

Nantes/Saint-Nazaire dockers battle for health

Up to 200 of them spend their days unloading the thousands of tonnes of cargo shipped into the French port of Nantes/Saint-Nazaire. It's a hard job, and while they now run fewer physical risks, dockers are today exposed to the "soup" of chemicals that impregnate cargoes. Wearied of seeing friends struck down by cancers, they have set going a research programme that retraces their toxin-exposed working lives.

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**A docker on the deck
of a bulk coal carrier.**
Images: © Laurent Guizard
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The port of Nantes/Saint-Nazaire stretches for over 60 kilometres of Atlantic coastline along the Loire estuary. At Montoir-de-Bretagne, one of the port's component sites, towering cranes loom over the waterfront, while miles of conveyor belts like hanging treadmills slice across the eye line. "They carry the bulk cargo (*from ships' holds – ed*) to the warehouses at the back", says Karl Montagne, 30 years a stevedore.

He hails a colleague overseeing the winding-up of discharging from the deck of a cement carrier. At the bottom of the 30-foot deep holds, dockworkers bulldoze the cement around. Clad in white coveralls, they work in clouds of dust and exhaust fumes, wearing basic "pig snout" respirators. It's little enough protection against the silica contained in the cement, which can cause silicosis, chronic bronchitis and cancer. "They're not much help against engine exhausts, either", grimaces Karl Montagne, "seeing as all the handling equipment lowered into the hold is diesel-engined!" In June 2012, diesel exhaust gas was classified as definitely cancer-causing by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Dock work has always been a risky business. But regular exposure to carcinogenic chemicals poses a particular threat. Chemicals "are an invisible enemy, everywhere but unseen"¹. "Before, to discharge logs, you had to climb up the pile. There was almost always a risk of them collapsing with you underneath", mulls Christian Zimmer, a docker like his grandfather. "Now it's mechanized. There are many fewer physical work accidents, but the wood is riddled with chemicals! Like everything else".

The soya landed at Montoir-de-Bretagne has been sprayed with pesticides before shipping to prevent fungi, rodent and insect contamination. And when the ship docks on this side of the Atlantic, the atmosphere is sometimes so unfit to breathe that the stevedores have to leave the holds open for hours before starting work. "When the hatch cover is lifted, this chemical fug hits you in the face so you have to turn away. When you're in the hold, it makes you feel sick (...). They say no

rat or insect could live after being sprayed with it!" testify some longshoremen². "Petroleum coke is the worst", says Karl Montagne. "That is really disgusting. It's so bad that you can't prep (*discharge and give a full wash down – ed*) more than one coke hold a day". Coke is a black, solid by-product of oil refining. Composed mostly of carbon, it contains large amounts of pollutants like sulphur and heavy metals³.

Toxic careers

Never having bothered about these dangerous compounds, the Nantes/Saint-Nazaire dockers realised some years back that they might be making them sick or even killing them. "That's down to Jean-Luc Chagnolleau", says Serge Doussin, a metalworker and former senior CGT union official. "He'd been a docker for 30 years, and felt there must be a link between his kidney cancer and his job, especially since he had always had a very healthy lifestyle. So, shortly after he was diagnosed in late 2007, he decided to quiz his co-workers about their health. He found out that he was far from alone. Of the 243 dockworkers contacted, 85 said they were suffering from a serious disease, predominantly cancer of some kind, while 43 had died, most from cancer-related complications – lung, prostate, kidney, colon, throat, larynx, bladder, oesophagus, pancreas, liver, rectum, stomach, etc".

Cancers seem to home in on dockers. Their life expectancy has shortened by 10 years. "Jean-Luc was flabbergasted", recalls Serge Doussin. "Us, too". Encouraged by oncologists, Jean-Luc Chagnolleau and his union colleagues set up an association for workplace health protection for Loire-Atlantique port workers (APPSTMP44). "The aim was to support further research and publicize the tragedy of work-related diseases", says Serge Doussin. Well-used to fighting for labour rights, all or nearly all the close-knit group of Nantes/Saint-Nazaire dockers signed up to the association. "There is real unity and active solidarity between them", estimates Serge Doussin, president of the association since Jean-Luc passed away.

Their active engagement supported by various doctors and stakeholders in prevention resulted in a research action project – "Escales" – being set up in October 2012. Funded by the Loire-Atlantique Regional Council and supported by the regional department for business, competition, consumer affairs, work and employment (Direccte), Escales aims to retrace the toxin-exposed working lives of dockers with serious illnesses.

"We did thirty three-hour interviews over 18 months", says project leader Christophe Coutanceau. "Dockers with a cancer gave very detailed descriptions of their working conditions: what kinds of tools were used? Was the atmosphere dusty? What equipment did they have? etc. We then deduced

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1. Quote from the exhibition "Dockers, corps à l'épreuve" staged as part of the "Escales" study.

2. *ibid.*

3. Petroleum coke is used as fuel by the cement and lime industry, and as a source of carbon in aluminium and steel manufacture.

at monthly expert committee meetings what kinds of carcinogens they had been exposed to". The expert committee members included occupational doctors, general practitioners, sociologists, historians, dock workers, etc. The committee also had access to the port records which the port authority agreed to open up. This enabled them to identify what cargoes had passed through the Nantes and Saint-Nazaire docks over the past forty years. "The main conclusion was that stevedores who had worked the docks for decades had been exposed to six to ten carcinogens each", says Serge Doussin.

Combined exposures ignored

"The study is showing up the main carcinogens that blight workplaces", notes sociologist and Escales' Scientific Director Véronique Daubas-Letourneux – "asbestos, diesel exhaust gas and PAHs⁴. We are also finding pollutants specific to dock work: arsenic-laden or –free wood dust, pesticides, hexavalent chromium". Is the daily exposure to this toxic mix behind the high number of cancers found from 2008 by Jean-Luc Chagnolleau? Retracing an individual's combined exposures to multiple carcinogens does not identify the single cause of that cancer.

"It is most likely that each of the different carcinogens the individual was exposed to has played a role in the overall process that gave rise to the cancer", suggests the Escales study. Data is lacking on the health effects of synergy between chemical molecules. But those that are available show that, at best, the risks are cumulative: where there is exposure to two products, the individual effects of each are combined. But often – especially where carcinogenic molecules are concerned – the effects are multiplicative. That means the risk is not doubled but multiplied 50-fold!

Combined exposures do not fall within the current criteria for recognition of occupational diseases in France, with one exception: a former employee at the Givors glassworks, on the southern outskirts of Lyon, who died in 2012 and has just been recognized as having suffered from occupational cancers resulting from combined exposures to multiple carcinogens⁵. "What generally applies is the asbestos schedule", says Véronique Daubas-Letourneux.

But that is the tree that you can't see the wood for. The specific provision made for it means that asbestos (which remains a real danger) has in practice overshadowed other occupational toxins. "The social security schedules that provide guidance for the identification of work-related cancers need to move with the times", insists Gilles Rialland,



Karl Montagne and the St Nazaire dockers took action to reduce their exposure to carcinogens. They have already lost many friends and colleagues.

a port worker and secretary of APPSTMP⁴⁴. "We want them to include combined exposures as the cause of diseases among workers". In order to get combined exposures to multiple chemicals into the scope of social security, the association's members plan to step up the claims for recognition of occupational diseases in the hope that successes will establish precedents. "The next step is Jean-Luc's case" says Gilles Rialland. "We managed to get judgment stayed so that the lawyer could include the inventory of toxins drawn up by Escales in his oral arguments".

Half-hearted prevention

Normally, employers have a duty to retrace workers' past exposures to toxins⁶. But they never do. "The certificate listing exposures to carcinogens, mutagens or reprotoxins that every employee is meant to have just doesn't

exist", says Christophe Coutanceau. Almost no-one has it. The occupational doctors who are meant to issue it don't necessarily know about it. And anyone trying to get information on the chemical molecules used can come up against an employer's brick wall.

"Another problem we have is the worldwide movement of goods", adds Véronique Daubas-Letourneux. "Stevedoring companies that hire dockers don't necessarily know what chemicals are used on goods loaded on the other side of the world". "We have to deal with international trade", says Philippe Breuille occupational doctor for the big seaport and a participant in the Escales study. "We have no control over industrial processes and safety in other countries".

Employers are also meant to provide their employees with personal and collective protective equipment. In Nantes and Saint-Nazaire, "some things are done, like ventilating holds and dousing bulk cargoes

4. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) occur as gases or particulate matter from the incomplete burning of fossil fuels (especially by diesel engines). The most studied is benzo(a)pyrene. They enter the human body by breathing, eating, drinking, or skin contact.

5. The judgment handed down in April 2014 is exceptional in that the grounds of the judges' decision were based on the arguments put forward by the researchers and lawyers who investigated the claim. See: <http://www.verriers-givors.com>

6. French labour law requires employers to declare products and processes leading to an occupational disease and the occupational doctor to certify exposure in all cases where an employee has been exposed to carcinogens, mutagens or reprotoxins.

Collective knowledge production gets official recognition

Cross-fertilisation of workers' pragmatic knowledge and experts' learned knowledge has been held to be a valid methodology for showcasing combined exposures to multiple chemicals by prevention professionals and Labour Ministry representatives. "This recognition is a result in and of itself", says Véronique Daubas-Letourneux, Scientific Director of the Escales survey. "It has to be said that we have strong ongoing regional support for research relating to occupational diseases". Another singular local feature is the energies of the group of workers who initiated the project. "That won us the unprompted confidence of workers that a researcher could have taken months to gain", says Véronique Daubas-Letourneux. It will also facilitate the downstream work of informing port workers – dockers and others – at first hand and helping sick workers trying to get their illness recognized as an occupational disease.

In France, two other groups are working to similar methodologies: the Association pour la prise en charge des maladies éliminables (AP-CME – eliminable diseases support group) near the port of Fos-sur-Mer (Marseille region), and the Groupement d'intérêt scientifique sur les cancers d'origine professionnelle (Giscop – scientific interest group on occupational cancers) in Seine-Saint-Denis (northern suburb of Paris).

More on these projects at: <http://www.etui.org/en/Topics/Health-Safety/Occupational-cancers/Union-campaigning>

"Asking too much could easily cost us our jobs."

(raw materials like coal – ed) which helps to bind dust", acknowledges Christophe Coutanceau. "But not in every case, far from it!" laments the researcher who believes that "the port industry generally is lagging way behind in protective provision". Another possibility would be to have pressurized cabins on the minibulks⁷ used by holdmen that would protect drivers from dust and exhaust fumes. But these don't seem to be in the spending plans.

Even the respirators that are sometimes used are rarely satisfactory. "You can't breathe with these on when you have to strain", recounts one docker. "They need to invest in more sophisticated equipment". "They don't listen to us", protests another. "You ask for a vented mask and they say it costs too much!"⁸ However that may be, protecting workers against the chemicals in cargo ships is a real conundrum. The Le Havre customs officers who protested in 2010 against the high levels of pesticides in the shipping containers they had to inspect have studied the problem closely and concluded that "the only certain sure equipment is that worn by firefighters in emergency interventions. But it is not suitable for everyday use because it is much too cumbersome".

Transform work

Effectively protecting employees is not just about equipment, but also looking again at work organization. "Men can't work for eight hours straight wearing individual respirators", says Christophe Coutanceau. "They

need a break every couple of hours". "If there are too many constraints, traffic may be diverted to other ports", argues Dr Philippe Breuille. "Not least because of the various European and international instruments saying that there must be no barriers to free trade". The Transatlantic Partnership Agreement being negotiated since July 2013 by the United States and the European Union is even mooted the idea that special courts could levy massive fines on states if laws (e.g. protecting employees' health) were to diminish a firm's "expected future profits"!

Dockers are split over the issue. Some argue that prevention is vital and do not want to yield ground. Others fear seeing the work go elsewhere. "Asking too much could easily cost us our jobs", sighs one. "But for us, health at work and the long-term future of the port are not an either-or thing", stresses Serge Doussin. "Anything but! If the job is to keep going, you have to preserve the skills and see that they are passed on". Committed to their work, and proud of their know-how, the dockers want to pass on their knowledge to the next generation. "But we want to do it without risking our lives. We're fed up with seeing mates go so young. It hits hard". ●

7. Mini-bulldozers (calf dozers) equipped with a grab bucket used in holds or on the wharves.

8. Quote from the exhibition "Dockers, corps à l'épreuve" staged as part of the "Escales" study.

Dockers in the port of St Nazaire cleaning the hold of a bulk cement carrier.

