HesaMag #02

Cleaning up: workers under pressure
New publications

Better Regulation: a critical assessment
Laurent Vogel and Eric Van den Abeele

This report is on the European Commission’s “better regulation” programme. The Commission is promising that scrapping or revising a number of directives will save businesses around 40 billion euros by reducing the “administrative formalities” they impose. In Better Regulation: a critical assessment, Laurent Vogel (ETUI) and Eric Van den Abeele (University of Mons) reveal the agenda within the agenda.

REACH: an opportunity for trade unions. Putting knowledge to work in the workplace
Tony Musu

The marketing of chemicals – especially those that could harm human health - has been regulated by REACH since 1 June 2007. Not that implementing this law will automatically mean better prevention of workplace chemical risks. Real progress, which includes outlawing the most toxic chemicals from workplaces, will not happen unless union representatives take ownership of the law. This booklet means to help them do that vital front-line job.

The EU approach to regulating nanotechnology
Aída Maria Ponce Del Castillo

The EU nanotechnology strategy aims chiefly to catch up the lag behind the US and Asia. The health risks posed by the commercial use of nanomaterials have recently come onto the European Commission’s agenda. The Commission has not so far seen a need for specific legislation to govern nanotechnologies - a view not shared by either Parliament or the European trade union movement. In this publication, ETUI researcher Aída Ponce combines a detailed survey of European policy in the area with an exploration of the ethical and social issues surrounding nanotechnologies.

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Oil spill: BP also negligent on health at the workplace

Little attention has been given to the consequences of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill on workers’ health. Yet the oil platform explosion on 20 April 2010 was fatal to 11 workers. According to provisional data, the operations being conducted to cap the well and halt the oil leak resulted in 186 accidents and 80 cases of illness among workers during the first six weeks of the operations. The majority of the workers involved in the operations are employed by subcontractors on contingent contracts. Their training has been neglected, according to David Michaels, who heads the US federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). In a document dated 25 May 2010, he states: “The organizational systems that BP has in place, particularly those related to worker safety and health training, protective equipment, and site monitoring, are not adequate for the current situation or the projected increase in clean-up operations. (...) I want to stress that these are not isolated problems. They appear to be indicative of a general systematic failure on BP’s part, to ensure the safety and health of those responding to this disaster.”

The same day, the weekly newspaper The Village Voice published a BP internal document dating back to 2002 in which the multinational justifies the adoption of less effective prevention measures where, on the basis of a cost-benefits calculation, the probability of an accident is low.

BP has always championed a health and safety policy led by the company itself, boasting of “leading from the top”, to use its expression. In other words, its policy is aimed at avoiding control by trade union organisations and the public authorities. This approach is often cited as an example by those who consider legislation to be an administrative burden on companies, both in the United States and Europe.

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Italy: government seeks to scrap Institute for Occupational Safety and Prevention

As part of its “economic operation” to restore public accounts, the government is planning to do away with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Prevention (Ispesl), the country’s only research centre of its kind. Its job will be taken over by the National Workers’ Compensation Authority (Inail). Observers say this will create a conflict of interest by putting Inail in charge of research on occupational diseases for which it will have to pay out compensation.

On 2 June, researchers, engineers, doctors and employees occupied the Ispesl headquarters. The move is seen as a “30-year leap back” which “once again isolates Italy from Europe, since in no other European country has the crisis led to the dismantling of health and safety at work research institutions”.

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Source: ETUI

Netherlands: trade unions demand independent doctors in companies

On 16 March, ahead of a European trade union meeting on occupational health, the Dutch trade union confederation FNV called for the introduction in companies of “employees’ doctors” who would be contractually linked to the health insurance rather than the company.

The FNV believes that this reform is now needed because the independence of company doctors is no longer guaranteed in the Netherlands. “Company doctors are being increasingly pressed to spend their time checking on workers who are off work through sickness”, according to a Dutch trade union leader, Leo Hartveld. This means that workers “too often regard the company doctor as an extension of the human resources department. And often, they are quite right to do so”, claims Mr Hartveld.

According to the FNV, the ideal company doctor should be a sort of independent advisor who would act on working conditions, handling such matters as risk assessments, conducting surveys and developing a prevention policy.

Noting that general practitioners are very regularly faced with patients suffering from work-related illnesses, the FNV argues that there is a need for stronger ties between GPs and “employees’ doctors”.

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Source: ETUI
Exposure to workplace pollutants may triple breast cancer risks

Exposure to certain chemicals or pollutants at the workplace before the age of 36 may triple the risk of post-menopausal breast cancer, according to a study published on 1 April 2010.

The women most at risk are those in frequent contact at work with synthetic fibres and petroleum products, according to a study done by a team headed by France Labrèche at the University of Montreal’s institute of occupational health research published in the journal Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

The researchers studied the health records of 1,169 Canadian women living with cancer aged 50–75 years. Nearly half had been diagnosed with breast cancer in 1996 or 1997 after the onset of menopause. The remainder had another type of cancer.

Chemists and occupational health specialists tried to establish the exposure of both groups to some 300 chemicals during their working time. The study, which excluded other known causes of breast cancer, showed a strong link between various widely used synthetic materials and risk levels, which were particularly high before the age of 36, when breast tissue cells are still proliferating and more sensitive to hazardous chemicals.

The risk of breast cancer was seven times higher for women exposed to acrylic fibres, and doubled for those exposed to nylon fibres.

Source: AFP

Depression more likely to affect people in non-standard jobs

A study by the Institut de veille sanitaire (InVS), published on 23 February last in the Bulletin épidémiologique hebdomadaire, shows that employees in certain categories of jobs in France (part-time, limited-term contracts, temporary staff, etc.) are more often affected by depressive illnesses. The risks are even higher among those on imposed part-time contracts. The study also revealed a link between depression and educational level, those without any formal qualifications being most affected. "The current economic environment, which is producing job insecurity particularly affecting workers in non-standard jobs, further emphasizes the need to monitor the health of these groups, especially their mental health," the authors conclude.

Source: ETUI

Germany: 41% of employees on-call by mobile phone outside work hours

The growing use of mobile phones and pagers by employees as well as managers is increasingly blurring the divide between working and private time. It is a development that may flout labour laws.

According to a survey published by BITKOM, the federal Association for Information Technology, Telecommunications and New Media, 66% of German employees can be reached by mobile phone outside office hours, including during the night hours for 32% of them. But 41% of these employees are not covered by a company or individual agreement laying down rules and conditions for being on-call. BITKOM argues that this lack of control increases the legal, financial and organisational risks on companies that have not negotiated an agreement.

Source: Planet Labor
ETUC wants quicker REACH implementation

In June 2010, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) issued the updated version of its list of chemicals of very high concern. Version 2.0 of the list includes 334 prioritized substances or substance groups, adding 29 new entries to the first version issued back in March 2009. The union wants as many of these substances as possible brought into the REACH authorization procedure.

The list – drawn up in conjunction with the European Trade Union Institute and Spain’s trade union work, environment and health institute ISTAS – pinpoints chemicals whose impact on occupational diseases makes them of particular concern. As of 30 August 2010, there were just 38 chemicals on the candidate list. On the same date, the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) launched a consultation on adding 11 new substances. 40 of the 49 chemicals on or up for inclusion on the European list are also on the union priority list.

Candidate list chemicals are not automatically banned or restricted – that depends on subsequent proceedings – but can continue to be placed on the market. On the other hand, suppliers do have to communicate information not just on the listed substances, but also articles or preparations that contain them.

The union list aims to help speed up REACH implementation. To push that forward, the ETUC and the European Chemical Workers’ Federation (EMCEF) also launched an information campaign in September 2010 to get workers’ shopfloor reps to remind employers that REACH lays a number of obligations on them which they have to fulfil before the end of 2010.

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Source: ETUI

Nuclear industry: firm guilty of tampering with its black workers’ dose meters

A US company that processes nuclear waste has agreed to settle compensation claims with black employees who were assigned to jobs with higher radiation exposures but who then had their dose meters doctored to show lower exposure levels.

The Studsvik Memphis Processing Facility in Tennessee, formerly known as Radiological Assistance Consulting and Engineering, or RACE, has signed a consent agreement with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Under the agreement, 23 black employees are to receive a total of $650,000.

The EEOC alleged the company assigned black employees to work with radioactive waste, with exposures higher than their white co-workers, and manipulated dosimeters to show lower levels of radiation exposure than were actually occurring. Black employees were also paid less and subjected to other kinds of discrimination.

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Source: ETUI

Mining disaster in Turkey: unions accuse sub-contracting

Turkish trade union organisations denounced the growing use of sub-contracting following the mining disaster of 17 May in the Zonguldak ore field, in the north of the country. The tragedy is known to have left 28 dead.

The trade unions argue that this lethal explosion – the third in six months – confirms not only the disrepair of the installations but also the poor application of safety standards by the public enterprise TTK, which runs the mine. These repeated incidents have prompted the Turkish mine-workers’ union Maden-İş, to call for coal-mining infrastructures to be modernised and an independent inspectorate created. At present, there is no such body.

In its analysis of the accident, the union also denounces the growing use of sub-contracting in public facilities. In the Kadıradon mine, where the explosion occurred, the construction of new galleries was contracted out to a private firm, Yapitek. Like many other private companies in the mining sector, Yapitek’s risk prevention policy is minimal. The firm is anti-union and strives to keep its workers at a distance from organisations that might make them more informed about safety matters.

Turkey’s mining industry has an accident rate 2.3 times higher than the metalworking sector and 3.5 times higher than construction. Between 1941 and 2003, 3,094 Turkish miners lost their lives extracting ore.

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Source: ETUI
Editorial

Time to live

Laurent Vogel
Director, ETUI Health and Safety Department

Setting up a constant increase in productive efficiency time as an ideal only to end up with increasingly less time to live is a topsy-turvy idea.

The right to "take time to live" is still a big battle to fight to ensure equal and good quality conditions of life in Europe.

This claim might seem not to add up when taken against the huge productivity gains. The production and equal distribution of goods to ensure that everyone on the planet has the material basis for a good quality life would take only a tiny fraction of the time it would have fifty or a hundred years ago.

By and large, these productivity gains have only been marginally reflected in working time developments, the organization of which remains typified by wide social inequalities which take a heavy toll on health. People get sick and die from overwork. People also get sick and die from having no paid work.

On 24 March 2010, the European Commission announced that it was revisiting the working time rules. After failing to push through a disastrous reform that would have seriously rolled back labour standards, it is now saying it wants to widen the debate and carry out a "comprehensive review". The document submitted for discussion by trade unions and employers' organizations suggests that the rules adopted in the 20th century no longer meet the requirements of the 21st century. Flexibility, individualization, autonomy are touted as the keywords of a natural evolution, not forgetting of course the competitiveness obsession.

Behind the pedestrian "new century" argument can be glimpsed the idea that a major commodification of life times is necessary to meet unavoidable needs. The idea of reducing imposed time – that of paid work or domestic chores – in favour of free time is described as traditional. Modernity is claimed to require new approaches. Setting up a constant increase in productive efficiency time as an ideal only to end up with increasingly less time to live is a topsy-turvy idea whose logic becomes apparent only if we bring into the equation the accumulation of profits in the honeypots of extreme wealth of our societies.

A conception of historical time based on the idea of progress is therefore put to work in favour of an age-old employer's demand: the freedom to negotiate working hours with the least possible interference from public regulation.

The requirement of equality leads to conflicting findings. Across Europe, women are still working far more than men if we bring both paid and unpaid tasks into the equation. The European Working Conditions Survey reports that women employed part-time work even more than male full-timers. It says much that the ten pages of text the Commission has put out for a consultation on working time contains not a single paragraph on the issue of gender equality.

Specific categories of worker are still working excessively long hours of anything between 48 and 80 hours a week. The ability to adopt individual derogations from the collective rules encourages that. The lack of official control over multiple job-holding also plays a role.

Part-time work generally goes together with substandard working conditions on the lower rungs of the job ladder with few development opportunities. Call it constrained or voluntary, it is directly connected with the unequal distribution of domestic work. It is most often a form of one-sided flexibility for the employers' benefit with working hours that are rarely negotiable, often inconvenient and sometimes split by unwanted interruptions.

Work intensification is happening everywhere. It has delivered huge productivity gains, mostly siphoned off into increased profits and a perverse increase in unnecessary work, especially through the planned obsolescence of many consumer goods.

These factors are behind huge social inequalities. The elite classes may look much less like leisured classes than in the past, but they still retain a much greater control of time and choice of activities than do the working classes.

The debate on the conflict between our business model and nature has everything to gain from making the reduction of working time one of the big challenges for the quality of life in our societies.
Barroso I: a 5-year standstill on health and safety at work

Workers were hoping for a better legislative framework, especially to tackle MSDs and occupational cancers, but the ex-Portuguese PM’s first term heading the Commission was more taken up with his single-minded pursuit of a rapid and far-reaching deregulation programme.

Laurent Vogel
Director, ETUI Health and Safety Department
A new European Commission took office in November 2004, headed by José Manuel Barroso, the former Portuguese Prime Minister who had committed his country to side with the US in the invasion of Iraq. In early 2010, the Barroso I Commission was succeeded by Barroso II. What did those five years bring for health and safety at work?

The thing to say before drawing up the scoresheet on this period is that the wheels of Community action can turn very slowly. Various initiatives were developed under the Barroso Commission which had actually been launched by its predecessor headed by Romano Prodi. The many plans to recast EU working time legislation, seen by European trade unions as attempts to roll back labour gains, are a case in point. So it would be unfair to lay on one Commission and its President blame that should be shared between the successive executives in Brussels. That said, the Barroso I Commission has marked itself out by its very specific political profile on labour/employment issues.

From 2005, it put a new spin on the so-called "Lisbon Strategy", a programme laid down in 2000 aimed at making the EU economy "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010". In 2005, the programme was refocussed, and its thrust steered towards labour-bashing policies. The Barroso I Commission was prone to seeing social rights as primarily a "burden" to be lightened. Flexibility, competition, privatization of public services, financial sector and industry self-regulation were prioritized. With staunch backing from the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark, the Commission was to curb all ambitious labour standards initiatives.

The main case for having a European health and safety policy is to prevent the functioning of a single market from resulting in "social dumping", i.e., an undercutting war on working conditions. To avoid that, EU policy since the late 1970s has been focused on harmonizing national laws in order to create a rock bottom minimum level of protection.

Legislative harmonization has been mainly based on the 1989 Framework Directive, which focused on two priorities: integrating health and safety into the company's strategies, and developing minimum rules for various specific risks, sectors or categories of workers.

These rules do not lay down specific substantive obligations, but rather define the content of information obligations. The employer has a duty to collect, process, and communicate information so as to assess risks and define specific policies. Workers and their representatives must be consulted.

This content reflects the policy thrust of the big health and safety at work reforms from the early 1970s on. Instead of laying down detailed technical rules for each risk, the legislation establishes a clear set of information obligations and specifies the employer's general responsibility - to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to the work.

For 20 years, the Commission never cast doubt on this approach set going by the 1989 Framework Directive. The Barroso Commission's policy has been the tipping point. In 2007, the Commission flagged up plans to cut the "administrative burdens" on businesses by 25%. It left private consultants the job of defining what was meant by administrative burdens on the basis of a smattering of interviews with employers' representatives. In October 2009, it heralded plans to reduce information obligations under the Framework Directive and the Temporary and Mobile Worksites Directive as part of its campaign to reduce administrative burdens. The main one thrown into question was that on risk assessments in small firms. It also wants the number and duration of inspections done by health and safety inspection bodies to be cut.

The 2007 hinge moment

There have been action programmes on health and safety at work since 1978. Over time, these "programmes" have mutated into "strategies". The new and woollier terminology which emerged in 2002 has mainly been used to justify a withdrawal by the Community institutions and the Commission in particular.

Improved working conditions that ensure the health and safety of workers depend on a wide array of factors. Community policies provide only some of the answers to these problems. The link between these EU policies and national prevention policies obviously plays an important role. Any assessment of what the European Commission does must look at what falls within its specific remit. Under-resourcing of labour inspection services across Europe makes it easier for employers to flout their safety obligations, for example, but Community policies do not have a shaping role here.

The Commission has left private consultants the job of defining what was meant by administrative burdens on the basis of a smattering of interviews, chiefly with employers' representatives.
Community inaction

In February 2007, the Commission published its strategy for 2007-2012. The ambiguity of the policy it proposed was reflected in the very title of the Communication – “Improving quality and productivity at work: Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work” – while the contents arguably made health and safety protection secondary to studiously unspecified economic concerns. It was also very thin on concrete initiatives. The trade union criticism of the time has unfortunately not been belied by the facts. It was not so much a strategy as a pre-emptive justification for Community inaction. The importance of the REACH Regulation adopted just weeks before went unmentioned even though EU health and safety at work legislation was lagging far behind some of REACH’s innovative principles (e.g., the exclusion of reprotoxins from the Carcinogens and Muta-gens Directive).

Two years before the strategy runs out, it is plain to see that the Commission’s initiatives have been few and indecisively pursued. Key issues for the protection of workers’ health are stalled.

One such is work-related cancers - the main cause of deaths due to a lack of workplace prevention. A directive to protect workers against carcinogens was adopted in 1990. It has been updated twice. The 2002-2007 Strategy provided for the Directive to be revised to factor in the experience gained, and especially the disturbing fact that the overall percentage of European workers exposed to carcinogens in the course of their work seems not to be falling. Two things were particularly important: setting binding exposure limits for carcinogens, and extending the Directive to include substances toxic to reproduction. So far, between impact studies based on unverifiable assumptions and endless debates on the administrative burdens on businesses, the legislative machine seems to be at a standstill. It bears pointing out that inadequate prevention at the workplace is thought to account for at least 8% of cancers. This means that up to 80,000 deaths could be avoided if consistent and effective prevention policies were pursued. Most of these deaths occur among the most disadvantaged groups and are concealed by the relatively long time that can elapse between an occupational exposure and the development of cancer.

There are also many reasons for the lack of movement on musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). MSDs are the most common ailment workers suffer from backache and 23% from muscle pain. The link between these conditions and work intensification, unsuitable equipment and facilities, organizational constraints and monotonous work is beyond doubt. Even so, the Commission's development of a common legislative base is painfully overdue. No formal proposal for a directive has yet been presented, even though the issue has been under discussion for at least a decade.

Long working hours are a major risk for both MSDs and more general damage to health. Work accidents, for example, are seen to increase exponentially beyond a 48-hour working week. Flexible working time is a major harmful factor which puts business profits before human needs. Non-fixed working hours that are unpredictable in the medium or long term, night work and weekend work are factors that can be linked to health.

Stoiber, Deloitte and co.: “Better Regulation” versus health and safety at work

The worst onslaught against a joined-up health and safety at work policy was launched by the Commission in its Communication of 22 October 2009 introducing a plan of action to reduce companies’ information obligations. The plan forms part of the “Better Regulation” campaign and covers thirteen different areas. It promises to cut the costs to businesses by around 40 billion euros a year.

Where the 1989 Framework Directive is concerned, the Commission plans to exempt some small firms from the obligation to draw up a written risk assessment, reduce the number of workplace inspections, and encourage Member States to limit the transposition of the HSW Directives to the minimum requirements they contain.

Scraping the written risk assessment in small firms would create a two tier system where the workers in those companies would lose the benefit of a preventive approach. Small firms are the ones most likely to have most need of a risk assessment since they are unused to a systems approach to preventing the hazards of work.

The plan is based on calculations of administrative costs and the purported reductions achieved by some proposals made by a consortium of private consultants headed by the Deloitte group. The consortium collected a smattering of data through interviews done in a handful of EU states. These data were then extrapolated to all EU countries. The consortium documents reveal their lack of knowledge of national situations and are riddled with nonsensical estimates. Writing a work accident report, for instance, is claimed to take an average of 1400 minutes in Romania, 5 minutes in Sweden and 0 seconds in Maltese firms with fewer than 50 workers.

This operation was carried out in three stages. DG Enterprise oversaw the consortium’s work. It was also the support structure for the Stoiber Group which took up most of the consortium’s proposals. It all resembled nothing so much as a ventriloquist act, with DG Enterprise using the voice of the consortium of private consultants to foist its view onto other areas of the Commission, then pushing the Stoiber Group to echo the core proposals. It then pushed through a document that binds the entire Commission in a kind of Barroso I Commission legacy to the Barroso II Commission.

Mr Stoiber has had his term extended by Commission President Barroso. He also became Chairman of the Deloitte Group’s Advisory Board in November 2009. The consortium headed by Deloitte has been paid 17 million euros. Not the best way to start reducing administrative costs …
The Barroso I Commission began on this by taking up a proposal for a directive drafted by the previous Commission which was nothing short of a step backwards in employment rights. Union opposition has so far garnered support from a majority of MEPs. The Commission's proposal was scuppered by Parliament. Following this setback, the Commission decided on 24 March 2010 to renew the initiative through consultation with employers and unions. The document put out to consultation is the usual "grab bag" favoured by the EU executive, a pick-and-mix assembly of a lot of flexibility and invocations of modernity, a smattering of health and safety, and so on. Basically, the Commission seems to want to keep the individual derogations that are against workers' interests and to argue that the International Labour Organization Conventions are mainly appropriate to the countries where working conditions are poorest. The European Trade Union Confederation has made clear its unwillingness to negotiate a revision of the Directive with the European employers, so new initiatives can be expected from the Commission before the end of 2010.

The REACH exception

The adoption of the REACH regulation in late 2006 was an exception to the failure to legislate on risks to health at work. This reform of the chemicals marketing rules may improve the situation of exposed workers and promote research into alternatives to the most dangerous chemicals. But REACH is not to be credited to the Barroso Commission – anything but. The period 2005-2006 witnessed the unedifying sight of a Commission failing to stand up for its own projects, and in which the majority opinion represented by President Barroso and Industry Commissioner Gunter Verheugen could not be bothered to hammer matters out with the other Commissioners.

That REACH escaped a bad mauling is mainly due to the European Parliament which, backed by a number of Member States and Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas, managed to stick to the requirement for an ambitious reform and was able to temper the influence of the multinational chemical industry lobby. The depth of discontent within the Commission was revealed in late 2005 when, in an unprecedented move, its Vice-President Margot Wallström publicly spoke out against the breach of Commission collegiality by some Commissioners negotiating a retreat on certain aspects of REACH without discussion with their colleagues. In these troubled times, DG Social Affairs simply sat on its hands – a course of conduct it has steadfastly followed throughout the debate. The question now is whether REACH will fulfill its promises, whether the ambitious reform will deliver meaningful results despite the unfavourable political context. Another incident revealed the determination of some industry lobbies to get their own back for the adoption of REACH, and the Commission's accommodating attitude towards their demands. In June 2009, under pressure from chemical multinationals – mainly Dow Chemical and Solvay - the Commission decided to extend the derogations for using asbestos diaphragms in certain electrolysis plants, even though safer alternatives existed and had been made compulsory by the national authorities of almost all European countries. Disturbingly, the only assessment made by the European Commission on this matter uncritically took up Dow Chemical and Solvay's arguments.

Flexibility and contingent work

For at least 20 years, Community health and safety at work policy had been broadly instrumental in reviving national debates, reforms of varying degrees in different countries and, in general, improving national health and safety at work policies.

The principles of the 1989 Framework Directive, the development of regulations on risks overlooked or inadequately addressed by most national laws, the emphasis on a management systems approach to health and safety at work and on consultation of workers have all helped leverage improved prevention policies in Europe. This general trend has been countered by job insecurity and a weakening of the mechanisms for overseeing what goes on in firms. This lack of oversight on employers' compliance with the law stems from an abdication of their responsibilities by the public authorities, exemplified by cutbacks in labour inspection resources, and a lesser degree of union influence than in the past.

This has made the positive contribution of European health and safety at work policy more uncertain today. The gap between the worst and best situations between the different countries since enlargement to 27 countries, each country's internal differences between relatively protected and completely unprotected sectors, and the weakness of labour action in this area are all factors that may play into a turning of the tide. Since Mr Barroso's first presidency, the European Commission seems to be questioning the very idea of harmonizing social conditions while maintaining the improvements made. It believes that lowering levels of prevention and increasing flexibility and contingent employment could be factors for competitiveness within the EU and with the rest of the world. The legislative requirements for health and safety at work are now spun as administrative burdens to be reduced. Should this policy continue, the question that must be asked is: might Community policy hold back the development of the most advanced national health and safety at work policies?

The period 2005-2006 witnessed the unedifying sight of a Commission failing to stand up for its own projects.
Cleaning up: workers under pressure

The contract cleaning industry is a microcosm of the worst health impacts of changing working conditions over the last thirty years. It combines the traditional health risks for workers - carrying loads, falls, exposure to toxic chemicals and biological agents, etc. - with so-called emerging risks like stress, in particular from new management and work organization methods.

This second issue of HesaMag tries to shed light on the many problems afflicting most of the workers in this sector. We thought the best way to explore what their actual working conditions are really like was through a journalistic approach combining reports, profiles and interviews.

The workers we met told us about the physical pain that dogs them, especially the musculoskeletal disorders brought on by inhumane work paces, irregular hours and being always on the go. But they were even more eloquent about their non-physical hurt, not least of all the lack of recognition for their work, having no clear occupational status and not being part of a workforce, the feeling of invisibility and isolation heightened by non-standard work hours, and much more besides.
Like most of her colleagues, Christine has to put up with a lack of recognition at work, where she feels isolated and almost invisible.

Image: © Rob Nelisse
The hidden face
of a booming industry

Cleaning has long been a poor relation of industry sector studies. Hitherto neglected because "negligible" in terms of jobs and turnover alike, three decades of steady growth now demand that it be given more than a passing glance. This article spotlights the trends and features of an overlooked industry that now employs more than 3.6 million workers in Europe.

Fabienne Scandella
ETUI Researcher

The worst thing for most of the cleaners talked to is the lack of respect for their work.
Image: © Virginie Pirard
History shows that contracted cleaning services are not new. Late 19th century records show it as part of the service offering of firms in France and Sweden. Well into the 20th century, however, keeping company premises tidy was mainly done by their own employees. This meant that the industrial cleaning market long remained small, since both demand and supply were very limited.

As the 20th century wore on, this situation would gradually change to give rise to an organized, separate industrial cleaning sector. The main changes came from the supply side. By the interwar years, the development of detergents and motor-driven vacuum cleaners prompted some entrepreneurs to move into this profitable niche where mechanization and professionalization would at some point stimulate demand.

After World War Two, and especially from the 1960s onward, the number of cleaning firms increased sharply, partly due to the relatively low initial investment and the lack of licensing requirements. That same decade saw the emergence of the first employer combines in many European countries.

The demand for cleaning services took off from the latter half of the 1970s. Faced with harsher economic times than in the boom decades, firms looked to flexibility-based strategies to stay competitive. One favoured means was outsourcing, which as the name suggests, means contracting out activities previously done in-house. Unskilled operative jobs, which included cleaning activities, were the first to be outsourced on a large scale thereby creating a demand to match the supply that had been developed and organized over the previous decade.

The sector has experienced steady sharp growth ever since, as evidenced by the available sectoral indicator trends. The European Federation of Cleaning Industries (EFCI) reports the European cleaning sector’s average market penetration rising from 43 to 61% between 1989 and 2005. In the space of sixteen years, therefore, the sector captured an additional 18% market share while the use of bought-in cleaning services overtook in-house cleaning from the mid-1990s on (Figure 1, p. 14).

Unsurprisingly, this remarkable expansion in market coverage has had a knock-on effect on the other industry indicators at European level. Between 1989 and 2006, its turnover increased fourfold at an average annual growth rate of 9.7% (Figure 2). At the same time, the industry’s business base almost quadrupled from 31,809 firms in 1989 to 129,000 in 2006 (Figure 3).

But while some of this increase comes from the pull effect generated by the opening-up of the market, it also reflects the absence of licensing requirements in the industry as well as the relatively low initial investment required. In fact, the sector remains typified by vast numbers of small and medium-sized or even micro enterprises competing against a small number of large national or multinational firms. Needless to say, the low concentration of capital in the sector means that the steadily rising number of firms has created the conditions to make that competition particularly fierce.

Finally, in a labour-intensive sector like cleaning, market expansion has naturally been accompanied by employment growth. The European cleaning industry workforce rose from 1.65 million in 1989 to 3.6 million in 2006 (Figure 4). This growth, however, should be interpreted with caution, partly because it cannot be equated to net job creation since much of the increase in the industry workforce is a virtual knock-on effect from the transfer of jobs resulting from outsourcing, and partly because the industry’s employment figures are expressed in terms of straight headcount rather than full time equivalents.

The problem is that part-time working is the norm rather than the exception in an industry whose expansion is driven by outsourcing and is subject to unbridled intra-industry competition.

### Dual control and antisocial hours

Being a labour-intensive sector, it is no surprise that terms of employment and working conditions should be affected by subcontracting arrangements and intense intra-industry competition. For cleaning activities to be set within a subcontracting relationship is not without consequences for the industry and those who operate in it.

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4. It must be added that some of the increase in turnover, number of firms and industry employment have also been contributed by the new EU member countries.

The prevailing dynamic of competition is strictly determined by the firms’ ability to cut prices.
Outsourcing replaces the traditional two-way employer-employee relationship with a three-way relationship that brings in a customer/work specifier. This dislocates the employment relationship by diluting the employer function to some extent. As a result, workers in the sector have to deal with multiple employers, sometimes with conflicting requirements. In short, they are under dual control.5

Positioning the sector as a subcontracting industry also undermines the quality of employment. Outsourcing is well-known as a favoured means of enforcing flexible employment practices. By farming out certain activities to outside service providers, businesses clearly mean to benefit from a low-cost flexibility that they could not have obtained from their employees.6 Where hours of work are concerned, for example, customers/work specifiers can force cleaners to keep non-standard hours by allowing them only staggered or split working hours that can only be worked at antisocial times (early morning, late evening or very occasionally overnight).

To meet such requirements that entail the use of large numbers of workers within very restricted time slots, part-time becomes the standard employment system. But, in what is largely a minimum wage industry, such underemployment adds up only to job insecurity for employees who, unless they have another job in addition to cleaning, often have no other way of providing for themselves and their families than to make themselves available to work overtime. So doing, they become precisely what the subcontracting firms want them to be: a tractable and cheap adjustment variable to cope with the vagaries of the business cycle and customer/work specifiers’ requirements. In the industry, 67% of the workforce is employed part-time for an average of 23 hours work per week. Only 25% of the hours worked are daytime hours.7

The requirement to be a subcontracting industry also affects the working conditions imposed on cleaning staff. Outsourcing cleaning activities allows customer companies to farm out both responsibilities and risks, while maintaining high performance requirements. Playing on market pressure and the temporary nature of outsourcing contracts, customers/work specifiers are pushing service provider firms to cut conditions to the bone in order to earn meagre profit margins. Work intensification, faster work paces, disregard for and/or cavalier attitudes towards their workers’ health and safety8 – cleaning equipment and products bought on cost grounds without concern for health and safety, etc. – bullying and harassment, all practices that have long proved to be effective, especially when directed at workers with no job security, etc. The overriding profit motive appears to warrant all tactics, even those that damage workers’ health and safety. This makes cleaning a back-breaking and dangerous job.9

Employment as an "adjustment variable"

Nor is the intense competition prevalent in the sector any more conducive to the development of decent employment and working conditions. The surfeit of cleaning firms on the market does nothing to promote balanced business relations between customer firms and service providers, since it allows the

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Promoting "best value" to halt levelling-down

Awarding cleaning contracts on the basis of financial criteria alone is good neither for contractors nor workers in the sector. Mindful of this common interest, the social partners in the sectoral social dialogue (European Federation of Cleaning Industries and UNI-Europa) decided to develop a guide* to encourage organizations awarding contracts for cleaning services to bear quality criteria in mind when scoring bids.

The guide Selecting best value proposes an evaluation framework to enable them to select a "contractor, which not only offers a competitive price, but also demonstrates the skills and capabilities to provide a high quality, reliable service". With added new criteria, the procedure for appointing a sub-contractor should squeeze out of the market cleaning firms whose abnormally low bids – some price quotes do not even cover labour costs – undermine the sustainability of law-abiding businesses and the health and safety of their workers. Ultimately, the goal of this initiative is to establish the conditions for healthy competition, which does not systematically drive industry standards down but rather encourages businesses in the sector to invest in the quality of their services, including through staff training.

While the best value guide is a commendable initiative, and makes a case that public contracting organizations are apt to heed when awarding contracts, the private sector still remains to be won over. And resistance from this quarter is stronger.

* Selecting best value – A guide for organisations awarding contracts for cleaning services (2003) Brussels, European Federation of Cleaning Industries and UNI-Europa

former to continuously up their demands and set the ground rules. This power relationship is even more adverse to cleaning firms since the very nature of the activity means that customers are largely unreceptive to whatever competitive advantages a company might be able to play up, including quality of service.

As a result, cleaning contracts are still largely let out on financial criteria alone, commonly referred to as "lowest bid". This means that the prevailing dynamic of competition is strictly determined by the firms' ability to cut prices. In an industry where labour costs account for 75-80% of total operating costs, this puts direct pressure on jobs. It means that to put in a bid capable of winning a contract, firms are forced to cut wage costs – which may simply mean setting on the minimum acceptable number of workers to provide the service.

It can also – as has been shown to happen in many firms, especially smaller ones that cannot benefit from economies of scale – be achieved through fraudulent management practices like undeclared work, multi-tier subcontracting, bogus self-employment, etc. In all cases, employment is very clearly "the" adjustment variable to contend with competition, as companies play either on its legality or on its volume, or sometimes both, to win contracts. As a result, industry employment is non-standard (fixed-term contracts, temporary work or even no formal contract), and does not square with the "normal" form of employment that prevailed during the Fordist period.

Also, as the number of workers is invariably set without regard to the volume of work to be done, the pace of work is regularly forced, and working conditions generally are deteriorating. The sector is being brought to its knees by an all-out price war that is driving service standards down and giving it a very poor image.

The conditions of employment, particularly characterized by non-standard contracts, underemployment and low pay, the nature of the activity and the low social value generally attached to it, make the cleaning industry a dumping ground where a workforce that cannot find employment elsewhere ends up for want of anything else. Looking at the composition of the industry workforce, three major features stand out.

There is a pronounced gender imbalance – 72% of the workforce is female. However, this feminization should not overshadow a relatively marked gendered division of labour: the majority of women mostly do the actual cleaning, while the minority of men hold technical or supervisory positions.

It is shunned by indigenous labour, and overwhelmingly filled by workers from immigrant backgrounds. They are often economically and socially vulnerable, having no other choice but to meekly put up with employment and working conditions that are bad for their livelihoods and their health.

Finally, it has a low ratio of supervisors - 88% of the workforce are manual labourers. The job requires few if any skills, meaning that the workforce is unskilled or classed as such, as can happen with immigrant workers whose qualifications obtained abroad are not recognized as equivalent in the host country.
"The schools are cleaner, but the cleaners are less healthy"

In Spain, cleaning products are making women cleaners seriously ill. Some are having to stop work altogether, but almost no-one seems to care. A field study of these workers shows that the prevention system is not working at all.

Berta Chulvi Ferréols
Journalist

Even ordinary cleaning products handled daily can cause serious illnesses.

Image: © Tania Castro
Rufi Soriano and Dolores Caldeiro set to work when the bell sounds the end of lessons. They work for a cleaning firm contracted by Valen-cia Council to clean all the city's schools. The noisy chatter and laughter of pupils has given way to empty classrooms and corridors that have to be cleaned in as short a time as possible. This shroud of silence that suddenly envelops the school buildings exactly mirrors the management of chemical risks in the cleaning industry: day in, day out, the women who make up most of its workforce handle highly toxic chemicals whose effects they know nothing about, but almost no-one seems to care.

Rufi and Dolores both have chronic illnesses – vocal cord paralysis and hand dermatitis respectively - but neither their company, the preventive service, nor the health insurance organisation countenance that their illnesses may be work-related or that continuing to handle toxic chemicals could affect their health.

The plight of women cleaners attracts few media headlines, unless it involves an accident with irreversible consequences. Which is what happened to Nuria Orduña and Ana de la Torre, two agency staff working as chambermaids at the Barcelona Hilton. They cleaned rooms which they did not know had been sprayed with pesticide just hours earlier, and both have developed multiple chemical sensitivity syndrome, among other conditions. Their lives have been turned upside down by it: they now have to avoid any exposure to airborne chemicals because their bodies are hypersensitized to certain substances. Simply breathing in the scent of a perfume triggers a persistent cough, for example.

Nuria has been recognized as suffering an occupational accident due to this exposure to pesticides and suffering total work incapacity. Ana's plight is far worse even: on top of the physical illness from poisoning, she is suffering depression from having lost the total incapacity pension she has been receiving since 2001. The top law firm acting for the health insurance organisation that pays her the benefit appealed the court decision that awarded it to her. The judgement was reversed on the basis of an expert report claiming that there is no such known disease as multiple chemical sensitivity syndrome. It took just minutes for the expert to put his opinion in. "Not even as long as a visit to the doctor", rages Ana. But that is all it took to deprive Ana of social security coverage.

Endocrinologist Carmen Valls-Llobet, an expert in the effects of chemicals on women and the author of various publications on exposure to pesticides, was literally aghast at the expert report: "There is a wealth of medical research published in prestige international scientific journals that confirms the existence of multiple chemical sensitivity syndrome, describing its symptoms and detailing what causes it." Time, then, for a more detailed look at each of these cases.

**Bleach made up by workers**

Rufi Soriano suffers from paralysis of the vocal cords and Reinke’s oedema, diagnosed in September 2007. The loss of her voice box came about when her firm decided that, to avoid having to collect waste packaging, it would get its own workers to make up the bleach it used. So the employer supplied them with bags of powdered sodium hypochlorite that they had to pour into the water contain-ers supplied for the purpose.

"It wasn't long before the complaints started," says workers’ rep Pedro Medina, "because the mixing operation gave off acutely

"The huge amount of money that goes to fund health surveillance in this country only serves to create a false sense of security among the workers." (Dr Carmen Mancheño)
irritating vapours." There were other reasons for withdrawing the product, too: "The woman told the company that the bags of powder were attracting children who were mistaking them for sherbet." This clinched it and the product was withdrawn, "because our health is one thing, but children’s health is a different story. No messing around with that", she says.

Following this exposure to bleach fumes, Rufi gradually lost her voice. Fearing a tumour, her doctor signed her off work in September to undergo a series of medical tests. The bleach was not and still is not the only highly irritating product that the young woman is in daily contact with. To get rid of ink stains, she cleans the classroom seats every day using a powerful stain remover that contains butoxyethanol, a chemical that is harmful if inhaled, swallowed, or comes in contact with skin.

Rufi obviously does not have all this information on the chemicals she handles. She has not the faintest idea what an "endocrine disruptor" is. She just knows that the stuff stinks. On her doctor’s advice, she decided to wear a mask: “Since I asked for it, the company supplies me with masks like they wear in hospitals. They aren’t as good as those I used to wear when I worked. I look at the product label to try and identify the powerful-smelling pink liquid. But I don’t know what the box problem. He wasn’t interested. He told me I should wear spectacles, that’s all”, says Rufi. And she should indeed wear glasses, as should all her co-workers, if the company had followed the guidance on the safety data sheet for the stain remover which recommends that workers should wear protective eyewear because of splashing risks. While talking to Rufi, I notice that her colleague Susana isn’t wearing glasses, "I can’t clean with gloves on", she says, clearly heedless of the risks involved in using the chemical unprotected.

General lack of information
Rufi and Susana are not exceptions - lack of information is the general rule. In 2005, CCOO’s occupational health service for the Valencia region carried out a wide-ranging research study on chemical hazards in the cleaning sector. 560 female (88%) and male (12%) cleaning industry workers employed in a total of 177 firms were surveyed. Only 28% of these 560 people claimed to have the safety data sheets for chemicals used every day. Even fewer (17%) knew the names of the chemicals they were using, suggesting that a problem exists with understanding the sheets. More worryingly, 35% of interviewees did not know the symptoms of acute poisoning, and 70% had no idea what long-term effects the chemicals they use at work might have. Only 38% of those interviewed knew what to do in an emergency involving a large-scale accidental exposure. Where personal protective equipment is concerned, 40% of interviewees said the firm did not supply any, and only 56% claimed to use it.

It is also not uncommon for important information about risks not to be shown on product labels. The same study looked at the safety data sheets and labels of 241 chemicals. In 22% of cases, the product’s CAS number4 was not shown on labels, even though this is vital for workers to access the safety data sheet for it. The R-phrases – i.e., the kind of risk it poses - were not there or incomplete in 29% and 35% of cases respectively. Analysis of the safety data sheets found that chemicals’ routes of entry into the human body were not specified in 28% of cases despite this being one of the few bits of information that workers can easily understand.

Various studies on health and social inequalities reveal the price paid by women cleaners. The Catalonia-based Jaume Bofill Foundation published a study on inequality and health in 2003 showing that women cleaning industry workers suffer even worse physical and mental health than other male
manual workers.¹ Even without knowing this, Rufí’s mother, Evencia, is clear about the problem. Now retired, she was also a school cleaner for 38 years. In her day, cleaners swept the floor with wet sawdust and cleaned the seats with an ordinary detergent. “It was quite hard to get rid of the foam”, she recalls. When I ask her to compare the results of these old-style products with those her daughter uses today, the answer is short and sweet: “The schools are cleaner now, but the women are less healthy.” The use of chemicals in cleaning stems directly from an organization of work that aims to maximise profits but discounts workers’ health.

One of Rufí’s workmates, Dolores Caldeiro, suffers from chronic dermatitis of the hands and a recently diagnosed malfunctioning thyroid gland (hyperthyroidism). The dermatologist who diagnosed the dermatitis says it comes from using chemicals like the stain remover concerned, but that’s it: no suggestions of an occupational disease, or preventive service investigation – end of story. Dolores decided to buy herself cotton gloves to wear under the work-supplied rubber gloves. “We now know that the stain remover we use is an endocrine disruptor, but we have used very different products. We’ve even cleaned with petroleum spirit.”

Health surveillance is not working

These women workers question the point of a health surveillance system run by people who have no idea what products are used at work and seem not to care about the clearly work-related origin of some chronic conditions. The plight of these women is not exceptional. While researching this article, I learned that the 400 women working for Valencia’s La Fè Hospital cleaning contractor had undergone the mandatory medical checks a few days before. The abnormally low readings of a spirometry test used to diagnose asthma worried Juana Mari, one of the company’s employee reps, who had been alerted to it by a sick workmate.

She wondered whether the doctor who had examined her knew what products she had been exposed to and whether if she had known, she might have interpreted the results differently. I googled up the details of the doctor who examined Juana Mari and many of her workmates and contacted her to explain about my report on how prevention works in the cleaning industry. I said I knew she had recently health-screened a large group of women workers in the La Fè Hospital. Dr Barbera agreed to a meeting, and I asked whether she knew the chemical hazards that the workers she had just examined were exposed to, and if she knew what chemicals they use on a daily basis. She admitted to not knowing what chemicals these workers handle, but was certain that the head of the preventive service knew, and that it was on the basis of that information that the company occupational health doctor had ordered a series of examinations. It was arranged that the doctor concerned would contact me. That never happened, and my call to the preventive service was cut off in mid-conversation for no apparent reason.

Dr Carmen Mancheño, an occupational health doctor and coordinator of the CCOO-Madrid occupational health service, is weary of condemning this kind of situation. “The huge amount of money that goes to fund health surveillance in this country only serves to create a false sense of security among the workers”, says Dr Mancheño. “In 95% of the cases I have seen, no connection is ever made between the workers’ health problems and the risks they are exposed to, and health surveillance does nothing to help improve the preventive system”, she adds.

As an occupational health specialist, she sees very serious consequences from a health surveillance system that is not doing its job: “The perception of risk from chemicals is very poor. Bleach is replaced with a solvent that causes liver disease and affects the central nervous system, but the workers are not told. It is hard to persuade them to take precautions when using these products. The women corroborate the information that comes from their workmates, and they follow the doctor’s orders out of respect, but the health surveillance system is not working”, concludes Carmen Mancheño.

Shattered lives

The cases of Rufí, Dolores and Juana show up the failings of the preventive system. But those of Nuria Orduña and Ana de la Torre also illustrate the failure of the mechanisms to compensate harm.

Nuri and Ana were employed in March 1999 by a temporary staffing agency that supplied chambermaids to the Barcelona Hilton. A bed bug infestation required three floors of the hotel to be sprayed with pesticide. The two women workers went into the rooms before the end of the safety waiting interval and came in contact with organophosphate compounds, wearing only rubber gloves by way of protective equipment. “I was about to go
We were just told not to take the gloves off and López of the Government of Catalonia’s Occupa-
tional Safety and Health Centre in Barce-
lona has drawn up a detailed medical report on the accident and the symptoms of these patients, which was annexed to the Ministry of Labour decision levying a 72,000 euro fine on the companies involved. Since being ex-
posed, these workers have suffered from neu-
ropsychological problems, hypersensitivity to chemicals, short-term memory loss, men-
strual disorders and autoimmune disease, according to medical reports written by Dr Carmen Valls-Llobet and Dr Julián Márquez. The following year, Dr Lópezc and Dr Obiolsd identified 16 cases of exposure to pesticides in the province of Barcelona, totalling 314 ex-
posed workers, 184 of whom are suspected of having been affected and 27 of whom are suf-
fering from serious ailments.

Nuria and Ana’s work and private lives have been shattered by this accident. They have been found to be suffering total incapacity for work by various court decisions. But lawyers for the health insurance organisation responsible for paying the benefit have ap-
pealed the judgements: “They have nothing to lose and our problems mean nothing to them”, says Ana. In her case, Catalonia’s High Court of Justice, finding one of the appeals admissible, advised the labour court which had recognized the work incapacity to base its decision not just on the health and safety inspectorate reports, but also to rule on the merits – no easy task for a judge who lacks the resources in expertise that are available to administrative authorities.

In response, the labour court appoint-
ed an expert who challenged the trial deci-
sion without even examining the patient or consulting her medical records which were drawn up on the basis of examinations by different specialists and reported multiple chemical hypersensitivity syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome, vagotonia associated with hypersecretion of growth hormone, a neuro-
 logical syndrome, and endocrine disruption associated with oestrogen hypersec-
tion. However, “Ana suffers from no disa-
bilising disease because these diseases do not exist”, the court-appointed expert had the te-
merity to write in his report.

Because of one of these “nonexistent” syndromes, however, Ana has been oper-
ated for a tumour caused by hypersecretion of growth hormone. And as Dr Valls-Llobet reports, nine other women who have also been exposed to organochlorine pesticides have had to be operated for the same type of tumour.
"They're worn-out in every respect"

Yves Roquelaure heads the Laboratory for Ergonomics and Epidemiology in Occupational Health, a research unit linked to the University of Angers and the French Institute for Public Health Surveillance (INVS). He coordinated a large-scale epidemiological survey on upper limb musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in the Pays de la Loire region in 2002.

Interview by
Denis Grégoire
Editor

Did your survey in the Pays de la Loire region find a high prevalence of MSDs in contract cleaning services?

**YR** — In our survey, as in others, cleaning workers - both those working in industry and in private homes - rank among the jobs most at risk of MSDs. Their main complaints are low back pain, shoulder pain and carpal tunnel syndrome (see tables, p. 22). It's a finding made in clinical practice, by occupational health doctors, and our own epidemiological data.

Do the findings show the "epidemic" of MSDs in contract cleaning worsening in recent years?

**YR** — In what we're doing, we aren't seeing an increase but that is likely due to the level already being extremely high. 70% of people complain of pain and a significant number of these are chronic back pain or chronic shoulder pain from being exposed to an absolutely enormous workload. It is not so different from bricklaying, but the back-breaking nature of cleaning is generally underestimated. Quebec studies have shown that getting people with work-related MSDs back to work may have therapeutic benefits. Does this apply to cleaning workers, too?

**YR** — I can't see it being easily done in this sector. They are quite unstructured jobs. The people often work alone, in a highly fragmented way, to very tight time constraints. They often work in the morning, with staggered or split working hours, cleaning office by office, spending 2 or 3 minutes per office, etc. So the basic options as to what you can do in terms of the individual are quite limited. To get them back to work as part of therapy entails giving a lot of thought to work organization so as to ease the returnees back into increasingly demanding duties. But to start with, they must be started on very much lighter duties, which generally can't be done in this kind of business.

Are MSDs a factor for being put out of work in this kind of job?

**YR** — The people you find in these jobs are already vulnerable, either young people who will gradually start to suffer, or people who already have a main job and are doing a second job in cleaning, usually in private homes. MSDs are indeed very much the leading cause of being out of work in cleaning services firms, well ahead of allergies.

What's the psychological state of the cleaners that you see?

**YR** — The main thing about them is that they are worn-out. There's no other word for it - they're worn-out in every respect. Most of the people I see are between 40 and 55, often

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1. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is a condition affecting the hand and wrist. The carpal tunnel is a space in the wrist surrounded by wrist bones and by a rigid ligament that links the bones together (from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety website).
Table 1 Prevalence of pain and MSDs among cleaners *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numbers (n =)</th>
<th>Prevalence of upper limb pain during the last 12 months (%)</th>
<th>Prevalence of low back pain during the last 12 months (%)</th>
<th>Prevalence of diagnosed MSDs (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=53
Source: Institut de veille sanitaire, LEEST

Table 2 Cleaners exposure to general risk factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>% employees exposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly repetitive upper limb movements &gt; 4 hours per day</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaks &lt; 10 minutes per hour if movements are highly repetitive</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling loads heavier than 4 kg more than four hours per day</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High psychological demands</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low social support</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Institut de veille sanitaire, LEEST

* This section of the French nomenclature of occupations and occupational categories (PCS No: 6891) includes employees responsible alone or as part of a small team for cleaning industrial or institutional/commercial premises (offices, etc.). The occupations of cleaning lady (in a private home, school or health facility, hotel), caretaker and machine servicing operative are excluded from this category.

women who have had a hard life. They’re suffering from upper limb MSDs, which have big psychological effects. These are people who have a very difficult job making ends meet. They often combine psychological distress, not to say depression and in any event anxiety, with chronic pain. When you add all those together, there is a very big risk of their having to stop work. And when they have stopped work, it’s extremely difficult to get them back into it. What makes them an even more at-risk group is that it is not easy to carry out prevention in this sector.

Are cleaning-related MSDs recognized as occupational diseases?

**YR** – If it is a condition included in the schedule of occupational diseases, like carpal tunnel syndrome, professional cleaners will have no more difficulty than any other occupation in getting the occupational original of their ailment recognized. Everyone knows how gruelling this kind of work is.

The problem is that these people are often suffering chronic pain not necessarily linked to a specific disease. It is highly debilitating chronic pain, but doesn’t classify as an occupational disease in the French system, or that of any other European country. For example, “ordinary” low back pain, which is nothing out of the ordinary for doctors but can be very debilitating, is not recognized as an occupational disease in France. Slipped discs are recognized, but not chronic low back pain, even though that is 10-20 times more common. Someone with highly disabling chronic low back pain may be unable to work but will not be recognized as having an occupational disease. It’s a glaring injustice.

Trade unions have condemned the increasingly faster work paces forced on workers in the sector. How do we break with this “do more, do it quicker” attitude?

**YR** – In my view, prevention can only be done at the industry level to ensure that the best employers are not penalized for being a little more costly than the others. Trade unions have a key role to play because these are workers who tend not to be unionized; they are isolated, weakened, in small or big firms which are fiercely competitive. So the balance of power is very much against them. And that could well be one of the causes of MSDs in the sector, with constant financial pressure, pressure to increase performance, and lower prices for years putting very considerable pressure on the cleaners.

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More on the work done by Yves Roquelaure

A dirty job, but somebody’s got to do it ...

A survey over several months of contract cleaning sites in Brussels and London uncovered the forms of managerial arrangement that work to deny cleaners the social and occupational recognition they aspire to. They create conditions that are a breeding ground for psychosocial disorders.

Fabienne Scandella
ETUI Researcher

Repulsion and disgust are universal reactions to filth and soiling. In most societies, contact with them is shameful and surrounded by taboos, purification rites and a raft of social do’s and don’ts. The Indian caste system is probably the best-known example of the institutionalization of these prescribed norms. The castes assigned tasks involving contact with bodily emissions, organic waste and death are viewed as impure and consigned to the bottom rung of the social status ladder. The aversion principle, based on fear of contamination, ensures that they keep their distance by prescribing intra-caste endogamy and establishing a set of social rules relating to the physical and social distance to be kept from members of other castes. This is why, given the nature of the activities reserved for them, the untouchables are effectively “outcasts”, assigned to the bottom-most rung of the social ladder and, as their name suggests, forbidden any physical contact with members of other castes.1

The extreme nature of the prescriptions associated with the Indian caste system has long been disapproved of in Western societies, where the application of such radical principles would be quite simply unthinkable. And yet Western societies are not free of aversion to soiling – in the broadest sense - and the individuals whose work brings them into close contact with it. In the 1950s, the American sociologist Everett Hughes found that a host of occupations are socially deprecated because of their physical closeness to bodily emissions, filth or death. He also revealed that the stigma which typifies what he called “dirty work” is passed onto the individuals who do it by association with the object of their labour, as the “personification” of it. They are generally made to feel that degradation by a lack of deference or respect, by being talked down to, acts of discrimination, and even to the extremes of avoiding contact.2


Nothing is clearer than cleaning’s connection with fouling, which classifies it beyond doubt as “dirty work”. My own survey of the cleaning sector bears out the way those who do this job are daily disrespected through abusive treatment and institutional distancing mechanisms.

Disrespect

Cleaning workers face two sources of disrespectful treatment in their daily work: from those who benefit from their work, and from their own superiors. Cleaners get the message from the evidence left by the former. A Ghanaian cleaner who works nights in the London office of an international bank said: “They throw their rubbish on the floor instead of in their wastebasket. People are like that - they think, ‘Oh the cleaners’ll be coming in to clear it up.’”

A Moroccan cleaner working in Brussels has the same kind of feeling: “If we find the toilets in a disgusting state, we write: ‘Please leave the toilets clean and tidy’, and the next day when you come back, it’s as if they’ve done it on purpose!”

It’s a fact of daily life that the cleaners have got used to, even though it shows contempt and disregard for them. But there are also more extreme expressions of disrespect, like that reported by a Cameroonian cleaner, working in the offices of a London-based multinational: “At one point, there was one particular person who kept on ‘doing his business’ on the floor [...] I said to the women: ‘Don’t clean it up. He’s doing it on purpose! Don’t clean it up. Call the manager and show it to him! That’s not our job. Don’t do it!’”

Faced with such extreme and degrading cases, the cleaners often make it a point of honour to rebel, to lay down the limits of their job and the amount of stigmatisation they are
willing to put up with. In cases like these, they tend to have more scope for reacting than when the disrespect comes from their own superiors, which seems very common in the business.

One cleaner said: "Once we were in the lift and the assistant manager said [right in front of us]: "I'm not getting in the lift with them." So she waited and took the next one. Our supervisor is Ghanaian. My team has one lady from Nigeria, two from Ghana and one from Sierra Leone. We're used to working together. So at one point, our supervisor started calling us 'My ladies'. The assistant manager turned round to the supervisor and said, "Who are you calling your ladies? You don't call them ladies! They aren't ladies!" Nobody said anything back, because the more you say, the more you get it indirectly taken out on you. So nobody said anything back. You have to stay calm, do your job and go home."

Talking about their direct supervisor, two Colombian women cleaners who work the day shift in a big insurance firm based in the City of London say:

"That supervisor treats us like dirt, he humiliates us. — He uses vile language to us. — The last one was what he said to me. I was outside and there were no witnesses. I was just sticking a notice on a wastebasket. He said: "Stick it there!" But it was special sticky tape and I didn't know. So he started in on name-calling 'dopey bloody tart, stupid cow!' The cleaning agents suffer regular belittlement and insults, but their precarious situation allows them no real way of demanding the respect they are denied.

Avoidance by design

As a service activity, cleaning should create a service relationship. But outsourcing and competition let customer firms ignore the staff who are cleaning their premises. By arranging their cleaning duties outside busy times and keeping them well away from other workers — cleaners’ cubby holes are often situated in basements or car parks — customer firms purposefully make their cleaning workers invisible by designing out the co-presence that could create service relationships — i.e., contacts between cleaning workers and the workers that benefit from their services. While this institutionalised distancing is regularly excused away by "practicalities" - to avoid interference with service recipients’ work - the zeal with which the cleaning agents suffer regular belittlement and insults, but their precarious situation allows them no real way of demanding the respect they are denied.

An overdue identity

Cleaning workers are painfully aware that the lack of respect and systematised distancing they undergo are based on a personification process through which they are pretty much equated with the object of their labour: dirt. One woman cleaner explains the correspondence principle she suspects to be at work behind the blanket looks of staff on the site she cleans at: "They wouldn't talk to a rubbish bin, so they don't talk to you."

Similarly, when asked about his negative attitude towards his job, a team leader hastens to clarify: "It's not me that looks down on it, it's them we work for who look down on it: we're cleaners, so we're like something on the bottom of their shoe. [...] They [the customers] think that because we're cleaners, we're just crap. That's what gets me."

For cleaning workers, the expressions of disrespect and distancing are all evidence of their inferior status and make it hard to identify positively with their job.

"We're at the bottom of the ladder. Who's below us? Nobody. OK, you can trot stuff like "a job's a job, this is Europe, it makes no difference". Well, all I can say to that is, 'yeah, right!' In conditions like these, many cleaners have a hard time maintaining a robust and enduring self-esteem. Many, too, feel embarrassed or worthless. In reality, the expressions of disrespect and avoidance measures act to deny workers in this industry the social and professional recognition to which they like most other workers aspire. In societies where the job you do is a lot of who you are, it is hardly surprising that such barriers to developing a positive professional identity cause severe psychosocial conditions. ●

Read more

Standing out among the invisible

An early thirty-something with already more than a decade in cleaning behind him, the young Moroccan landed in the capital of Europe with dreams of becoming a lawyer. He clearly has drive, but for now has to settle for using it to help the unseen workforce.

Denis Grégoire
Editor

He passed his first year's studies in Belgium with little difficulty, despite having little interest in the course. But it is not in the Moroccan tradition for men to live off their parents after a certain age and anyway, Anass had meanwhile met the woman who was to become his wife and the mother of his two daughters.

"In Morocco, a man has to provide for his family. So I had to work at the same time as studying. I started out washing dishes in a restaurant, but the pay was very poor and sometimes the owner didn't pay at all. Someone I knew pointed me towards cleaning where the pay was a bit better, but mainly you have a proper contract and the certainty of getting paid at month-end", said the young man.

Union steward and chargehand

A regular pay-packet, but also physical constraints that soon forced him to drop his studies to build up overtime, going from one site to the next. One of his worst memories is cleaning a supermarket. "There were just two of us to clean up the store – obviously – but also the warehouses and car park. And it all had to be done between 6:00 and 9:00 each morning. The customer toilets were the worst. Some people are just filthy - I can't tell you what we had to clean up ... And then there were the snide remarks from some supermarket staff reading their paper and coming out with: "Another mugging. Oh look, a Moroccan again."

The supermarket in the morning, the offices of big multinationals in the evening. Coming in as a student "dental technician", within a few months Anass had become a "hygiene maintenance technician", as they call it in the trade nowadays.

At 32, Anass Nadi has already done the cleaning industry from A to Z. Starting out as a cleaner while still a student, he has since 2005 been a chargehand for the company contracted to clean the Berlaymont - the European Commission's famous star shaped building in Brussels. A "good job" for an industry where he seems never to have wholly fitted in, however. A sharp shirt unbuttoned to below the neck under a black leather jacket, sporting a silver-plated watch, a cheeky grin for a pretty passing face, the young man is a million miles from the stereotypical cleaner, apart maybe from the fact of being Moroccan. By far most workers in this sector in Brussels are immigrants or with immigrant backgrounds.

He arrived in the European capital as an 18-year-old in the early 1990s with a modern literature degree hoping to study law. "But my uncles, who had been living in Brussels for several years, had actually enrolled me in a dental technician college because the fees were much lower than the university", he says, still regretfully.

Despite the risks, some union officials force a showdown.

Image: © Vincen Beeckman

He's a job where you have to buckle down to it, and never answer back under any circumstances. While the former is no problem, the latter just isn't really him. "I put the caretaker of an office building who was bossing me around in his place. He complained to my
"This business is all about power games; it’s pretty behind the times."

managers and I was transferred elsewhere straight away. The phrase ‘the customer is always right’ still applies in this game."

But a strong character can also help open doors. "Looking presentable, being able to put my point across clearly and even my pugnacious side have played in my favour", he admits.

His aunt, a union steward of 30 years’ standing, seized on her nephew’s education to get his help in reading the documents she gets from her union. "Barring the odd "special case" coming to Belgium to pursue their education, like one colleague who is doing his doctorate in mathematics, there aren’t many educated people in our industry. And if you are, there’s every likelihood that the unions will try and get you to stand in the workplace elections."

Union steward and chargehand, the "double duty" is common in the industry. Being appointed to a union office often results in being given bigger responsibilities or benefits by the employer. Anass Nadi readily admits, "You wear two hats. You get in the loop despite yourself. Nobody’s going to turn down perks just for their own benefit or protection."

The steadily rising workload is an even bitterer pill for the workers in that not all face the same requirements. The steward notes that it is those who work unsociable hours that are subject to the highest productivity constraints. Some "favourites" chosen by EU building management officials on the basis of criteria as ‘objective’ as physical appearance, do an easy 8-to-4. "This business is all about power games; it’s pretty behind the times", complains the employee rep.

When asked about his future, Anass seems split between the remarkable zeal that typifies him and a kind of resigned acceptance. He sat exams to join the Brussels police, but a computer glitch meant his results could not be validated.

"I speak all the Maghreb dialects, I’m a people person and I like helping others." You can easily see him as a community mediator, not least because he is deeply concerned about the lack of bearings and low-level crime among his community’s youth living in Belgium. But he is still unsure about resitting the exam. A recently recruited friend has told him that the police force isn’t entirely a bed of roses. Until a more appealing future career comes along, he will stick with his "bread-winning" job, but with the promise to himself never to keep silent. "I’ve always said, if I have to die, it will be on a battlefield." •

Undercutting

There can be a fine line between "perks" and "dodgy dealing". The cleaning sector is a fiercely competitive marketplace. And in order to win contracts, especially those with European institutions, companies quote artificially low prices. And to still turn a profit on the contract, bidders may be tempted to overstep the bounds of legality. Anass Nadi vividly remembers the "moonlighting" scandal uncovered in the Commission in 2007. The cleaning firms which then had the contract to clean the EC’s offices had set up a fraudulent scheme, contracting the work out to a firm that employed undeclared workers.¹

"The outsourcing thing would probably never have happened if the tendering rules hadn’t been so ultra-free market that the one who bids 10 when the competition quotes 15 wins the contract", fumes the young union steward.

This undercutting war eventually rubbed off on the workplace relations between EU officials and the outside firms’ employees. "Some Commissioners’ private staff want cleaners at their beck and call, i.e., working exactly when they want. They want their office cleaned at 6.30 am on the dot and not a second later or they lodge an official complaint. Some people think we should be as invisible as possible", he says. That said, the young man doesn’t find EU officials any more difficult than private sector customers.

"It’s all about the person. Some are pretty stuck up. For instance, some officials put in a complaint because they found some of the cleaners having a coffee from the machine reserved for Commission staff. Others are quite friendly. We chat, they tell us about their holidays, we tell them about our worries, but there’s no over-familiarity. Professionalism is the main thing."

Quality standards, the new trend

There isn’t much time for water-cooler gossip anyway. The offices of the Berlaymont behemoth are cleaned by just over 80 people today, compared to over 100 before the contract was renegotiated. Fewer staff and ever-rising demands. The shop steward is particularly critical of the emerging trend towards quality standards in the industry: "Outside firms do quality audits on our work. They hand you a report, and if you score less than 90%, for example, the cleaning firm has to pay back a percentage of the price paid by the customer."

Eco-products are the current big thing, so the contract requires "green" cleaning products to be used. "But the cleaning firm buys the cheapest, so you have to use twice as much elbow grease as before, and as everything has to shine..."

¹. As reported in "Nouveau scandale à l’Union européenne" (new scandal in the European Union), in the Belgian daily Le Soir, 2 June 2007.
"No more being ground down for us"
Dutch cleaners up in arms

Dutch cleaners have been striking for over nine weeks to get a new collective agreement. Never in the Netherlands have so many cleaners been moved to direct action – apparently all thanks to unionization.

Pien Heuts
Journalist
It is May 2010, and 80-odd cleaners are contemplating their new collective agreement (CA) with pride and satisfaction. For the past two days, the small coastal town of Renesse-aan-zee in Zeeland (southern Netherlands) has been hosting the mould-breaking “cleaners’ parliament”. It is a victory celebration, obviously, but especially a gathering to map the way forward for the future. After months of labour action, they went on strike for nine weeks, finally winning their agreement at the end of April. “We fought hard for this victory”, said a train cleaner member of the parliament. “It isn’t just about the money; the main thing is that we have become visible, and we deserve the same respect and dignity as any other human being. We clean up other people’s mess, but we won’t be treated like dogs.”

The cleaning workers grabbed the Dutch headlines earlier this year with TV news reports showing cleaners using cherry pickers to assault the headquarters of the cleaning giant CSU. Elsewhere, they brought Utrecht station, the main railway junction of Dutch Railways (NS), to a halt. For six days, 400-odd cleaners lived day and night in the concourse. When one striker was threatened with the sack, his colleagues mounted a media stunt, occupying the headquarters of a major publishing house, the Telegraaf Media Groep. The royal palace also had a visit from the cleaners.

Frontline soldiers

Different nationalities, thousands of workplaces scattered nationwide, language barriers, temporary contracts and no tradition of labour withdrawal - hardly the best ingredients for mass labour action. But still, a group of 1400 activists managed to get grassroots action going. Unionization seems to be the key to it all (see inset, Justice for Janitors). FNV confederation union leader Ron Meyer is in charge of the Schoon Genoeg’ union membership drive. After a string of small-scale protest stunts, negotiations on the CA started in late 2009. Preferring a backseat role, Meyer gives full credit to the cleaning sector union members for a much improved CA. He keeps hammering home the point that the frontline soldiers are the ones who did all the work; and there he puts his finger on what unionization is all about – not the union as a problem-defining and –solving organization but the membership setting the course to take. Meyer has a very firm vision of union action: "For too long the union has viewed its members as consumers, and that hasn’t encouraged them to get involved. In my view, the image of the union leader shepherding his flock is dead and gone. People have to be clued up on their situation, because they are the only ones who can get things done. Only they can stick up for their rights and go on the

"For too long the union has viewed its members as consumers. In my view, the image of the union leader shepherding his flock is dead and gone." (Ron Meyer)
Modern slavery

More than 150,000 people work in the cleaning sector in the Netherlands. They are a diverse mix of nationalities, men and women, young and old. Wages are low, so many people need two jobs. Working full-time, they earn barely more than basic welfare benefit, i.e., about what it takes to just keep body and soul together. Work hard and don’t complain is the motto at the bottom of the job ladder. Employers are well-versed in how to take advantage of the vulnerability of cleaners who are often happy just to have work, fear being fired or losing their temporary contracts, or don’t speak the language well enough to be able to fight back. The Dutch cleaning market is in the hands of five big firms – mostly multinational: Asito, ISS, Hago, CSU and Gom. An all-out price war has been raging since big accounts like Dutch Railways, Schiphol Airport, government departments, banks and other big companies contracted-out their cleaning. Cleaning firms bid rock-bottom prices to win contracts, often below cost. If the normal hourly rate is 21 euros, the bid will show just 16 euros. A number of employers openly admit to being unable to actually carry out the tasks offered in the contract, which is why the number of hours’ cleaning done is less than the number of hours agreed. Because the millions in annual profits have to be assured, and as labour costs make up 90% of a cleaning firm’s costs, this is where the biggest savings are made. Whenever the contract changes, the cleaners have to do more work with fewer staff and for lower pay. For example: it used to be that an office of 300 square metres was the norm; today, a cleaner has to do double that. A Dutch cleaner has less than two minutes to clean a train toilet. A cleaning crew has ten minutes for an entire train.

Virgin soil

Ron Meyer tells how the campaign was developed, how contacts have been struck up in recent years with cleaners at hundreds of different locations. “We had to win them over. These people are fearful and suspicious, browbeaten by their employer, and may not want anything to do with the union. On the other hand, it’s a good thing to sow seed in virgin soil. You can start out on a sound footing, and not be held back by a traditional union structure.”

For the previous CA, Meyer had already noted that union activists could have free access to all workplaces. There was no record
Justice for Janitors

The Dutch campaign to unionize cleaning workers is based on a union strategy imported from the United States. In the 1980s, the SEIU union (Service Employees International Union) mobilised as many as 225,000 cleaning workers in thirty cities to get better pay and health insurance. Like the US union, the FNV confederation is having problems recruiting workers generally, and cleaners in particular. Increasing membership is not just a strategy for union survival, it is more a way of doing something about poor working conditions. But for that, the union needs a representative membership.

The organizing campaign means constantly being out in the field to identify problems, unacceptable situations, issues and questions raised by workers. The campaigners are also looking for potential members in mosques, churches and community centres. It is a strategy in which the union has to become an abiding feature of the worker’s life.

The other idea with this very clear direct action aspect is to get an objective detailed picture of the sector: the number of workers, the problems, customers, businesses, shareholders, turnover, and so on. The aim is to give workers the responsibilities, resources and support they need to deal with the issues themselves. Natural leaders capable of carrying a campaign emerge at the different organizing sites. They are the backbone of the movement and meet regularly in the ‘cleaners’ parliament.’ The organizing strategy also puts a big focus on international contacts. Light-hearted protest stunts designed to catch media and public attention are vital to achieving the aims. Organising is an ongoing process. The job is never done.

In the United States, the organizing campaign met with a union-busting response, as union members were laid off, injured and intimidated. This is unlikely to happen in the Netherlands, where workers are in a stronger legal position and there is a culture of consultation between employers and workers. But the strike has had after-effects, both during and after, such as contracts not being extended for example.

More about labour action inspired by Justice for Janitors

of participants at such meetings. "That enabled us to keep up intensive contacts with the rank-and-file", he said, "but we also reach out to people through local community centres, churches and mosques. We want to get imams, pastors and priests actively involved in the next campaign. We have to form a broad social coalition where the struggle of cleaners and other low-income workers will occupy the foreground."

In late February, after light-hearted stunts that failed to get the employers at the negotiating table to improve their pay offer, the cleaners turned to the only means left to them: a strike. At that time, the plight of cleaners was known partly through a serious study done by the union, and it was also known that the employers were having a knife held to their throats by their customers, the result being contracts at bargain prices. The FNV opened a strike fund and 1,400 strikers signed up.

"Like a big family, we roamed the country for nine weeks", says Judy Lock, an activist and cleaner at Schiphol. "We reacted immediately to reprisals like summary dismissals or contracts that suddenly didn’t get renewed, and in the evening, we were on the TV news again. We are immensely united, nobody can divide us. Every time we went back into negotiations, everyone seemed even more determined to keep on fighting. The employers were beside themselves."

Judy explains the cleaners’ commitment to labour action by the fact that they understood that they could win by fighting, and because the activists made sure that the union was again visible on the ground. "People won’t stand for being exploited in this way any more. Everyone human being wants to be respected. The cleaning sector is a form of modern slavery, but we have ourselves to blame for that. We have to stick up for what we want. In the past, we let the union do that. With this organizing strategy, I see the union move more as a football club. To win, you have to work together flat out. It is a process that has to develop. In the upcoming negotiations for the CA in 2011, I’m expecting at least 4,000 workers out on the barricades."

Lively characters

Ron Meyer argues that one good thing about unionization is the realization that a union is a winning organization, composed of ordinary people on the ground. People who are not pigeonholed as working poor and disadvantaged, but as lively, impassioned, cheeky and characterful. “We knew it was a David and Goliath battle, so it was important to spread our forces around. With a vanguard of 1,400 cleaners, it worked very well. Whether on the radio, on TV, in newspapers or on the Internet, each cleaner told their story to the media persuasively, and calmly explained why they had had enough of being exploited. We were fighting like blindfolded boxers; fortunately, our opponent was weak and blind.”

It took a nine-week strike for the negotiations to finally end up on 24 April 2010 in a new two-year CA, with the offer of a structural wage increase of 3.5%, whereas the employers had gone into the negotiations categorically refusing to discuss any pay rise. Workers can also take Dutch lessons during
Hans Simons, who has headed the cleaning and business services employers' organization for the past year, is satisfied that a good outcome has been achieved on the CA. He stresses the importance of keeping workers in the cleaning sector by providing good working conditions given the future labour market shortage. When asked, he voices a belief in the importance of a stronger union. Simons is and remains a social democrat. He feels that the reason the dispute dragged on for so long was the gap between the pay offer and demands, the travel allowance which the union subsequently stepped back from, price competition in the sector and the change in union strategy.

"The traditional system of the top employers negotiating with the union has receded into the background. The unions have handed over power to the cleaners themselves, which is unusual in Dutch labour relations. That also has a drawback: it is questionable whether such a small group of strikers is really representative of the entire industry", says the employers' representative. But he still managed to give credit to the unions: "It is very important to take up the cause of the cleaners. The world now knows what's going on in the cleaning sector, that the cleaning sector is not as clean as all that. It's a good thing to have gone on strike, to get our voice heard. The employers weren't expecting it. It can sometimes take up to an hour to get all the equipment together. They're profiting on the backs of workers. It's a good thing that people are finally aware of the exploitation and cut-throat competition. The world now knows what's going on in the sector, that the cleaning sector is not as clean as all that. The Netherlands now knows what we can do. It's a good thing to have gone on strike, to get our voice heard. The employers weren't expecting it. It's a choice I made for the children. I want them to have a better future. They have to be able to get an education. I don't want them ending up as cleaners. I have two jobs. If one employer goes bust, I still have the other.

We're under a lot of pressure at work. We have to work harder and harder. My back and arms hurt. I've already had to be operated on my wrists. But I think it is important for the hospital to be clean. I want to do a good job. The one thing you have to be careful about in a hospital is germs. That's why it's stupid that we get hardly any cleaning products. My boss just tells me not to whinge when I complain. There's no respect for the work we do. Last year, we went on strike with the union. We had to pick up other people's work and do it in the same number of hours. A lot of women daren't speak out. They were really pleased when I went on strike this year. If you strike, we will too, they said. Sixty out of 180 cleaners did. It was a good thing that we finally got seen. Before the strike, we simply didn't exist. I told the other women: 'We're going to do this in a right and proper way. All we're asking for is the end of slavery. To be respected for what we do.' We stood up for ourselves. It feels good. We're not afraid any more."

In their own words
Christine Monk-Simon (47), born in French Guyana, cleaner at the Erasmus Medical Centre

*I stayed at home while the children were little. My husband was earning just enough to live on. But the cost of everything's going up: rent, electricity, shopping, the children's education. I like working, and with five children I've no other choice. I work mornings from 6 am to 9 am and evenings from 5.30 pm to 9 pm. I'm up every day at half-past five because I have to get the bus to the hospital. Travel alone costs me 60 euros a month. That's a lot. But I'm ploughing on. It's a choice I made for the children. I want them to have a better future. They have to be able to get an education. I don't want them ending up as cleaners. I have two jobs. If one employer goes bust, I still have the other.

We're under a lot of pressure at work. We have to work harder and harder. My back and arms hurt. I've already had to be operated on my wrists. But I think it is important for the hospital to be clean. I want to do a good job. The one thing you have to be careful about in a hospital is germs. That's why it's stupid that we get hardly any cleaning products. My boss just tells me not to whinge when I complain. There's no respect for the work we do. Last year, we went on strike with the union. We had to pick up other people's work and do it in the same number of hours. A lot of women daren't speak out. They were really pleased when I went on strike this year. If you strike, we will too, they said. Sixty out of 180 cleaners did. It was a good thing that we finally got seen. Before the strike, we simply didn't exist. I told the other women: 'We're going to do this in a right and proper way. All we're asking for is the end of slavery. To be respected for what we do.' We stood up for ourselves. It feels good. We're not afraid any more."

In their own words
Mame Birame Sow (52), born in Senegal, Schiphol Airport cleaner

*I dream is to one day have a farm on the little plot of land I own in Senegal. But first I have to earn money for a well, solar panels and a tractor. I work evenings at Schiphol from 2.30-10.30 pm, Wednesday to Sunday. It's hard physical graft. You have to clean the floors, empty the bins and tidy up in the departure and arrival halls. Customers want cheap contracts, so my employer offers the work at cut-price rates. We have to do more work with fewer staff. They even save on cleaning products. It can sometimes take up to an hour to get all the equipment together. They're profiting on the backs of workers. It's a good thing that people are finally aware of the exploitation and cut-throat competition. The world now knows what's going on in the sector, that the cleaning sector is not as clean as all that. The Netherlands now knows what we can do. It's a good thing to have gone on strike, to get our voice heard. The employers weren't expecting it. They're cowboys who want to grind us down.

I earn 1,300 euros a month. I have another job from noon to 2 pm. I'm shattered when I get home at night. But I need money to provide for my family. I used to work in computing. But my contract didn't get renewed due to all sorts of reorganizations. I'm not typically Dutch, I've got an accent. So I was first out. I've got recognized training credentials and worked as a programmer in Senegal, but I can't find work in IT now. Too old. Too black. I've no opportunity to prove myself. It's frustrating to have to do unskilled work. But it's work. And there is a bright side. If I had stayed in Senegal, I wouldn't have had all the experience I have. I've seen a lot. Life has given me understanding."
MSDs: action-oriented research helps unions to break the silence

Tens of millions of European workers suffer from musculoskeletal disorders — an “epidemic” that politicians and social partners alike have done too little about. Will the answers come from the shopfloor? Over 300 members of a Belgian trade union have taken part in an "action-oriented research" project, and the initiative is spreading.
“Many colleagues are packing in work at 58 because they are worn-out and can’t go on any longer”, Anne-Marie Brogniez told a score of workers and officials from a branch of Belgium’s national FGTB trade union federation. The union steward for the Mestdagh-Cham-pion supermarket group knows all about the problem of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) from surveys done in the past in her firm, particularly among butchers and lift truck operators, two jobs particularly hard hit by these diseases. But the reason she was coming back to it on a summer’s day in 2009 was for a still more far-reaching project intended to involve all staff in her supermarket and other group outlets - nearly 200 people in all. Union stewards from two other firms, Laurenty contract cleaners, and the Lepage industrial maintenance firm, were also present.

The three firms had answered the call put out by the FGTB some months earlier on 28 April 2009, bringing together hundreds of activists for a World Day for Safety and Health at Work with MSDs as the keynote theme.

And with good reason, for this vast family of inflammatory and degenerative diseases of the musculoskeletal system affects all sectors and all categories of workers. The foremost Europe-wide occupational health survey – the last of which dates from 2005 - found a quarter of European workers reporting back pain, while 23% experienced muscle pain in the shoulders, neck and upper and lower limbs.1 MSDs are by far the most common work-related health problem in Europe.2

86% of workers affected

The usual preliminary to any prevention strategy is to make the problem more visible. And that was the guiding principle of the “action-oriented research” coordinated by the FGTB in Charleroi, an industrial city in western Belgium. The project is based on what is known in scientific circles as the “Nordic Musculoskeletal Questionnaire”, which asks specific questions like “Have you at any time during the last 12 months had trouble such as ache, pain, discomfort, numbness in the neck, knee/leg, wrist?” and also asks workers to rate the pain felt on a scale of 0-10.

The survey reveals a marked gender difference with regard to medical advice: women more readily go to the doctor and more often follow medical treatment than men.

86% of the workers reported experiencing musculoskeletal pain or discomfort in the previous 12 months, and 72% during the seven days before taking part in the survey. For 71% of the workers affected, lower back pain is far and away the most common type of MSD in the three companies (see Figure 1, p. 34). It was also the site of the most intense pain which those suffering it rated at 4.5 out of 10, or twice as intense as that experienced by those complaining of upper back, neck and knee/leg pains (see Figure 2).

The workers were also asked questions about seeking medical help: 43% reported having seen a doctor about musculoskeletal complaints during the 12 months preceding the survey, 45% reported having received treatment and 22% said they had been off work.

“The differences found in the site and intensity of reported complaints cannot be put down to gender,” argues the report’s author, Dr. Jilali Laaouej. “Looking at the findings for workers in gender-mixed jobs like the butchery department in Mestdagh stores, for example, the differences are close to nil”, says the CDAST expert. One difference, however, is that women complain significantly more than men of upper limb pain, which Dr. Laaouej argues is mainly due to gender size difference – stockier workers complain less of pain in the upper limbs than slighter ones.

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3. Developed in 1987 by Scandinavian experts, the questionnaire consists of closed questions and can be self-administered or used in an interview. The questionnaire was created to answer the question: *Does a musculoskeletal disorder exist in the given population and, if so, what area of the body does it affect?* The questionnaire includes a back view diagram of the human body divided into nine anatomical regions.
The idea is to get the workers to take ownership of the problem as a whole. Has it worked? At a feedback meeting with the Mestdagh and Laurenty shop stewards in February 2010, the initial feeling was “up to a point”. On the good side: all but the odd one or two workers agreed to answer the questionnaire. “Once we assured them that the questionnaire wasn’t going to end up in the employer’s hands, they were OK with it. In fact they came out with: “it’s good that someone’s talking about our line of work at last”, observed Catherine Mathy, a union steward at Laurenty cleaning contractors. On the down side: while some hope that the survey findings might prompt their employers to look again at how they organize their work, most of the participants are under no illusions, and some would seemingly even rather leave things as they are than see changes brought in, putatively to make their job easier.

“Even improvements are a worrying thing at Laurenty. We have appropriate equipment that should make our job easier. But the problem is that the firm links well-being at work to profitability. So every time a new cleaning cart appears you know it’ll mean layoffs because there will be fewer hours to work. We get a new eight-wedge microfibre cleaning cloth. Great, doesn’t need to be wrung out every time. But as you won’t be losing time going to the bucket to wring it out, you get half an hour less to clean the same area,” complained the union rep.

One outcome the union does see as positive is that the workers involved in the research make the direct link between their physical aches and pains, and their job. But showing up the impact of work organization does not necessarily translate into action. Most workers seem resigned. They have accepted the idea that it comes with the job in this industry.

The burden of work organization

Work organization factors seem to be clearly implicated in MSDs: workers with variable working hours (rotating or split shifts) report significantly more painful complaints than workers on fixed working hours. Likewise, average perceived pain rises with the length of the working week. This is no more surprising than is the observed relationship between pain intensity and length of service whether in the job, firm or total career (see Figure 3).
A worker’s tale

White collar workers suffer too

In late May 2009, the French CGT union’s Federation of Education, Research and Culture workers launched a campaign against MSDs, which are also prevalent among knowledge workers, as the following personal testimony reveals.

Vinca Hyolle is a specialized stack attendant in the book legal deposit department of France’s national library, the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.

“We get huge parcels in that you have to lift off the book trucks, open them up, sort the books, which can weigh up to several kilograms. You have to do a search to make sure that the work hasn’t already been registered, then you have to accession it and assign it an inventory number, then put it on a book truck, which means making a turning motion. We work on computers and use a mouse, which results in spinal problems because we don’t have appropriate furniture. We work at a table that isn’t a desk, so you can’t sit with your legs under it. So I have to work at a distance from my keyboard and screen. Computer work needs relative quiet, but there are a dozen of us in the same room, so there is obviously noise going on, especially when opening parcels. We spend two half-working-days a week on opening, which is when we take the parcels, open them and put them on book trucks for taking to other colleagues who spend their entire day – exactly 7 hours 12 minutes – on nothing but accessioning. So, there isn’t much variety in the work.

Our job has changed a lot with computerization. Before, stack attendants just did manual work like opening parcels and sorting the books. Now, they also have to be able to use computers and management systems, and know the national library catalogue inside out. Our jobs have become more complex and at the same time we are being asked to meet higher performance targets. We have recently been set accessioning quotas that take no account of time spent hunting information on materials that are hard to classify. When the work used to be done at a more relaxed pace, there were fewer mistakes.

“You do feel stressed because you absolutely have to meet the targets set. For example, a cataloguer has to accession 25 books a day. But for some books, this means inputting all the information related to the bibliographical description like particulars of the author, type of edition, etc. This is pretty time-consuming and knowledge-intensive work. You have second readers who are responsible for checking the quality of accessioning. These are often recent graduates fresh out of their competitive exam, who come in and start lecturing their more experienced colleagues who are making mistakes because of stress. This has created tension in the office, the atmosphere has gone downhill, we don’t celebrate people’s birthdays any more. We used to do quality work that was seen as a benchmark in all libraries in France and even abroad. That reputation is under threat because there’s some question of part of our cataloguing work being farmed out to private contractors.”

The union believes that increasing this kind of “action-oriented research” can also help bring home to policy makers and the establishment the scale of a problem they are pretending does not exist.
United States: OSHA gets a new life

Since President Obama came to power, the US federal health and safety at work agency, OSHA, has increasingly broken away from the line taken under George W. Bush. A long period of unwavering belief in self-regulation may be giving way to a big stick policy much less favourable to unscrupulous employers.

Caroline Crosdale
Journalist, Planet Labor Agency
"There's a new sheriff in town." So said David Michaels at one of his first meetings with business leaders in February, barely two months after President Barack Obama appointed him as Assistant Secretary of Labor in charge of the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). "Five thousand preventable deaths recorded each year are expensive, wasteful and totally unnecessary," he said, adding that "we need to issue sizable fines to get the attention of employers and return to the original intent of the OSHA Act."

Because OSHA's core missions – laying down and enforcing the ground rules of workplace health and safety – have gradually been forgotten as the business self-regulation lobby has imposed its agenda. The Occupational Safety and Health Act was passed in 1970 in very different political times to the highly "pro-business" climate of the George Bush era. And even though then-President Richard Nixon was also a Republican, still "the legislature recognized that every employee had the right to safe and healthful working conditions," says Michael Silverstein, a professor of public health at the University of Washington, who worked with OSHA in the 1990s. "And the employers were responsible for providing a workplace free of recognized hazards."

16 years of the Vietnam War

Forty years on, the results are just not there. The most serious work accidents resulting in sick leave have fallen only from 3.4% in 1973 to 2.4% today, notes Professor Silverstein. And more than 5,000 workers are killed at work each year reports NYCOSH (New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health), a coalition of 200 local unions, lawyers, doctors and other experts. Add to that those who die from a disease contracted at work, and you get 50,000 deaths a year. This is the same number of deaths as those incurred in US ranks by "16 years of war in Vietnam," says Richard Trumka, leader of the big AFL-CIO union, in an opinion piece published by NYCOSH. It also means that "a worker dies from a workplace injury or illness every 8 minutes," says Michael Silverstein.

In all, OSHA records nearly 4 million accidents and illnesses a year. Add to this the number of unreported accidents, sickness and accidents suffered by government employees and the self-employed who are not covered by OSHA, and you get 9 to 12 million sick and injured, calculate the NYCOSH experts, at a cost to the US economy of $290 billion a year!

Also, risks that endanger employees' lives have not gone away and may even be getting worse. Falls, falling objects and road accidents have been rising for 15 years, observes Michael Silverstein. Latin-American workers who are readier to accept hazardous work are also a high risk group: their probability of fatal accidents has increased three-fold in 15 years.

And finally, "It is more and more difficult to develop standards", argues the professor of public health. "It takes 5-10 years sometimes. Many more steps are required. There are more analysis reviews by many different groups like the small business panel or the court. It is very difficult to complete analysis". He recalls a 1980s attempt to raise the maximum exposure levels on 400 chemicals at a stroke. The court threw it out, requiring a risk assessment for each product and "we never recovered from that". In fact, only two new threshold limit values have been brought in within the past 12 years and for one of them – the carcinogenic hexavalent chromium – the unions had to fight in the courts to get it. As a result, OSHA now actually regulates about twenty chemicals, while the maximum permissible exposures for 450 others date from the 1950s/60s. In other words, they desperately need updating.

A pro-self-regulation administration

Matters were not improved by the Bush team taking over the White House – anything but. The agenda was to get on good terms with the employers and scrap the alleged bureaucratic burdens stemming from regulations. This was behind President Bush's removal of the "Form 300" column on reporting musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) from the mandatory occupational disease reports. Under Bill Clinton's presidency, a new regulation incorporating 10 years of work on MSDs was to be introduced bringing in ergonomic standards for employees and doing a tally of affected employees. The new Republican administration cancelled the entire intended set-up. But, these diseases - especially carpal tunnel syndrome - now account for 30% of workmen's compensation claims. Their disappearance from the official statistics did not go unnoticed, therefore.

In 2006, President Bush also appointed Edwin Foulke - a pro-self-regulation lawyer who had previously advised businesses on how best to avoid having a workplace union set up - to head OSHA. "We didn't expect a lot and he didn't do very much", says Michael Silverstein dismissively. Marc Freedman of the US Chamber of Commerce, a federation representing more than three million businesses, mourns the passing of the previous OSHA administration, which he says "helped the employers to learn how to do the right thing. That's better than scaring employers into compliance."

He cites the example of workplace health and safety plans – or Voluntary Protection Programs (VPPs) - developed with OSHA experts by employers who also self-report accidents and diseases. In exchange, OSHA inspectors no longer inspect these firms other than in exceptional circumstances.

Originally introduced in the Reagan years, only 122 workplaces had VPPs in 1993. But 15 years on, 1450 come under the programme. While the business community has welcomed the approach, the unions are less appreciative of what was one of Edwin Foulke's star measures. "150 million dollars a year were used catering to business needs when there were more pressing priorities," argues Bill Borwegen of the Service Employees International Union. "VPPs were the centrepiece of the programme", opines Michael Silverstein. "They were a substitute to enforcement."

An inspection every 88 years

The upshot was that OSHA did little regulation or supervision. NYCOSH Director Joel Shufro recalls the aftermath of September 11, 2001 when 40,000 people worked for many months
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not to report accidents and diseases. Case tracking is poor. After a serious occurrence, follow-up investigations may not be done until two years after the event. Much too late.

There are also too few workplace visits. Michael Silverstein has calculated that at a rate of 100,000 visits a year, the likelihood of a workplace inspection will happen ... once every 88 years.

3500 new workplace visits

OSHA really needs to put its house in order, therefore, to get back to its original intent and make itself credible with over 100 million employees. That, at least, is the task before its new helmsman, Dr. David Michaels, appointed in December 2009. A distinguished epidemiologist at George Washington University, Mr. Michaels is a trained scientist and respected author of the recent book Doubt Is Their Product (see our Books section p. 40) in which he shows how firms are delaying the introduction of new regulations by challenging the veracity of scientific discoveries.

The newcomer, however, is under close scrutiny from his former academic colleagues and experts across the trade union community. Secretary of Labour Hilda Solis has given him more manpower and funding. And she is expecting more bang for the buck. OSHA will have a budget of $573 million in 2011, $14 million more than in 2010 – a windfall that is expected to go into hiring new staff. In 2009, OSHA had just 2,155 staff - in 2011, it will have 2,368. Many of the newcomers will be inspectors tasked with ensuring that the health and safety standards meant to protect the lives of 109 million employees are being applied in workplaces. In 2009, there were 1,123 inspectors; there should be 1,278 in 2011. The stated aim is to schedule 3,500 new company visits a year.

A worker was killed and his body dissolved when a tank of sulphuric acid exploded in 2001 – the company had to pay an OSHA fine of just $175,000 ... but $10 million to the Environmental Protection Agency for killing thousands of fish!
A maximum exposure limit for silica dust year. A much tougher new regulation was introduced. In October 2009, a BP refinery in Texas had experienced an explosion in 2005 which killed 15 workers and injured 170 people. The OSHA inspectors returned some years later and still found 439 violations of industry safety rules.

"Professor Michaels has an aggressive posture to employers," opines Brad Hammock, head of the labour, employment, and benefits division at the Jackson Lewis law firm in Washington. "He shows less willingness to settle, he has a much harder edge tone toward the employers community. For my clients, it raised the profile of OSHA. Before, OSHA was deep down on their list to do, now it is number 2 or 3 on their list," he says.

And indeed, the new boss wants to give fresh impetus to the creation of standards "stuck in the pipeline" for many years. His sights are set on a hundred chemicals. A maximum exposure limit for silica dust is due to be set shortly. Beryllium - used in aerospace, telecommunications and defence applications - will also soon be regulated, along with diacetyl, an artificial flavouring suspected of causing bronchiolitis among popcorn industry workers.

The risks run by crane and derrick operators are front and centre. An average 80 workers are killed on construction sites each year. A much tougher new regulation was therefore published in July.

Musculoskeletal disorders are also on David Michaels’ list. The 'Form 300' column is back with a bang. And OSHA top brass have even decided to put out regular public information on all accidents and diseases found in 80,000 firms.

Stiffer fines

The new-look OSHA is informing more, regulating more and hitting the bad apples harder. In October 2009, a BP refinery in Texas had to pay a fine of $87 million, the biggest ever demanded by OSHA. The oil group had experienced an explosion in 2005 which killed 15 workers and injured 170 people. The OSHA inspectors returned some years later and still found 439 violations of industry safety rules.

In the old days, OSHA representatives would have negotiated with BP management, and imposed a lighter punishment in exchange for a promise of new investment. But the new agency is taking a harder line. It issues citations. And many firms have felt the sting. In February 2010, no fewer than 41 firms had fines of more than $100,000 levied on them by OSHA. Animal feed packaging company All Feed Processing and Packaging is back with a bang. And OSHA top brass want to "bring OSHA into the twenty-first century," he said, his agency needs to be able to impose more meaningful penalties on employers in order to "provide an important incentive to do the right thing." And he exemplified the agency's lack of firepower. An immigrant worker was killed in a fall in New Jersey - the firm paid a $4,200 fine. An employee died in a gas pipeline explosion in Michigan - a penalty of just $4,200. A worker was killed and his body dissolved when a tank of sulphuric acid exploded in 2001 - the company had to pay an OSHA fine of just $175,000 ... but $10 million to the Environmental Protection Agency for killing thousands of fish! "Unscrupulous employers often consider it more cost effective to pay the minimal OSHA penalty and continue to operate an unsafe workplace than to correct the underlying health and safety problem", said David Michaels. OSHA's top man would therefore like to add more swingeing fines, and even the threat of imprisonment, to his existing armoury.

Expanding the population covered by OSHA would also be welcome. Civil servants, for example, are outside its scope of action. And new immigrants have never looked at OSHA guidance, says Steve Choi, Executive Director of the MinKwon Center for Community Action, a volunteer outreach agency for New York's Korean migrant worker community.

Not only does OSHA need to make up ground lost in the 20th century, it also has to adjust to today's new demands. The public health experts want both better coverage of "old" chemical hazards and an action plan for 21st century emerging industries. Among them, Professor Michael Silverstein includes expo sure to particulate materials from nanotechnologies and the risks of eco-industries. A construction worker renovating old homes can well come up against lead and asbestos, for instance, while a roof solar panel fitter runs a risk of falling. Not to mention the risks run by nursing auxiliaries when simply lifting a patient.

"Some hazards have been around for thousands of years," concludes Prof. Silverstein, again citing perennial construction risks: "You dig trenches, they collapse. This happens every week. To prevent it, is not expensive, not difficult, but people are still killed."
Job-related suicide: three books in search of explanations

The grim regularity of workplace suicides reported in the French media is typified by each fresh suicide at France Télécom, where 46 workers have killed themselves since 2008 (figures at mid-April 2010). The tribulations of France’s historical telecom operator have shed a stark light on the impact work has on a problem hitherto generally thought to arise out of private griefs. The media headlines have also made it a handy scapegoat for finger-pointing and public disquiet.

And that is unfortunate. Because it is not France Télécom that is the real problem – its working conditions are certainly no worse than others – so much as changing management methods, and they are not confined to the former public corporation.

Three books on the issue published in late 2009 avoid this trap. Orange stressé looks in detail at the France Télécom case (Orange is the company’s flagship brand name and touted as the future group name). Journalist Ivan du Roy finds parallels between rising levels of psychological distress among employees and the company’s privatization. While cautioning against facile assumptions – work-related distress also affects the public service – he nevertheless singles out the revamped corporate culture after the public service was turned into a commercial company listed in France’s benchmark CAC 40 index.

"On 31 December 1997, their job was to meet users’ needs, however long it took or however much it cost to repair a line or install a (free of charge) phone socket; the very next day, on 1 January 1998, callers stopped being users and became customers to be sold or made to want to buy a product as quickly as possible", writes Ivan du Roy.

To win union backing for the company’s privatization, management agreed to maintain civil service status for the staff in place. A victory, then; but in an environment now governed by competition laws and the stock market, the claims of overstaffing were soon to follow. France Télécom was to enlist its working conditions as “management by uncertainty” (consisting in imposed stress, enforced mobility, constant reassignment, sidelining and enforced retirement).

Office workers at all levels aged around fifty were the first casualties. Anything went to squeeze out these employees who enjoyed protected civil servant status. The author cites one case of a “high-flying 50-something polytechnic graduate who rose to executive assistant on 10,000 euros a month, and whose job now is to make up meeting badges and hand out glasses of orange juice to managers”.

Cost-killer methods also loom large in Travailleur à en mourir (Working to death), a book that centres around a spate of suicides at Renault’s research centre. The author interviewed the victims’ families, who paint a picture of technicians and engineers with a love of their job and the car industry. Some were sidelined, others set impossible targets. Some ended up throwing themselves off the Technocentre walkway, others were found in the Guyancourt lake (near Paris). The authors look for the reasons for these workplace suicides in the changes made after Carlos Goshn took the helm of the carmaker.

The new boss announced that Renault would double its product line to turn out 800,000 vehicles in three years, to be achieved through a new bonus system based on “key performance indicators”.

“What lay behind this was a highly individualised take on merit based on punishing the under-achievers and rewarding the achievers, but the idea of group endeavour has gone”, said one CGT union rep.

In Suicide et travail: que faire? (What to do about suicide at work), occupational psychologist Florence Bègue describes the havoc wrought by the destruction of workforces through her assignment in an aerospace equipment maintenance firm hit by a spate of suicides.

Shifting from a servicing to a mass production approach led to a fall-off in quality at Mermot, a company reputed for its workforce skills for over a century. The bottom line is now all that counts.

“They describe a fragmentation of craft-based teams that erodes their professional abilities and makes them have to skim their work. The workers say they are in a dying trade, in downgraded jobs, and that results in feelings of worthlessness and pointlessness”, writes Bègue.

Florence Bègue and Christophe Dejous explore in forensic detail the key role played by work in the interaction between individual identity and group identity. A relationship that is threatened by management methods that effectively isolate workers.

“The current spate of workplace suicides stems not just from unfair treatment, incurring disfavour or bullying. It stems mainly from the harrowing experience of other people keeping their silence, letting them down, refusing to speak up, being cowardly. The unfair treatment or bullying that once would have been a difficult or painful experience can today escalate quickly into an identity crisis.” That is less an observation than an indictment of the dominant model of business organization.

― Denis Grégoire

Orange stressé. Le management par le stress à France Télécom by Ivan du Roy, éditions La Découverte, October 2009, 252 p.


These books are available in the ETUI’s Documentation Centre.
www.labourline.org
The mercenaries of science

Epidemiologist David Michaels has published a gripping book entitled Doubt is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health. The first part of the title is a direct reference to a cigarette executive’s remark that, “Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.” The author exposes how the industry has managed to turn the meaning of words upside-down, sanctifying its science as “sound science” and vilifying scientific community research as “junk science” to stave off policy decisions on risks for as long as possible.

Where does it come from, this industry love affair with scientific absolutes? And why the contrast between the rush to bring any innovation to market - including where no risk assessment has been done - and the demands for a full and detailed assessment of any initiative to protect health? David Michaels argues that the multinationals’ first attempts to further their causes through the promotion of “sound science” date back to before World War Two, the aim being to avoid government regulation of the carcinogens that workers were exposed to. But incidentally, to limit inconvenient lawsuits. The industry went on the front foot, giving the steer to asbestos research in the 1930s, and initiating a major development in industrial hygiene expertise ... which consistently downplayed the risks. The author shows how, around the same time, the dye industry engaged research programmes to avoid being forced to take effective prevention measures. Over the years, the scientists working for industry have continually honed their “sales pitch”.

The author reviews the practices of a money-driven science. In areas as diverse as tobacco, lead, synthetic dyes, Freon gas, some food additives, drugs and nuclear energy, we seem to be locked into a “groundhog day” scenario. Faced with initial data that indicate a significant health hazard, industry-funded scientists have consistently played down the dangers while playing up the limits of knowledge and the degree of uncertainty. The critique is to demand proof that the workers concerned had not also been exposed to other harmful substances.

This strategy of doubt lets industry go back on the offensive on two favourable fronts. The scientific community cannot but be receptive to arguments that point out the limitations of the methods used by available studies and propose endless new research to clarify the results and verify the uncertainties. The false positive idea of “sound science” which tells only settled truths goes in hand with tempting budgets and access to the industrial workforce as an inexhaustible supply of laboratory animals. It gives politicians all the ammunition they need whenever they decide to throw in the towel to a lobby. It simply notes the imperfection of scientific knowledge and does not seek to undermine economic activity by mere guesswork. The symbiosis between scientists working for industry and policy makers can be reinforced by the wholesale use of PR consultants and intervention by the court system, although the latter is more a US than European phenomenon.

A kind of meta-discipline of risk assessment – Europe would tend to talk of “Impact assessments” - has gradually imposed itself. It aims to put the inevitable element of uncertainty inherent to all scientific output to use in discrediting public policy measures. The criticisms grow shriller still where the risks relate to the least fortunate groups. This is what the author describes as the institutionalization of uncertainty. Sadly, it is an area in which the EU seems to be playing catch-up with Bush’s America.

The book ends on twelve recommendations, all targeted on promoting transparency, requiring a prior risk assessment before chemicals are placed on the market, and developing publicly-funded scientific expertise. There is also a concern that environmental protection should be more closely allied to workers’ health.

Written in language the lay reader can understand, and shot through with a burning desire to put scientific knowledge into the crucible of the social debate, this book will certainly be of wide interest outside the United States. It is of more than incidental interest that its author became the new director of OSHA - the US federal health and safety agency - in 2009. Hopefully, he will get the chance to put his ideas into practice.

— Laurent Vogel

Doubt is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health