

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?

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Incineration is big business in the EU. Its share of household waste treatment rose from 13% in 1996 to 22% in 2010.
Image: © Belga/AFP



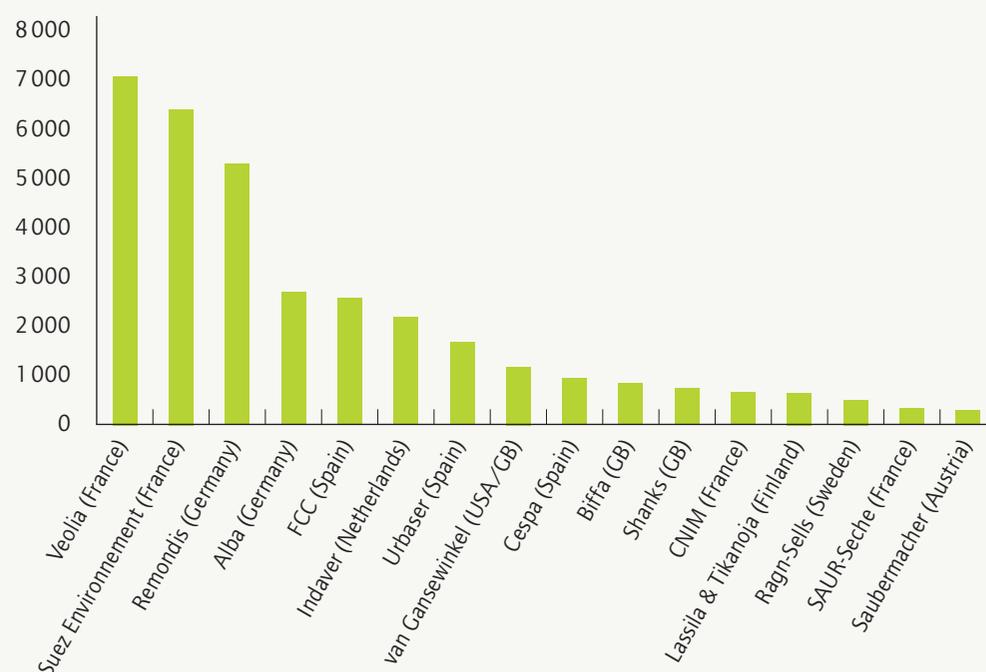
Waste generation varies considerably between countries and richer countries tend to produce more waste per person. For example, the municipal waste generated per person ranges from 294 kg in the Czech Republic to 801 kg in Denmark. The next lowest levels after the Czech Republic are in Romania, Latvia, 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 waste sector in Europe is growing rapidly. Two thirds of companies are publicly owned, but the role of the private sector is increasing as a result of a major trend towards the outsourcing of collection and sorting of household waste by local authorities to private companies. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, since the mid-2000s, there has to some extent been a return to municipal waste collection contracts in Germany, France and the UK. The overall effect has certainly been to halt the earlier trend towards privatisation, although there are still cases of new privatisation.

Graph 1 Largest municipal waste management companies in Europe (revenue in million euros, 2010/2011)



Source: Hall D., Nguyen J. (2012)

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 take be guaranteed.

These aims should be reflected in the waste hierarchy (see Table 2) corresponding to the European Commission's 2020 strategy¹. 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 reality². 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)³, 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 Commission⁴ 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.

Table 1 Employment in the waste sector in the EU (2008-2011)

	2008	2009	2010	2011
EU 27	914 800	893 300	885 800	928 600
France	106 900	104 500	103 700	113 100
Germany	134 000	138 100	132 800	146 200
UK	148 800	116 000	104 700	118 600
Italy	128 800	140 900	155 900	148 500
Spain	67 900	75 800	61 900	75 700

Source: Hall D., Nguyen J. (2012)

Table 2 Waste hierarchy

Processes	Aims
Prevention	Waste per capita falling
Re-use	Waste per capita falling
Recycling	Separate collection & stimulation of secondary materials market
Recovery	Restrict energy recovery to non-recyclable materials
Landfilling	Virtually eliminated

Source: Kirov V. (2011) How many does it take to tango? Stakeholders' strategies to improve work in Europe, WALQING Project



Organic waste composting is a key way the authorities hope to achieve the ideal of a circular economy.
Image: © Belga/AFP

- 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 Unions⁶. 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 land-fill of household and industrial waste. EPSU supports the European waste hierarchy (see

1. European Commission (2011) A resource-efficient society – Flagship initiative under the Europe 2020 strategy.

2. Friends of the Earth (2010) More jobs, less waste. Potential for job creation through higher rates of recycling in the UK and EU.

3. Hall D. (2010) Waste management in Europe: framework, trends and issues. Report commissioned by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU), University of Greenwich.

4. WALQING – Work and Life Quality in New and Growing Jobs. See: www.walqing.eu

5. Municipal Waste Europe (2013) Resource Efficiency – A European Resource Strategy Underpinned by Municipalities and their Waste Management Companies.

6. EPSU organises workers in the energy, water and waste sectors, health and social services, and local and national administrations in all European countries. It is the largest federation of the ETUC and comprises 8 million public service workers from over 265 trade unions.

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 circumstances⁵. 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;

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.