triva National Safety Foundation with the aim of promoting workplace health training and information initiatives and giving support to businesses in the sector to spread a prevention culture. The Foundation conducted joint research with Inail based on data on strain- and repetitive movement-related work accidents to workers in Federambiente member companies (see box).

“The information from these studies is concerning and shows the urgent need to act on the ergonomics of refuse collectors’ jobs. That is why CEEP, which we are a member of, strongly supported the proposal for a Directive on musculoskeletal disorders which the European Commission has since dropped”, says Rubes Triva Foundation consultant Luca Casale.

EU rules on MSDs may be going nowhere, but in-country initiatives are starting to yield their first measurable benefits. “After a study in Genoa we purchased equipment with ergonomic features that ease and reduce the strain of movements for manual collection in the historic centre, where mechanical means can’t be used, and we are working on job rotation between men and women”, explains Giuseppe Dagnino, the prevention manager of the city’s environmental sanitation departments.

Ergonomic issues have to be addressed by looking at work organization, argues Gabriella Duca, who is coordinating ongoing research commissioned from the University of Naples’ Laboratory of Applied and Experimental Economics. “We want to identify the ergonomic problems from manual and mechanical movements made when handling wheelie bins which stem from the fact these activities are carried out in a setting where physical factors (ranging from the type of waste through the weather conditions and features of the dustcarts to road wear, etc.) interplay with human and organizational factors. We will be doing a job analysis using a descriptive method based on direct observation. The result will be proposals to improve the use of work equipment, refuse collection workflows and collection routes.”
The Rubes Triva Foundation has also supported research by the Institute of Management of Sant’Anna de Pise Graduate School to assess the cost of work accidents in the environmental health sector.

**Alarm bells over ageing workers**

"Pension reform means we shall have refuse collectors having to work up to the age of 65. Even today, the average age is 45, rising to 55 in central and southern Italy. After seven years' doing this kind of job, they're worn out: binmen die young. We are sitting on a powder keg when you think that the average age of refuse collectors in Naples is 58", cautions Massimo Cenciotti. Research published in 2005 showed that "street sweeper and refuse collector" are the jobs with the worst records in terms of health and life expectancy at age 35ª.

That Italian manufacturers are failing to develop ergonomic work equipment is obviously not helping to improve matters. "Manufacturers must be encouraged to make more ergonomic equipment and close Italy’s environmental shortfall where only 150 patients are registered each year compared to 5,000 in Germany", stresses the union rep.

So, what are the unions doing about these problems? "When a fatal work accident happens, the union will often denounce it in strong terms. But they have a hard time standing up to companies, especially private sector environmental sanitation contractors, who often say these matters are none of their concern", says Cenciotti. The trade unionist also argues that health and safety at work is manipulated to other ends: "Instead of striking, they threaten to enforce all the preventive and protective measures."

"I firmly believe that the union must rely more on workers' safety reps who should be directly elected by the workers, and not appointed by the union reps. This would create a direct relationship between elected officials and those they represent", says Cenciotti. To support and train these reps, the CGIL public service workers’ union held a day conference for workers’ safety and work environment reps last November to coincide with the RSU elections. The Rubes Triva Foundation was tasked with developing a large-scale training plan to get workers’ safety reps more involved so they can make better use of all their powers. "We want to support an awareness in public enterprises that workers’ safety reps are a resource for the company", says Massimo Cenciotti.
EU waste legislation: current situation and future developments

The European Union’s policy on waste aims to make waste management more efficient throughout the Union, treating waste as a resource and moving towards a European recycling society in which the Member States can develop autonomous waste elimination systems.

Aïda Ponce del Castillo
ETUI
EU waste policy aims to make waste management more efficient for the Union as a whole by managing waste as a resource and moving towards a European recycling society in which Member States can develop self-sufficient waste disposal systems.

The current EU waste regulations are complex. The general framework is laid down in the Waste Framework Directive\(^1\) and the Waste Shipment Regulation\(^2\). The next legislative level consists of texts that cover waste treatment operations, such as the Industrial Emissions Directive (Waste Incineration)\(^3\) and the Landfill Directive\(^4\). Finally, there is a third level of legislation, with seven specific laws that deal with different waste streams: sewage sludge in agriculture; packaging and packaging waste; PCBs/PCTs; end-of-life vehicles; batteries and accumulators; restriction of hazardous substances in electrical and electronic equipment (RoHS 2); and waste electrical and electronic equipment.

**Waste Framework Directive**

The EU umbrella regulation is the Waste Framework Directive (WFD), which provides definitions of key concepts such as waste, end-of-waste status, re-use and recycling.

The Waste Framework Directive was adopted in 2008 and its main objectives are to move the EU closer to a ‘recycling society’, avoid waste generation, use waste as a resource, reduce the adverse environmental and health impacts of waste, and move Europe’s energy and resource efficiency towards the creation of a ‘circular economy’\(^5\). The WFD takes into account the precautionary principle laid down in the Treaty on European Union and is based on three main principles.

**Prevention:** this refers to two aspects: prevention of waste and prevention of the harmful effects of waste. Taking a life-cycle approach, the Directive puts waste prevention at the top of the hierarchy of waste options to be applied by Member States when developing their national waste policies, followed by preparing for re-use, recycling, other recovery (notably energy recovery) and disposal.

The Directive also states that the Member States should establish waste prevention programmes by 12 December 2013. These should describe the existing prevention measures, determine appropriate specific qualitative or quantitative benchmarks for waste prevention measures and establish indicators for waste prevention measures\(^6\). Progress should be reported to the Commission periodically.

**Polluter-pays principle:** this principle is laid down in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and aims to prevent and remedy environmental damage. In accordance with this principle, the costs of waste management shall be borne by the original waste producer or by the current or previous waste holders.

**Extended producer responsibility:** this aims to strengthen the re-use and the prevention, recycling and other recovery of waste. However, implementation is at the discretion of Member States.

It should be noted that often these principles are not translated into concrete policies as it is up to Member States to implement

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5. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation describes the circular economy as a system that aims to ‘design out’ waste. It is a shift towards using renewable energy, eliminating the use of toxic chemicals, which impair re-use, and eradicating waste through the careful design of materials, products, systems and, consequently, business models.
6. As of 17 January 2014, 14 Member States plus parts of Belgium and the UK had adopted waste prevention plans. Only four of the plans include specific quantitative targets.
them, taking into account their specific national context and circumstances. The Court of Justice has even ruled that the Member States are free to transpose the polluter-pays principle as they see fit.

**Waste Shipment Regulation**

The movement of waste is an important international trade issue. The EU is the world’s largest exporter and importer of non-hazardous waste destined for recovery (before the US and China). In 2011, it accounted for: 35.5% of the world’s exports (US: 4.5%, China: 21.4%) and 44.5% of the world’s imports (US: 18%, China: 1%). European paper and plastic are often recycled in Asia.

The Waste Shipment Regulation aims to supervise and control such shipments in order to protect both human health and the environment. It applies to all international waste shipments, for all purposes, within, into or out of the European Union. The EU has basically transposed into its legislation the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, which is therefore binding on all EU states.

EU legislation also includes provisions on the shipment of waste between Member States, through a system of prior authorisation for the shipment of waste for disposal or recovery, a compulsory notification system and a standard consignment note for shipments of waste. Member States are obliged to take the necessary steps to inspect, sample and monitor waste shipments. They must carry out inspections, spot checks and physical checks of shipments.

Despite its binding nature, this legislation is enforced differently in the various Member States, as proven by a recent audit carried out in eight EU countries.

The examples below highlight the complexity of the problem:

1. There are weaknesses in the information systems, with no clear policies and guidelines for tackling problems related to data collection and reporting. As a result, statistical data can be incomplete or unreliable and it is more difficult to pursue information-based enforcement, monitoring and review. The comparability of statistical data on inspections, infringements and sanctions is hampered by the lack of a protocol for the collection, registration and reporting of such data.

2. There are two different tariff code systems. The tariff codes that the Waste Shipment Regulation and the Basel Convention use differ from the international tariff codes used by customs authorities. So far, only one of the eight countries has developed a conversion table so that tariff codes can be used to select high-risk shipments for inspection by customs authorities that have to declare them.

3. The enforcement policy in several countries is not sufficiently based on an explicit risk assessment. For instance, the audit states that there is clear evidence in several countries that hazardous waste is imported or exported as ‘goods’ and/or as ‘green-listed waste’ (non-hazardous waste intended for recovery), which is a way of avoiding the procedures set out in the Regulation.

These aspects, combined with the limited number of inspections, the inability to trace different waste streams, the differences in how infringements are penalised and the low levels of sanction in some countries all constitute serious problems. This situation also increases the risk of waste being shipped illegally and results in improper treatment of waste.

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**Figure 1** Main legal instruments forming the EU waste acquis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework Treatment Streams</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Waste Framework Directive</strong></td>
<td>2008/98 (includes municipal and construction demolition waste)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Industrial Emissions Directive</strong></td>
<td>(Waste Incineration) 2010/75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Landfill Directive</strong></td>
<td>1999/31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sewage sludge</strong></td>
<td>1986/278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Packaging</strong></td>
<td>1994/62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PCB/PCT</strong></td>
<td>1996/59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>End-of-life vehicles</strong></td>
<td>2000/53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Batteries</strong></td>
<td>2006/66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Waste electrical and electronic equipment</strong></td>
<td>2012/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hazardous substances in electrical and electronic equipment</strong></td>
<td>2011/65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: European Commission (2013)
With regard to international trade, in the framework of the negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and the United States, it is evident that further reflection is needed on the issue of waste shipment inspections and controls, and the other effects of such transport.

Directives on waste treatment operations

Two main Directives comprise this second level of EU waste legislation, focusing on waste treatment operations: the Industrial Emissions Directive (Waste Incineration) and the Landfill Directive. The Industrial Emissions Directive (Waste Incineration) aims to achieve a high level of environmental and health protection. To this end, it imposes obligations on industrial activities with a major pollution potential, through permits and specific discharge requirements. These measures are designed to avoid or minimise polluting emissions in the atmosphere the air, water and soil, as well as waste from industrial and agricultural installations.

Various industrial sectors with a major pollution potential are targeted: energy industries, metal industry, mineral industries, chemical industry, waste management, rearing of animals, etc. Specific provisions are also included for specific facilities such as combustion plants and waste incineration or co-incineration plants, among others.

The Landfill Directive lays down strict requirements for landfills to prevent and minimise their negative effects on the environment (water, soil, air) and human health. It defines the different categories of waste (municipal waste, hazardous waste, non-hazardous waste and inert waste) and defines landfills as waste disposal sites for the deposit of waste onto or into land. Landfills are divided into three classes: landfills for hazardous waste, landfills for non-hazardous waste and landfills for inert waste.

The Directive lays down a standard waste acceptance procedure so as to avoid risks. In particular, it states that waste must be treated before being landfilled. It also lists certain types of waste that may not be accepted in a landfill (liquid waste, used tyres, etc.).

Finally, the Directive sets up a system of operating permits for landfill sites and states that the Member States must ensure that existing landfill sites do not continue to operate unless they comply with the provisions of the Directive.

Directives on waste streams

The Directives on waste streams deal with the management of specific waste categories. Their objective is to ensure the efficient and environmentally sound management of waste streams: sewage sludge; batteries and accumulators; packaging and packaging waste; PCBs and PCTs; end-of-life vehicles; hazardous substances (recast Directive); waste electrical and electronic equipment (recast Directive).

Sewage sludge: the Directive seeks to encourage the use of sewage sludge in agriculture and to regulate its use in such a way as to prevent harmful effects on soil, vegetation, animals and humans. To this end, it prohibits the use of untreated sludge on agricultural land unless it is injected or worked into the soil.

Batteries and accumulators: the Directive prohibits the placing on the market of most batteries and accumulators with a certain mercury or cadmium content. It establishes rules for their collection, recycling, treatment and disposal.

Packaging and packaging waste: the Directive focuses on preventing packaging waste and promoting re-use, recovery and recycling of packaging waste, with a view to preventing or reducing its impact on the environment.

Disposal of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and polychlorinated terphenyls (PCTs): polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) belong to a group of man-made chemicals known as persistent organic pollutants (POPs). PCBs are classified as probable human carcinogens and have numerous adverse effects in animals and humans. The Directive on the disposal of PCBs and PCTs lays down the requirements for environmentally sound disposal of PCBs, including inventories of equipment containing PCBs and plans for disposal.
Large volumes of illegal waste are shipped out, much of which is hazardous.

End-of-life vehicles: the Directive aims to limit the production of waste arising from end-of-life vehicles, organise waste collection and organise waste treatment. It also seeks to increase re-use, recycling and recovery of end-of-life vehicles and their components, and to facilitate dismantling through information on components and materials. It lays down numerous requirements for European vehicle manufacturers, which should design vehicles that are easy to recycle.

Electrical and electronic equipment: the Directive promotes the collection and recycling of electrical and electronic equipment. The recast of the Directive on waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE) lays down new collection targets (85% of WEEE generated, or 20 kg per capita from 2019 onwards). It also gives Member States the ability to fight illegal export of waste, in particular illegal shipments of WEEE disguised as legal shipments of used equipment. Finally, the recast Directive harmonises national registration and reporting requirements.

Restriction of hazardous substances (RoHS 2): the Directive restricts the use of hazardous substances in electrical and electronic equipment. The recast Directive seeks to increase the amount of e-waste that is appropriately treated and to reduce the volume that goes to disposal.

Future of EU waste legislation and ‘Better regulation’

The European Union’s ‘Better Regulation’ agenda was launched by the Barroso Commission in 2004. Its main aim is to reduce administrative costs for businesses by simplifying the existing legislation. It moves away from the precautionary principle by extending the use of regulatory impact assessments and measuring administrative costs with a view to increasing competitiveness.

The ‘Better Regulation’ approach is being used for the critical assessment and scrutiny of many important pieces of sectoral legislation. In addition to health and safety legislation, it also covers the Strategy for Sustainable Development and the environmental programmes, thereby simplifying environmental policy.

In 2012, the Commission put SMEs at the core of the ‘Better Regulation’ agenda. Following a consultation, they identified the 10 most burdensome laws, including the legislation on shipments of waste, the waste framework legislation and the Waste Framework Directive.

To respond to this need for simpler legislation, the Commission is working on a review of waste policy. DG Environment has the task of improving implementation and cutting down on unnecessary reporting or other administrative procedures in waste legislation. Support for actions such as ‘fitness checks’ of legislation will help to identify burdens, gaps and inconsistencies, and how a sector should be adapted.

In its 2013 roadmap entitled ‘Review of Waste Policy and Legislation’, the Commission states it will carry out a review of waste policy and legislation, and present the results in 2014. Three elements will be covered: a review of key targets in EU waste legislation (in line with the review clauses in the Waste Framework Directive, the Landfill Directive and the Packaging Directive); a ‘fitness check’ of five of the Directives dealing with separate waste streams; and an assessment of how best to tackle plastic waste, following on from the 2013 Green Paper on Plastic Waste.

The review will be based on the objectives of the Resource Efficiency Roadmap, the need to ensure sustainable access to raw materials and the Thematic Strategy on the Prevention and Recycling of Waste, which highlights the need to modernise, simplify and ensure the consistency of waste legislation.

Review of targets

The targets to be reviewed by 2014 are the following:

— the Waste Framework Directive lays down targets for the preparation for re-use and the recycling of waste materials from household and possibly from other origins, and targets on preparation for re-use, recycling and other material recovery, including backfilling operations, on non-hazardous construction and demolition waste to be achieved by 2020;
— the Landfill Directive lays down progressive targets for the reduction of landfilling of biodegradable waste, the last target to be achieved in 2016;
— the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive lays down differentiated recycling and recovery targets for several categories of packaging waste.

The following targets are to be achieved by 2020, although there are no penalties if they are not achieved.

Waste Framework Directive targets:
— increase re-use and recycling of waste materials from households, e.g. at least paper, metal, plastic and glass, to 50%;
— increase re-use, recycle and other material recovery of non-hazardous construction and demolition waste to 70%.

Landfill Directive targets:
— reduce the amount of biodegradable municipal waste going to landfills to 35%.

Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive:
— 60% as a minimum by weight of packaging waste should be recovered or incinerated at waste incineration plants with energy recovery; 55% as a minimum and 80% as a maximum by weight of packaging waste should be recycled; the following minimum recycling targets for materials contained in packaging waste should be attained:
— 60% by weight for glass;
— 60% by weight for paper and board;
— 50% by weight for metals;
— 22.5% by weight for plastics, counting exclusively material recycled back into plastics;
— 15% by weight for wood.
'Fitness check' of Directives on waste streams

The following five Directives will be covered by the ‘fitness check’:
- Directive 86/278/EEC on the protection of the environment, and in particular of the soil, when sewage sludge is used in agriculture;
- Directive 94/62/EC on packaging and packaging waste;
- Directive 96/59/EC on the disposal of polychlorinated biphenyls and polychlorinated terphenyls (PCB/PCT);
- Directive 2006/66/EC on batteries and accumulators and waste batteries and accumulators.

Green Paper on Plastic Waste

In March 2013, the European Commission launched a broad public consultation on how best to tackle plastic waste in the context of the current waste policy framework. The final report was published in November 2013 and identifies several important topics for the respondents: waste management, waste prevention, legislation, market and market-based instruments, awareness-raising and communication. The EU’s legislative framework for waste is complex and will continue to be so, despite or because of the upcoming fitness checks and overall review of the legislation. In addition to its complexity, the main issue is the way in which the Member States implement the legislation or fail to implement it. Added to this are the numerous illegal waste activities that affect all EU citizens and the long-term investment that is required in waste management and infrastructure.

Three challenges require investment and stricter rules in the EU and its Member States.

Illegal waste is increasing in the EU. Large volumes of illegal waste are shipped out, much of which is hazardous. These illegal shipments are a crime and disrupt proper waste treatment. Inspection authorities report a lack of information and an inability to gather and track information. The Member States need to ensure that are meeting their commitments under the corresponding EU Directives, including verification of the purpose of the shipment and the safety requirements.

How to tackle plastic bags?

The negotiations on the ban on plastic bags in the EU have been controversial. The Commission estimates that every EU citizen uses around 200 plastic bags every year. Last November, a legislative proposal to reduce plastic waste was blocked by the Commission’s Secretary-General, Catherine Day, who prevented it from going to an inter-service consultation. Instead, Environment Commissioner Janez Potocnik suggested a ban on or reduction in the number of plastic bags through the introduction of a charge. A political agreement between ministers is expected by June 2014, under the Greek Presidency. This ‘weak’ measure was criticised by Margrete Auken MEP (Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance), who highlighted the Commission’s failure to set clear targets for reducing lightweight plastic bags and leaving it up to Member States to decide how and to what extent to reduce the number of plastic bags.

The second aspect relates to the incinerator plants in Europe and the waste they produce. Incinerators do not make waste disappear; they transform it into ash, gases, heavy metals and toxic compounds that can be hazardous to human health and the environment. Action must be taken to divert waste from incinerators and promote recycling instead.

The EU exports large volumes of waste to emerging or developing countries. Between 250,000 tonnes and 1.3 million tonnes of used electrical products, including computers, televisions and refrigerators, which contain hazardous substances, are shipped out of the EU to West Africa and Asia every year. Household rubbish is even shipped to Latin America, labelled as clean plastic for recycling. There are also numerous shipments of waste between countries in Europe, including illegal shipments.

The European Union therefore has an important role to play in supporting other countries, including West African states, to develop environmentally and socially sound recycling systems.
“The bottom line is that sorting’s done by people”

Belgium has had household paper and recyclable packaging waste collections for years. The collected refuse was long almost entirely hand-sorted. Sorting centres have recently invested in machinery to automate some operations. Modernisation does not automatically make the job any less gruelling.

Denis Grégoire
ETUI
An overpowering acrid stench fills the nostrils of the few pedestrians who venture into this inhospitable part of the Brussels south borough of Forest. It comes from the huge “manure heap” formed by the hundreds of thousands of bags of garden waste collected from the European capital’s residents. The smell makes you not want to linger outside the gates of the metropolitan area’s only composting centre in a motorway no man’s land. Ever since the 19th century,noxious human activities have been shunted out to the edge of towns. Slaughterhouses, for example. Waste and recycling – very much a growth industry – is no exception to the rule that jobs – and those that do them – that offend people’s sensibilities get relegated to the outskirts.

A few hundred metres further on, in a shed the size of two football pitches occupied by Recyclis, a hundred RCVs (refuse collection vehicles) are working. Try to dump your valuable payload. Don’t call it rubbish! The tonnes of paper, cardboard and PMC (Plastic, Metal packaging and drinks Cartons) collected door-to-door for twenty-odd years in Belgium, would once have gone for incineration or to landfill but are now a valuable resource for creating a new raw material. But before the soft drink and water bottles are turned into plastic “chaff” used to manufacture duvets and polar fleece clothing, they have to be sorted. That is where Recyclis – a private company whose sole shareholder is the Brussels-Capital Region (population around 1.2 million) – comes in.

Sheep’s head

A six-strong crew working with machine-like precision pull rejects from the endless conveyor or which shoots through freesheets and other discarded paper items – a 1980s atlas, some black and white family photos unearthed from an attic – at high speed. Less emotive but more colourful, thousands of plastic bottles bob along a second conveyor where a second crew of six workers has been at it since half past six this morning. On one side of the vast shed, a yellow line – for paper – on the other side, a blue line – for PMC’s. The afternoon shifts will take over at three o’clock, and work through till 11.00 at night.

Screwdrivers are removed and put aside. There’s nothing you won’t find in the collection bags. “Some people just dump stuff they want to get rid of cheaply into the bags; bottles of toxic chemicals like white spirit; even dead animals or sheep’s heads”, fumes Dicko Boubou, a Recyclis health and safety committee (HSC) rep. Even firearms have apparently been found in the blue bags.

Managing by creating inter-worker rivalries

“The boss pressures us to work at a crazy pace”, says Godelieve. For 33 years she has worked for Vanbreuze, a family textile firm established in 1878. Her days are spent sorting clothing – several tonnes of it. It’s physically exhausting work from standing all day long, repetitive movements, permanent exposure to dust from the old clothes, huge temperature differences because the shed which is their workplace is run-down and poorly insulated, etc.

It is also mentally demanding work. The clothes shoot by on a conveyor and the workers have to pick out at a glance the characteristics and quality of the cloth, and sort them by type of material, size, colour, etc. Once sorted, the clothes will be sold on through second hand shops, exported – mainly to Africa – or turned into rags for industry. These gruelling working conditions have been made worse in recent years by a work atmosphere that is literally and figuratively unbearable.

Despite public education campaigns in selective sorting, some people still seem unaware that their waste is processed by hand. There’s a risk of workers cutting their hands, and some have had to have hospital treatment for needlestick injuries from hypodermics hidden among the plastic bottles. Pre-sorting is the highest-risk operation, when the plastic bags are ripped open to discard rejects, especially those that might jam the machines.

Thirty years ago the company still had 300 employees. Now, there are just 62, including 11 on long-term sick leave. The firm’s problems are obviously not making for harmonious labour relations. In a sluggish economy, the employer seems to favour pitting workers against each other. “Every truck is weighed, so the boss knows what quantities of clothes each of us processes every day. He keeps a list, with the names of the least productive workers circled on it”, says one of Godelieve’s workmates.

Since the early 2000s, the firm has been mainly hiring foreign workers, chiefly Bulgarians living in Brussels or Ghent, even though the plant is located in the small industrial town of Opwijk. The workers speak no Dutch, are mostly younger and take no interest in trade union activities. “Many came in as self-employed, but were eventually taken on as employees because management got scared of what the unions might do”, says Bart Deceukelier from the Christian trade union ACV-CSC Metae which looks after metal and textile workers’ interests.

"Some people just dump stuff they want to get rid of cheaply into the bags."
Lowest bidder wins – at what price?

Household waste policy is a regional authority responsibility in Belgium, but organizing its collection and management has been delegated to local authorities. Refuse collection has long been done by local council workers, but councils are increasingly putting the job out to tender from private companies.

And there’s the rub, because local council contracts are generally let out to the lowest bidder irrespective of its workers’ pay and employment conditions. In the Liège region (eastern Belgium), a non-profit association, Terre, recently bagged the recyclables collection contract from under the nose of two European waste industry giants, Britain’s Shanks and France’s Sita.

“Public services are not setting a good example. They should be using responsible businesses”, protests CSC union regional official Marc Delvenne. He is at a loss to understand the decision because Terre has a very singular view of worker representation. “In the 2012 workplace elections, the prospective candidates ended up not standing after pressure from the employer.” An employer more than ready to play up to the press his in-house “alternative” model of direct democracy. A question that might be asked is whether the association’s workers are free to speak their mind.

The point is that Terre’s 300-odd workers are a particularly vulnerable group which includes ex-offenders and people with mild disabilities. The association comes under a “catch-all” collective agreement that lets it pay workers 9 euros an hour compared to 13 euros for workers in “conventional” companies in the sector who are covered by a more favourable collective agreement. Adding insult to injury, Terre supports social economy projects in Third World countries and claims … to be combating poverty in both North and South.

Two new sorting lines were put in in April 2012 which can automatically remove making some aspects of the job a less thankless task, the work pace is now set by the protection system. Previously, all the contents of twelve of us on the old line, now there are just emptied bags had to be sorted by hand.

Six; work rates have speeded up”, says Philippe Boon, also an HSC rep. And the workforce has shrunk from 80 to 8 employees.

And then there’s the dust – everywhere. A thick carpet of the stuff coating the endless pipework of the two lines and literally getting into your throat. “The new paper line pumps out the dust”, complains Philippe Boon. “It’s fitted with extractors, but how can you avoid dust with the huge quantities of materials processed? And the extractors make a real racket.”

Since the new lines started up, the workers have been having hearing problems. “We’re all going deaf”, warns HSC rep Gregory De Bood. It’s a worrying development – the new lines have only been in service less than two years. “The occupational doctor had a laboratory do measurements which found very high noise levels”, reports Spero Houmey, the FGTB (central federation for manual workers) official for the waste sector.

Management knows there is a problem and is willing to find a solution to minimise the causes of harm, but singles out the machine manufacturer. “The machine is still under warranty. We’ll see with the manufacturer if the noise can be cut down. Each machine on its own meets the standards for noise, but the problem is when they’re all going at once. The building being all sheet metal and right by the motorways doesn’t help matters. But workers also have to wear their earplugs”, said Philip Robinet, chief operating officer since 2012. As for the dust, Mr Robinet says that the workers have been provided with masks and recent measurements by a laboratory have shown that the dust standards were being met.

Health records

Outside the shed, forklift drivers are loading bales of compressed PMC onto a trailer. A PMC bale weighs about 300 kg; a bale of paper/cardboard up to 800 kg. So safety awareness is key. Happily, serious work accidents are rare, claims the chief operating officer, backed up by the shop stewards’ committee. This is why the workers’ representatives on the HSC have decided to focus their efforts on work-related diseases. Besides the noise and dust problems already mentioned, the Recyclis workers also suffer from musculoskeletal disorders – as do nearly a third of all European workers. The forklift drivers get back, shoulder and neck pains, while sorters suffer from tendinitis, back and leg pains – obviously, for they are on their feet all day.

Assisted by the occupational doctor, the shop stewards’ committee plans to create a record for each worker containing full information on any work-related health problems and their development throughout working life. The record would be made available to the family doctor who would be the only one apart from the occupational doctor and worker to have access to it. Occupational health usually tends to be a no-go area for general practice; it is also true that few GPs concern themselves with it and think about their patients’ working conditions, so the FGTB decided to support the unique approach of the Recyclis trade unionists.

At this juncture, the concern is less how management will receive the initiative – “it’s a firm you can talk to”, acknowledge the union reps – than the decisions taken at a higher level.

“The regional authorities have decided to reorganize recyclable waste collection through a system of communal wheeled bins without consulting the workers who process that waste”, laments Spero Houmey. The union official fears that the quality of waste collected will go down. “The authorities play up the sector’s economic vigour, but are completely disregarding health issues, and forgetting that the bottom line is that sorting’s done by people”, fumes the union official.
Heavy metals and vulnerability, a toxic cocktail for electronics recycling workers

In early 2013, the French media reported on health problems among workers at the computer monitor and television reclamation plant Environment Recycling in Allier (Auvergne). The workers who were exposed to toxic dust released during CRT crushing operations were experiencing a range of ailments. Analyses of dust samples commissioned by the CGT trade union confederation showed it to contain no less than 28 toxic compounds including lead, silicon, barium and antimony. A year on from the revelations, HesaMag asked CGT officer for the department, Laurent Indrusiak, to update us on developments.

Interview by Denis Grégoire, 10 February 2014

Could you briefly remind us how the CGT came to expose this state of affairs?

Laurent Indrusiak – It came to light when a GP noticed that a number of his patients were complaining of unusual fatigue, nosebleeds, digestive disorders, etc. Blood tests showed up blood lead levels between 260 and 350 micrograms per litre of blood, which is well above normal. The doctor then realized that his patients all worked for the same company, Environnement Recycling. So he contacted the CGT. We had analyses done of dust samples provided to us by workers in the CRT crushing shop, which were found to contain toxic compounds. We notified the employer, workplace health service and health and safety inspectorate. As company management weren’t interested and the authorities responsible for monitoring and protecting workers’ health were doing nothing, the CGT went to the press.

Why would the workplace health service and HSW inspectorate do nothing about it?

L.I. – As the investigation went forward, it turned out that the occupational doctor had in fact taken action on the blood test results. We found out that he had actually challenged in writing the contents of a health and safety committee (HSC) report saying there were no health problems among the company’s workers, even though two employees whose blood tests showed blood lead levels of 600 micrograms had been moved to other work. But apparently company management just shrugged it off. They seem to think that because their business will get much worse in the years to come. With help from the Henri Pézerat Foundation we are compiling case files that should end up in court cases. A complaint will be filed to get recognition and compensation for “injury through anxiety”. A criminal complaint is also likely to be laid for “reckless endangerment of life” because the employer knew that there was exposure to toxic dust and wilfully exposed its employees to that risk.

How could the HSC take that line when workers’ reps are meant to be on it?

L.I. – In fact, the workers’ reps on the HSC are not union members. They were appointed by the works council from management nominees. When we met them, it soon became clear that they were not very well up on employment law and were clearly not immune to pressure from company management.

Is it to do with the kind of workers employed in this industry?

L.I. – There is a clear connection, it’s true. The company employs about 180 workers, all of them under employment opportunity scheme contracts which can be renewed three times for a total of 18 months maximum. We’ve found that not many workers get their contract extended after this period. Many of them have had fairly chequered lives. Some have had alcohol or drug abuse issues, and sometimes been in trouble with the law. The plant also has a sheltered workshop that employs people with disabilities. So you can see that the company’s workers are extremely vulnerable, either because of their employment contract or their past lives. They often get told: “Environnement Recycling is the last chance saloon for you!”

How is your organization planning to improve health and safety at work for these workers?

L.I. – After the CGT’s information campaign and media reports, the company finally decided to fit a suction and exhaust system last November. It’s too soon as yet to tell how effective it is. Even though they no longer work for the company, we are still looking after the interests of the workers who first complained about their working conditions and their health impact. Of the 23 employees whose cases we were supervising for employees from 200 micrograms.

2. A French toxicologist who warned of the dangers of asbestos in the 1970s. The Foundation named after him continues his fight against chemical hazards in the workplace, in particular by providing scientific support to workers trying to get recognition of their health damage.
3. Recognized by the French Supreme Court of Appeal in 2010, “injury through anxiety” comprises the mental distress suffered by employees exposed to a carcinogen from the simple fact of knowing they are likely to develop a disease even though it has not yet manifested.
OSH in the green economy – a victim or an integrated aim?

We are in the process of transforming production and consumption in the direction of more environmentally adapted products and processes. How good are we at applying a holistic perspective and including a healthy and safe working environment as an integrated aim of the sustainable and green businesses and workplaces?

Aan-Beth Antonsson
IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute

Toxic resins are used in wind turbine manufacture and repair.
Image: © Belga/AFP
The aim to reduce environmental load through, for example, resource efficiency, energy efficiency and detoxification of materials and processes has led to many changes such as new products and processes, new chemicals and raw materials including the increased use of renewable resources, new methods for reducing waste and for handling, reusing and recycling waste, new methods that reduce energy consumption and new methods, including biofuels, for energy production.

All these changes affect work life and working environments. New professions arise, e.g. in building and maintaining windmills for energy production, or sorting waste to make it possible to recycle it in the form of as-pure-as-possible materials, or growing energy forests for biofuel production.

**Risks arising from the green economy**

There are several examples of changes introduced out of an urge to reduce the environmental load and develop environmentally friendly processes that have resulted in new and sometimes severe occupational health or safety problems.

Reuse of waste such as electronic products is a very complex process. To be able to recycle material, the material has to be as pure as possible, and this sometimes demands manual dismantling which may lead to the creation of workplaces with poor ergonomics. Additionally, the exposure to flame-retardants emitted during dismantling and the risks associated with exposure to these substances has been discussed.

The introduction of windmills has introduced new and risky workplaces and operations, e.g. in the maintenance of windmills but also in their production for which hazardous chemicals are used. Maintenance on windmills includes entering the windmill and, as the construction is usually very high, it is often difficult to access the top of the windmill. Access to the exterior top of the windmill is also a risky operation.

In the process of phasing out trichloroethylene as a degreasing agent, new chemicals were introduced. Some of these had unforeseen properties that caused new health risks such as limonene (a terpene present in e.g. citrus peel) which is oxidized in contact with air and forms sensitizing substances or glycol ethers of a type which has been shown to be reprotoxic. In Sweden these new degreasing agents were introduced as the environmentally friendly solution to the degreasing problem, but were promptly phased out once these problems had become apparent (see box, p. 39).

Another example is the replacement of the amalgam (which contains mercury) used for dental fillings by acrylates. After the introduction of acrylates, allergies increased among dentists and dental nurses due to skin contact with these products. In Sweden allergies are now decreasing, as the problem has been recognized, the handling of the acrylates has improved, and skin contact has been reduced.

There are several other examples of substitutions and introduction of new chemicals and materials that have led to an increase in allergies, due to the new materials. Such examples include, for example, an increased use of biocides when solvent-based paints are substituted for water-based ones. Another example is the new preference for environmentally friendly natural materials on which mould and bacteria may grow and spread dust that causes allergic alveolitis. The use of biofuels for energy production has also led to higher exposures to microorganisms, e.g. in the handling of wood chips, peat and household waste for incineration and energy production. Microorganisms can cause respiratory symptoms and illness, e.g ODTS (organic dust toxic syndrome), which causes flu-like symptoms, and allergic alveolitis which is is an inflammation of the alveoli within the lungs caused by hypersensitivity to inhaled organic dusts.

From an environmental point of view, allergies are not always recognized as a problem, which is why, from an occupational health and safety point of view, there is a need to pay special attention to sensitizing properties of new substances and materials.

**Recycling – the lessons to be learned**

At the end of the 1980s a great deal of effort was put into reducing and recycling waste. The aim was to reduce the environmental impact of waste but also to reduce consumption of resources by recycling material. One of the first plants for the sorting of waste in Europe was built in Denmark. The plant employed 20 workers, 15 of whom were exposed...
to dust from the sorting of waste. Nine employees developed symptoms such as upper airway infections or bronchitis and ODTS was suspected in the case of three employees. 53% of the workers developed lung disease during the first eight months of production. Inside the plant, which was enclosed and without effective ventilation, the concentrations of dust, endotoxins, bacteria and fungi were measured and found to be high. These findings led to several steps being taken to improve ventilation and reduce exposure. Though the measures were to some extent successful, the concentration of mould was still too high and eventually the plant was closed down.

In this example, the risks associated with the handling of organic waste – which may be dry or wet – were not identified and handled effectively enough. This kind of waste is an excellent breeding ground for bacteria and mould. In the handling of the waste, aerosols containing microorganisms are emitted. If the aerosols spread to the breathing zone of the workers, they will be exposed to microorganisms that may cause different kinds of lung symptoms and diseases.

It is interesting to reflect on what could have prevented the outbreak of these lung diseases. Preventive action is based on thorough knowledge of risks and potential control measures and their effect. In the case of the recycling plant, this would include the following: knowledge of the microbiological risks that may occur from handling organic waste and using that knowledge in the planning of the plant and risk assessment of the new jobs; knowledge of methods that effectively reduce the emission and spreading of microorganisms to the working environment. Knowledge alone is not, however, enough. The knowledge has to be applied in the planning and design of the plant and the work processes. Additionally, there is a need for maintenance of the plant including the control measures that prevent the spread of aerosols from the waste, in order to keep exposure to microorganisms at or below acceptable levels.

The above examples illustrate problems that may arise with the green economy. Of course, the changes implemented to reduce the environmental load do not always cause problems. There is no automatic connection between the purpose of the change and its outcome in terms of occupational health, safety, quality or costs. For example, the phasing out of both cadmium and lead is in general advantageous for the working environment. Even if there are advantages, there may also be drawbacks, which is why it is important to consider whether there are any other effects that may occur and that have to be attended to in order to prevent, for example, work-related accidents, diseases and symptoms when substances and materials are phased out.

**How can drawbacks associated with green changes be prevented?**

As we all know, risks can be prevented more effectively and at a lower cost if they are identified at an early stage and if there is a thorough understanding of risks as well as knowledge of the requisite control measures. For this reason it is important to carry out follow-up monitoring of the change, in order to identify any new and emerging problems.

One challenge stemming from changes towards a green economy is that many of the changes are based on new technologies and materials. Some of the risks associated with the changes may be well-known but new risks may also arise that are completely unknown or that are difficult to assess. Such risks may become apparent, what is more, only when the new technology has already been put into operation.

From the evaluation of the impact on occupational health and safety of changes to reduce environmental load that we have conducted at IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute, we can draw conclusions about what could have prevented the risks that have emerged.

It is important to include occupational health and safety experts, for example from occupational health services, early in the planning stages of new production processes and materials.

Appointing experts is not, however, enough. It is also important to ensure that the occupational health and safety expert has a thorough knowledge of similar products, processes, materials, etc. Lack of understanding of the content of the change will increase the risk of not identifying occupational health and safety risks. Even if the products, etc. are new, there is probably some relevant knowledge to be derived from experience in workplaces using similar products and processes.

In the evaluation of changes, it is important to adopt a holistic and systemic perspective on the change. It is necessary to consider the working environment as a whole, including risks of accidents, ergonomic, chemical health hazards, the psychosocial working environment, etc. It is likewise important to consider the entire production system, as changes in one part of the system may well affect other parts. Yet even with an ambitious planning of the change, it is impossible to foresee all risks. For this reason it is important to carry out follow-up monitoring of the change, in order to identify any new and emerging problems.

This way of dealing with change may seem simple and self-evident. The fact is, however, that the requisite steps and precautions are seldom applied and when this is the case the application is frequently only partial.

**What is special about changes towards a green economy?**

All changes are liable to create drawbacks as well as bonus-effects. This is the case with changes towards a green economy and their effects on occupational health and safety as well as with many other changes that take place at workplaces.

Whenever a change takes place, it is important to be aware of how it affects the workplace and of its potential side-effects alongside the intended and expected benefits.

From an occupational health and safety point of view, there is considerable
interest in the change towards the green economy. Is this interest unnecessary and uncalled for? I would say that it is important to keep track of developments towards a green economy and to evaluate the effects on the working environment with a view to preventing drawbacks. Sustainability is a strong driving force for development and innovation. The focus on the green economy will capture many of the on-going changes at workplaces. There are, however, many other kinds of change that it is important to monitor and evaluate.

One factor that makes the change towards a green economy especially interesting is that the new materials, technologies, etc. often include some kind of innovation. Innovation is especially interesting, as it will, by its very nature, include some unknowns. And unknowns may entail risks that it is difficult or even impossible to foresee.

Another fact that characterises many of the sustainability-oriented innovations is that they are often developed in small businesses. From a working environment perspective, this means an aggravation of circumstances, as small firms seldom have expertise of their own about occupational health and safety and rarely engage experts to support them with risk assessment, etc. if there are no obvious and recognized risks that have to be dealt with. The importance of small businesses in the context of the green economy is an aspect that should, from an occupational health and environmental perspective, be attended to and discussed.

It is also important to be aware of the need for a broad perspective on changes and to ensure that the change towards sustainability will include social aspects as well as a healthy and safe working environment.

A bonus-effect of this focus on evaluating the effects of the change towards a green economy could well be a greater awareness that it is important to evaluate all changes from a working environment perspective, regardless of the causes and purposes of the change.

As it is not possible to state that all changes towards a green economy have either a positive or a negative impact on the working environment, it is important to develop strategies to deal with the varying effects on OSH deriving from the green economy. In developing such strategies, we will encounter several challenges.

For decades it has been pointed out that it is important to include OHS experts, for example from occupational health services, in the early stages of planning and development. This is a practice that still does not work very well and to make it do so is a real challenge, not only for green products, but in relation to change of all kinds.

Another challenge is related to the small businesses that play such an important role in the development of green products. How can we ensure that they will identify potential OSH problems associated with the new green products and processes and take steps to deal with the risks in question?

One challenge is that, insofar as new materials may be related to emerging risks of allergies, all allergy-related risks need to be taken seriously, for this is a form of risk that, from an environmental perspective, is not always considered important.

The limonene story

Limonene was first introduced as a new natural degreasing agent that could be used to replace trichloroethylene. In one of the Swedish popular occupational health journals it was even presented as “citrus lemonade”. As often is the case with natural products, it was believed to be safe and healthy – almost to the point of being drinkable, hence the comparison with lemonade!

The truth is that limonene is a terpene, an organic solvent, with a Swedish threshold limit value of 150 mg/m³. At my research institute, IVL, we had a project in which we evaluated new degreasing agents from an occupational health perspective. In this context, we visited a few plants that had recently started using limonene for degreasing. At one of these plants, the operator used limonene in degreasing baths and handled the products to be degreased without gloves, dipping his hands in the bath. At another plant, limonene was sprayed on to the products, without proper ventilation. In parallel with our study, another research group discovered that limonene in contact with air, e.g. in a degreasing bath, was oxidised to a substance with allergenic properties. We concluded that using limonene as a degreasing agent was risky, due to skin exposure and exposure to aerosols, so that, if use of limonene was to be continued, precautionary steps were needed. After presentation of these studies, it became apparent that limonene was in fact not a good substitute for trichloroethylene, and since then I have not seen it used for degreasing.

Further reading


Photo report
“Bwala Five Five” – scavenging to survive

Olivier Ervyn
Olivier Ervyn is a Belgian documentary photographer who has dedicated his latest work to West Africa. The photos of the “Bwala Five Five” tip are part of a larger project focused on people at work and the risks they will take to scrape a meagre living. At the same time, he is preparing one project on African churches in Europe and another on the new forms of poverty in developed economies.
In 2012, 49 million tonnes of electrical and electronic waste were dumped around the world – about 20 kg for each person on the planet. These figures come from a report by the “Solving the e-waste problem” consortium of manufacturers, NGOs and UN agencies. The same study predicts that by 2017, e-waste will increase by one-third. It would be naive to think that these tens of millions of PCs, tablets and smartphones will be recycled in the countries where they were bought. The most worn-out will likely end up in landfill in Third World countries. Ghana has made a specialty of this kind of activity and has many other sites apart from Agbogbloshie, the rubbish tip made famous by the pictures of teenagers setting fire to it so as to recover the metals from electronic goods. “Bwala Five Five” is the code name chosen by the fifteen-odd women and children who gather at dawn on at the municipal landfill in Koforidua, a city of 130 000 inhabitants, waiting for the first dustcarts to roll in, hoping they will dump enough hard plastic objects and cans to resell. Plastic fetches 0.20 euros per kg, base metal only 0.08 euros.
Learning from Ravenna

Angelo Ferracuti

Short story writer, novelist and playwright Angelo Ferracuti’s latest book deals with the “Ravenna tragedy”, a 1987 industrial accident in which 13 shipyard workers died in this port city in north-eastern Italy. We asked him to talk about his unique approach to creating this memorial work and what the local community thought about his book, twenty-five years after the events.

Image: © Mario Dondero
(p. 42, 44, 45)
My reporting career spans years. I go about it the only way you can for these first-hand personal stories from those involved, at least for someone like me. I put so much of myself in it, senses tingling and nerves alert, sometimes just wandering around with no specific aim trying to get a sense of the scene, what makes it tick, becoming part of the action. More than with fiction, this method of writing stories from real life calls for a radical change not only in narrative subject matter, the form that you choose each time, but also the writer's own deep feelings and beliefs.

The places where some stories have happened themselves already form a kind of narrative, an explanation; they fuel questions, not only in narrative subject matter, the form it tick, becoming part of the action. More than with fiction, this method of writing stories from real life calls for a radical change not only in narrative subject matter, the form that you choose each time, but also the writer's own deep feelings and beliefs.

The places where some stories have happened themselves already form a kind of narrative, an explanation; they fuel questions, not only in narrative subject matter, the form that you choose each time, but also the writer's own deep feelings and beliefs.

My article was published in the CGIL's' Rassegna sindacale weekly which was bringing out a special Labour Day issue for 1 May, as well as in Diario, a magazine I was doing some work with at the time, using pictures taken by Mario Dondero, the legendary photographer I had worked with on several occasions and who for me is “the master”.

I think I only stayed there three days, working under time pressure like any journalist, trying to get my head around the basic essentials of this story from the past without managing to connect it to the present. But I did have an opportunity to visit the dock where the tragedy happened so many years ago and talk to some of those involved, like Burbassi, the fireman in charge of operations to recover the bodies; Sartoris, an engineer now and a young employee of Mecnave, Enzo Arienti, because of the unscrupulous use of subcontracting, the gangmaster system, and illegal working (ten of the eleven workers were undeclared labour, only one was officially employed by the company managing the work), and a brutal capitalist mentality that puts profit before people's lives: a mentality which was then prevalent and would later be dubbed neo-liberalism.

For the Ravenna firm systematically used the gangmaster system that allowed it abdicate all responsibility, and use cheap day labour by outsourcing different jobs to outside contractors so as to cut costs and delivery times, having them work unbeknown to one another.

These workers died because of negligence by the contractor and owner of Mecnave, Mario Dondero is considered the father of Italian photojournalism.
workers, Massimo Padua, just a child when his father died. Thirteen workers died like rats, in the words of Cardinal Ersilio Tonini, injuring themselves in the desperate bid to escape, but knowing for five to ten minutes – an eternity in such conditions – that they were dying of asphyxiation.

Only connect

Unlike writers, journalists lack the leisure to be discursive – they have to cut straight to the facts, the news – that’s their job. But as writers and storytellers, we do a different, slower job – what Mario Dondero calls “connecting” – going back to the scene time and again, trying to zero in on the subject of our story and keeping the flame that feeds the rage to write burning.

It happened later on that the publisher Einaudi asked me to write a book more or less based around the stories of the various work-related deaths I had reported on over the years, mainly for II Manifesto. First thoughts were that I might look at the ThyssenKrupp case in which seven workers died in a fire on 6 December 2007. Then I thought about the Ravenna tragedy, that I might be able to get a better handle on for it happening in a typical provincial town in central Italy, not so different from Fermo where I live. That’s how I came to write Il costo della vita (The cost of life) and how I went back to Ravenna in spring 2012.

The biggest post-war industrial tragedy after the 1954 Ribolla brown coal mine disaster in which 43 workers died happened where nobody expected it: not in a depressed area of Southern Italy, but in the “red” Romagna – a labour heartland where the Italian Communist Party was still a force – there, where welfare, democracy and a social security system the envy of Europe had been created; a place where the CGIL left-wing trade union has close to 100,000 members. In short, somewhere workers’ oversight should see that the rules were followed. So I thought, if that could happen in Ravenna, it must be symptomatic of something else going deeper than this unique and shocking story.

Only after a year’s work, numerous trips, getting accepted by a whole community, interviewing fire-fighters, doctors, ambulance support workers, nurses, local news reporters, trade unionists, the relatives of victims and surviving workers did I reach the conclusion that what had happened in this port had sent a tremor through the world of work that might spell the end of the “social contract” which had been the foundation of our democracy ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Two years earlier, the protest march by 40,000 Fiat white-collar staff after the 35 day...
strike had ended in a dramatic defeat for the union. Shortly after, the fall of the Berlin Wall had led to the decline of socialism across the world, and with it many of the gains made by the 20th century labour movement.

Wastelands and tombs

I have now been on a seven-month book tour up and down Italy, and as often as not my talks to the public turn into a full-scale discussion meeting with speeches from workers laid off by failing companies, others with serious illnesses. There is always one victim of workplace violence, a young casualised worker who has changed jobs 20 times in three years, on the dole, with a nervy restlessness and gleaming eyes, whose body already betrays his hopelessness fuelled by loneliness and defeated by work.

In my travels around Italy, all I saw were wastelands, abandoned firms like Borsig in Mantua, occupied for a year, or Fincantieri in Ancona, whose workers have gone through very hard times; on the dole, with a nervy restlessness and gleaming eyes, whose body already betrays his hopelessness fuelled by loneliness and defeated by work.

In Ravenna as elsewhere, in the shipyards, on farms, not to mention building sites and factories, where dismantling often kills, as at ThyssenKrupp, Isochimica in Avellino where asbestos was being worked, or that sooty cathedral of Italian-style capitalism, the Ilva steelworks in Taranto which alone produces 97% of the country’s dioxin. This is the cost of capital, these are the workplace fatalities for which Italy can boast that it tops a macabre league, and it is not just a technical or cultural problem but a political one.

In times of crisis, many issues and problems struggle to be heard in the consciousness of those who are working, and can get pushed to the background. I was struck by what one worker told me after a presentation: “I’d rather die of cancer than stay on the dole,” because having no job and no future kills the spirit even more than a lack of money and lousy working conditions.

Stock responses of Italian rhetoric

Ask me who still remembers about the Mecnavi tragedy in Ravenna and I would answer: not many. I was giving a talk in Baldini technical institute, and of the 300-odd students, only two or three had heard their families mention it. I was greatly struck by the difficulty they had putting it in a specific historical context and their meagre knowledge of the world of work in general. Everything else apart, it was for them something that happened before they were born, with no connection to the ongoing present they live in.
A participatory, high-octane meeting organized by Manifesto, attended by a number of political activists could not have been more different; there was a perceptible sense of a very intense sharing of ideas, including across generations, and a detailed recall of the social and political dynamics of the time. I also got the sense that local authorities and institutions wanted not to talk about this story in present-day terms, to relegate it to the status of a historical event that could be celebrated with the stock responses of Italian rhetoric – tricolour-sashed mayors, banner-carrying rank-and-file, speeches solemnly pronounced every 13 March in an attempt to take the industrial outrage out of the event and sever it from the labour strife of the present – when initially and for years it was experienced as something shameful, a mark of infamy, the greatest post-war tragedy to occur in a communist stronghold, a real blow. To the point that when my book came out, there was not, as I expected, a single official organized public presentation in the city, except of course that of the CGIL.

As to the current mayor, while I was in Ravenna writing my book, he never thought to talk to me or give me an interview, which I found somewhat suspicious. The upshot being that this centre-left public dignitary was not happy about my telling the press how uneasy I felt about the public exploitation of the memory. Afterwards, at the first presentation of the book last summer, when the deputy mayor – a PRI member (in Ravenna, a stronghold of freemasonry and Garibaldi-influenced politics, the Republican Party is still very powerful) – I set a spontaneous and very heated discussion going, in which this second leading light of local politics was truly torn to pieces by trade unionists, political activists and readers of the paper I write for, but above all by Labour Court judge Roberto Rivero, who confirmed and added to the case I made in my book.

“I know but I can’t prove it”

I believe that non-fiction narratives like Il costo della vita must be meaningful instruments to be used by the labour movement to ask real questions about why certain things have happened and continue to happen: a way in Ravenna, as elsewhere, to look at our own reflection. There are many aspects of this story that happened in 1987 which this city has not yet thought about locally, it has not questioned itself enough, it has not honestly reconstructed what happened. Such as, for example, how in the space of just four years in the mid-1980s an ordinary manual labourer – Enzo Arienti – could have become one of the biggest handling contractors in the European shipbuilding industry. He had ties to large swathes of Italy’s shipbuilding industry, and had very close links with politicians and Christian Democrats. Arienti’s own defence lawyer, Achilles Melchionda, declared in stupefaction that: “It is incomprehensible and unacceptable that for years this company was managed in a way that appeared so lacking, vague and rough and ready in terms of accident prevention, without anyone ever noticing.”

No-one has ever managed to give me a plausible explanation of the tremendous rise that led Mecnavi from a turnover of 500 million to 30 billion lire in 1986. “I know,” wrote Pier Paolo Pasolini, “but I can’t prove it. I don’t even have clues”. I also “know”, and reading between the lines of my book will tell you what I believe about this story and the various interests that revolve around this port. But in Ravenna – and not only in Ravenna – we have to at least ask ourselves why such a thing happened where it should not happen, and why it keeps happening regularly in Italy, like an inevitability, laced with the crocodile tears of the usual platitudes as if it were something physiological, imponderable with no answer, written into the DNA of the nation that is infected by it.

9. The Italian Republican Party (Partito Repubblicano Italiano, PRI) is a secular, liberal political party founded in 1895.

Angelo Ferracuti’s book, Il costo della vita, can be ordered from www.einaudi.it
World Cup in Qatar: a real building site for workers’ rights

Almost 20 million migrants work in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. The majority today are from South Asia and many are exploited and face particularly harsh daily living and working conditions. In some cases, it could even be referred to as forced labour. The phenomenon is not new, but it is now very much in the spotlight with the new building sites for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. It is an opportunity for international trade unions and NGOs to relaunch the fight for these immigrants’ economic and social rights.

Marc Molitor
Journalist

On 11 February this year, Qatar adopted a charter specifying that every migrant worker in a dormitory should have at least 6 sq. m. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) branded it a “sham”.

Image © Amnesty International (p. 47, 51)
Qatar’s successful bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup is bringing huge investment to that emirate in the Persian Gulf: construction of stadiums, hotels, roads and motorways, and other infrastructure. The money is going to pour in: there is talk of USD 100 to 200 billion between now and 2020. These colossal projects will require 1 million migrant workers. These are additional migrants because Qatar, like other coastal Gulf states, has already for many years had a substantial foreign workforce, hailing mainly from Asia. Indeed, there are 1.7 million foreigners in Qatar, giving it the highest percentage of migrants in the world: they account for 90% of the total population and 94% of the employed working population.

Many of these immigrants are exploited and deprived of their main economic and social rights. Many of them are in a situation that could be described as forced labour under international law, and even quasi-slavery in some cases, particularly in the domestic sector.

The new building sites for the World Cup and the abuses that are taking place in them, or could take place in them, are today putting Qatar under the spotlight and attracting the attention of the global media. The problems facing migrants in the Gulf are not new; however; international trade unions and NGOs have been denouncing them for years. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) have in the past three years published enlightening reports that are extremely precise and well-documented (see end of article).

At the sponsor’s mercy

‘Trapped’ is the best word to describe the situation of these migrants. They are often deceived by charlatans before leaving their own country, then trapped when they arrive by various legal and illegal barriers, before returning home after having been cheated out of some of their earnings.

The problems appear at the very start of their adventure. In a desire to escape unemployment or poverty in their country, to help their family, to pay back debts, or to save some money to buy land or a house, get married or start a business, Indian, Nepalese or other migrants are hired by a local recruitment agency acting on behalf of an employer or contact in the Gulf. Even at that stage, they are made to pay exorbitant fees, some of which may be demanded by the employer, in cahoots with the agency, which is illegal under Qatari law. To get the money for these fees, the migrants get into debt with a local lender or the agency itself, at prohibitive rates. For example, Nepalese migrants often have to pay 35% interest. That is the start of the trap. The migrants frequently receive their papers, passports, job description, sometimes their contracts, and their documents for their Qatari ‘sponsor’ the day before they leave for the Gulf or even at the airport. They often do not understand them because they are drawn up in a foreign language.

Once they arrive in Qatar, they are ‘looked after’ by their ‘sponsor’ or ‘backer’, who is usually the employer himself. This is the kafala system, which requires every foreigner to be sponsored. Originally an Islamic custom providing guardianship for adopted children, it has now been extended not only to women but to the economy and the labour market. All foreigners, be they workers, entrepreneurs or investors, must have a sponsor, and it is through him that they obtain their entry visas, residence permits and work permits. Without his authorisation, they cannot change jobs or obtain an exit visa to leave the country. This system means that workers are completely dependent on their sponsor and it leads to many abuses.

In a recent Amnesty International survey of 1,200 workers, 90% of those surveyed had their passport confiscated, which is illegal under Qatari law. In some cases, they never actually receive their residence permit and thus become illegal immigrants.

If the workers did not already sign a contract before they left home, they are then offered one, which sometimes contains a different salary or job to that previously promised to them. In both cases, they are forced to accept it, because they are too committed and have too much debt. Moreover, they will need their sponsor’s authorisation to leave the country, which is a crucial element in the trap.

Migrant work in Qatar is regulated by law. The Labour Law includes provisions on the maximum authorised working time, compulsory breaks because of the heat in the summer, a day off each week, paid leave, monthly payment of wages and safety standards in the workplace. However, crucially, it does not contain any provisions on a compulsory
minimum wage. In the same survey, 20% of workers said that their salary is lower than the one that they were promised.

The Labour Law is frequently infringed by employers. Indeed, 20% of the workers surveyed said that they do not receive their wages on time. Sometimes they have to wait for weeks or even months before they are paid. Employers often make unforeseen deductions that differ from, or are higher than, those laid down in the contract to cover various costs, especially accommodation and food.

There is a very high level of subcontracting in the construction sector. Thousands of companies from every continent are jostling to get to Qatar to take part in the building frenzy. The disputes between these companies frequently have repercussions for the workers: their employer will say that the contractor has not paid him, but it is impossible to verify this.

Health and safety at risk

In a report published in September 2013, the British newspaper The Guardian revealed that 44 Nepalese workers had died during the summer on Qatari building sites. Stephen Benedict of the ITUC recently stated in a programme on Belgian public radio (RTBF) that every day two coffins arrived in Kathmandu from the Gulf and Malaysia. A recent report from the Nepalese capital in the Belgian newspaper Le Soir described in detail the distress of parents waiting for their son or relation to be returned to them. In this case, the victim had come from Malaysia: ‘An airport employee puts the deceased person’s passport into his father’s trembling hands. A cousin takes the death certificate: Severe pneumonia, he says. The father, taken aback, doesn’t understand. My son had called me the day he died. He was complaining about money being taken out of his wages and cancelled leave. But he wasn’t sick. We got a call from one of his friends that evening. It seems that he had become ill very suddenly and died on the way to the hospital.’

These press articles reveal only the tip of the iceberg. Statistics on accidents in the workplace are not published in Qatar. Those that do exist, particularly those provided by hospitals, are very incomplete. However, the scant statistics available indicate that deaths in the workplace are three to four times higher than the European average. Based solely on current trends, the ITUC has estimated that at least 4,000 people will die by 2020, not only from accidents but also from heart attacks caused by heat, stress and poor living conditions. That does not even take into account those whose experience will leave them injured, disabled or traumatised when they go home.

Migrant workers have to be housed at their employer’s expense and their accommodation only has to comply with living subsequently changed. During the Iraq wars in 1991 and 2003, the Gulf states expelled many immigrants from countries that had taken a diplomatic stance alongside Iraq, notably hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and Yemenites. Another factor was the growing mistrust among the Gulf regimes with regard to Islamic extremism, which risked feeding off the exasperation of a sea of Arab workers who were experiencing discrimination (extremism that some of these states actually propagate themselves). Consequently, the proportion of Arab migrants fell from three quarters in 1975 to one quarter in 2005. They have been gradually replaced by workers from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, alongside immigrants from China now, too.

Except for a middle class of expats, their working and living conditions are harsh and they experience a great deal of discrimination. They are mostly young men who find jobs in industry, construction and private services. Women (a quarter of all migrants) work primarily as maids in the homes of Qatari citizens. Family migration is either prohibited or strictly limited, if not practically impossible in certain countries, along with naturalisation and permanent residence. The migration is therefore temporary, often lasting just a few years, and the Gulf states want to monitor it closely: they do not want any new citizens who might upset the political/tribal and religious/historical balances. They also want to be able to reduce rapidly the number of migrants if oil prices and revenue fall.

Immigration in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf

Immigration in the Gulf states is linked to the phenomenal oil and gas resources of the coastal states (especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain). Today it accounts for 40% of the Gulf’s population and two thirds of its working population. It increased significantly with the rise in oil prices in the 1970s and 1980s. This revenue has resulted in foreign deals and investments by the Gulf states but, of course, it has also benefited the local populations, who have become the richest in the world per head of population.

These populations are small, however, and they have a tribal structure. The indigenous people, originally nomadic, have settled down and become rentiers, first and foremost. The large ruling families share out the oil revenue, offering their own citizens practically free housing, education, health, consumer goods and public goods, and reserve for them all public service jobs and management posts in the private economy. However, for middle-tier and production jobs in industry, construction and private services (including domestic services), the Gulf states rely heavily on immigration.

Initially, this immigration came mainly from neighbouring Arab states: Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Yemen, etc. Its composition has evolved as the Gulf states began to rely heavily on immigration from countries that had taken a diplomatic stance alongside Iraq, notably hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and Yemenites. Another factor was the growing mistrust among the Gulf regimes with regard to Islamic extremism, which risked feeding off the exasperation of a sea of Arab workers who were experiencing discrimination (extremism that some of these states actually propagate themselves). Consequently, the proportion of Arab migrants fell from three quarters in 1975 to one quarter in 2005. They have been gradually replaced by workers from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, alongside immigrants from China now, too.

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standards that are already very low (a maximum of 2 m² per worker and four beds per room). In many cases, however, those standards are not met. If there are any problems or disputes, the employer may refuse to pay for their electricity and cut off their air conditioning and water... The accommodation is in camps of shacks or prefabricated buildings with one or two storeys, far from the city centres and construction sites. They are not allowed to be built in residential areas where Qatari families live. A spirit of apartheid and quasi-racism prevails, especially because foreign workers are frequently banned from going into the city centre or into shopping centres on their days off...

Workers have the option of bringing any infringements against them to the attention of the labour authorities and, eventually, the courts. Complaining is a risky business, however. They need to be able to travel, often on several occasions, and to speak Arabic or English, which is rare among these workers. Otherwise, they need someone to represent them. That all costs money and takes time, and during the process the workers are rarely paid, are ostracised or come under pressure from their sponsor. The number of complaints received is therefore much lower than the number of infringements, a situation that the Qatari authorities have themselves acknowledged. Finally, there are ridiculously few labour inspectors.

The situation can deteriorate rapidly when the abuses add up. Unpaid wages start to accumulate, under the pretext that the company is having problems with its contractor, and a conflict arises. The workers want to stop work or change jobs without their employer/sponsor’s permission. Then he threatens to tell the police that they are ‘absconders’. When the situation becomes so bad that the workers decide to go home, they face the ultimate blackmail: they cannot get a visa to leave the country as it has to be approved by their sponsor. To put an end to the ordeal, they agree to sign a document stating that their employer has paid them all of the wages that they are owed. The investigations by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty and the ITUC uncovered several scandals of this nature, involving cases where these documents are sometimes signed in blank in advance. This kind of blackmail does not only affect ‘low-cost’ workers. Recent cases, with broader media coverage, have involved, in particular, footballers, a French football coach and expat European entrepreneurs, held in Qatar after a dispute with their Qatari sponsor, who is also their business partner.

Domestic workers are undoubtedly in the worst situation, although this is not specific to Qatar and the preparations for the 2022 World Cup. These cases, which usually involve women, should almost be dealt with separately. Unlike construction workers, they are invisible, receive even harsher treatment and have less legal protection because the Labour Law does not apply to them. They are isolated and privy to the whims of their employers, the private Qatari households who hire them. In practice, thus, there are no rules and they have absolutely no way to defend themselves. Sexual abuse is not uncommon. These extreme situations are equivalent to forced labour, as defined and prohibited by the international conventions.

Muzzled protests and revolts

How do they defend themselves collectively? When migrants protest, it can be explosive, as demonstrated by quite a few incidents and even riots. However, they have been muzzled and disregarded by the authorities and the local media. Trade unions are prohibited in Qatar. More precisely, they are authorised in very restrictive conditions and are only open to Qatari citizens. However, they have little or no interest in them as they have everything they need. Moreover, trade unions and

94% of workers in Qatar do not have any trade union representation.
strikes are prohibited right across the public sector, in the energy and transport sectors, and in all related sectors. In short, 94% of workers in Qatar are deprived of any trade union representation, which means that any trade union movement would be pointless. Qatar clearly does not adhere to the International Labour Organisation’s fundamental conventions on trade unionism and collective bargaining.

Many parties are responsible for the exploitation of migrant workers; it cannot be blamed entirely on Qatar. Several actors must be taken to task, and in a very specific context. The migrations to the Gulf are at the heart of a globalisation that involves various actors. On the one hand, there are the mini-states, which are very rich and undemocratic and which subscribe to key elements of international social law. On the other hand, there is a veritable, often shady, recruitment industry that is thriving. There are agencies in the countries of origin and intermediary levels between them and the Gulf, which involve Qatari sponsors and sometimes former migrants who have made their fortune. The migrants’ home countries turn a blind eye as their emigrants send considerable sums of cash back home. Then there is the myriad of companies, the huge Western and Asian companies, and the entire chain of subcontractors, from all around the world, too, in which the Qatari sponsor plays an important role. At the top of that chain, both the large companies and the major Qatari funds linked to the authorities claim often not to know what is happening with their subcontractors.

In light of the work to prepare for the 2022 World Cup, there is an enormous challenge in the years to come. It is rare for so much money to mobilise so many people over such a brief period of time in a region that is so small and that does not apply the necessary national and international regulations, and one that is so sensitive from a geopolitical perspective, too.

The investigations and warnings are increasing, even in the UN. Given the poor representation of migrants, the absence, with a few rare exceptions, of any solidarity or interest from the Qatars themselves, and the lack of any reactions from the migrants’ countries of origin, the main pressure has to come from outside. In this regard, FIFA, the International Federation of Association Football, which is organising the World Cup and has been criticised by the ITUC and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), wears two different hats. It alternates between promising these bodies that it will put pressure on Qatar and complaining to the investors about the media bashing of Qatar and the World Cup.

The ITUC and NGOs agree on the essential reforms that have to be carried out. Firstly, Qatar should recognise the freedom to form or join a trade union without restriction and the right of collective bargaining. This is a cornerstone of all of the other reforms. It is also essential to do away with the sponsorship system so that workers are completely free to change jobs and leave the country. Thus, better equipped, the trade union movements will be able to campaign for the introduction of a fair minimum wage. They also want the entire recruitment sector to be regulated, and they want contracting companies to be jointly responsible for ensuring that the subcontractors further down the chain comply with the national and international social standards. Finally, Qatar must carry out workplace inspections and controls to ensure that basic social justice is guaranteed.

Further reading


Online: Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University in Qatar. See http://cirs.georgetown.edu/research/101627.html