

“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.

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The industry is getting automated to help meet government recycling targets.

Image: © Martine Zunini
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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) a day roll in to dump their 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 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 PMCs. 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.

Bottle labels peel off and get everywhere. It's a nightmare for service engineers.



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 Metea 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 some items with a magnet and an optical detection system. Previously, all the contents of emptied bags had to be sorted by hand.

While these machines are bringing the sorting industry into "Modern Times" and making some aspects of the job a less thankless task, the work pace is now set by the conveyor, just like the Chaplin film. "There were twelve of us on the old line, now there are just six; work rates have speeded up", says Philippe

Gloves give vital protection against cut and puncture wounds during manual sorting.



Boon, also an HSC rep. And the workforce has shrunk from 80 to 58 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 Bool. 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 don'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 wheelie 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 Environnement 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 normal¹. 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 creates jobs in an area in economic decline they can do what they want, especially with the considerable political backing they get from the mayor and other *département* and regional government politicians. This is a company often held up as a model for our region's development.

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 progressing, eight have stayed in touch with us. Six months – in some cases up to a year – after leaving the company their blood lead levels have obviously gone down, but the symptoms are still there. The body doesn't naturally eliminate lead and heavy metals in general – they get stored in our organs. The workers are worried that their health will get much worse in the years to come. With help from the Henri Pézerat Foundation² 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"³. 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.

1. The French Labour Code requires strict medical supervision 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.