

HesaMag #15

Journalism, an increasingly precarious profession



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Occupational safety and health in 2040: Four scenarios

How will the next generation in Europe deal with occupational safety and health issues?
Aída Ponce del Castillo (ETUI) and Sascha Meinert (IPA, Berlin)

This guide is the result of a project looking at the long-term prospects for making better and strategic decisions on occupational safety and health (OSH) in the European Union. The publication presents four potential scenarios ('wellbeing', 'self-reliance', 'productivity' and 'protection') for the future of OSH in the European Union. The time horizon of the scenarios (up to 2040) focuses on the world in which the next generation will live and work, with the idea that inducing real changes requires a long-term perspective. The scenarios presented in this publication aim at starting an open and constructive dialogue among the many stakeholders involved in workplace health and safety policies in the EU and its Member States.

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Epigenetics and chemical risk management in the workplace

Dr Rokus Renirie and Dr Hildo Krop
(IVAM, Research and Consultancy on Sustainability)

This guide provides a comprehensive introduction to epigenetics, the emerging science of biological mechanisms in the DNA which can change our genetic activity without changing the genetic code itself. The knowledge of epigenetics is important for workers as it could lead to retrospective proof of past exposure to (adverse) chemicals and early identification of dangerous chemicals at the workplace.

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Benchmarking Working Europe 2017

This 2017 edition of Benchmarking working Europe focuses on the question 'overcoming cleavages across the EU?'. It analyses in four chapters and with the help of 58 visual graphs latest trends and outcomes of European policies in the areas of macro-economics, wages and collective bargaining, labour markets and, last but not least, social dialogue and workers' participation. The publication demonstrates that the European Union is experiencing increasing social divergences and underlines the need for new policies that can generate higher living standards for all, based on fair integration and upwards convergence.

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Newsflash...

Chambermaids resort to medication in order to do their jobs

According to a joint survey by the Trade Union Confederation of Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), 71.5% of Spanish chambermaids are forced to take medication in order to be able to do their jobs.

The survey found that 100% of chambermaids suffer or have suffered from dorsal and lumbar pain, 80% from pain in the forearms, wrists and hands, 47% from pain in the hips, buttocks and thighs, 67% from knee pain and 87% from leg and foot pain.

The survey by the trade union associations also provides further evidence of the adverse effects of precarious work and the pressure to work ever faster, since the women reported mental health problems in addition to these physical symptoms.

This combination of physical and mental health issues explains why 71.5% of chambermaids are forced to medicate themselves in order to get through a day's work.

The Trade Union Confederation of Workers' Commissions has called on companies to comply with their legal obligations as a matter of urgency by minimising occupational risks, and urged the Spanish Government to take steps to ensure that these problems are recognised as occupational diseases and that this group of workers is eligible for early retirement.

Belgium: worrying rise in burnout among thirtysomethings

According to Securex, which manages the human resources of over 80 000 Belgian companies, the number of thirtysomethings on sick leave for at least 12 months has risen by 20% in the past year. Securex attributes this to an increase in burnout.

These figures show an increase in the number of long-term sick in all age ranges between 2015 and 2016, but the greatest rise is among 30- to 40-year-olds. 'This significant rise is undoubtedly due to burnout,' claims Heidi Verlinden, a Securex human resources expert. 'This is probably due to a lack of work-life balance,' she explained.

According to Securex, around 1% of thirtysomething employees have been off work for at least a year due to illness, though this is much lower than the older age ranges. Employees in the 60 to 64 age group are the most badly affected, accounting for 17% of those concerned.

In 2001, Securex estimated that 1% of employees were off work for at least a year due to illness, a figure that exceeded 3% in 2016.

This remarkable increase is a cause for concern for the authorities. Incapacity benefits amount to € 8 billion a year, which according to the Flemish financial daily *De Tijd* exceeds unemployment allowances.

Canada to ban asbestos by 2018

The Canadian government is moving to ban the use of asbestos by 2018, Science Minister Kirsty Duncan announced on 15 December. The ban on asbestos, which the World Health Organization declared a 'human carcinogen' in 1987, will apply to the manufacture of any products containing the substance, as well as on imports and exports.

More than 50 countries around the world have banned asbestos, but Canada has been consistently reluctant to follow suit, at least in part because of asbestos's role in the economy.

Quebec, in towns such as Thetford Mines and Asbestos, was the main producer in Canada. Canada has been slow to take on the asbestos industry, in part, because asbestos has long been considered a political sacred cow in Quebec.

After most wealthy, developed countries banned the carcinogenic mineral, the province sought to find markets in developing countries. Canada's last asbestos mines closed in 2011, but political leaders have continued to drag their feet on meeting international anti-asbestos standards.

Kathleen Ruff, a well-known Canadian ban asbestos campaigner, now hopes the next step will be for Canada to support a crucially important UN treaty, the 'Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade.' The purpose of that agreement is, primarily, to protect nations of the global South from having toxic substances such as asbestos dumped on them.

Civil society groups from around the world have warmly welcomed the news that the Canadian government is to outlaw the use of asbestos. 'The significance of Canada's U-turn is enormous as it was the Canadian Government which brought a case against the French asbestos ban to the World Trade Organization, Canadian politicians who led the veto of United Nations actions to regulate the global asbestos trade and Canadian civil servants and vested interests which orchestrated global pro-asbestos marketing initiatives', stated the anti-asbestos movement in a press release signed by seven organizations, including the Building and Woodworkers International (BWI).

Plea for a global plan to combat occupational cancer

Dr Jukka Takala, a world expert on work-related cancer, considers it necessary to establish a global programme for eliminating carcinogens in the workplace. 'Cancer is the primary cause of death in the workplace,' he stated on 16 December 2016 at an ETUI monthly forum.

The figures are indisputable. In the European Union alone, 102 000 people die each year because of their exposure during their working life to carcinogenic substances or their involvement in processes exposing them to carcinogenic agents. This figure accounts for 53% of all deaths connected with work-related diseases.

Policies introduced for preventing cancer pathologies together with information and awareness-raising campaigns very rarely take account of the work dimension. However, data indicate that the workplace should be of central focus in the fight against cancer. According to figures taken from a study mentioned in an article by Finnish researcher Dr Takala, almost one in every three cases of lung cancer and almost one in five leukaemia cases can be attributed to occupational exposure.

Dr Takala, former Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), believes it is necessary to embark on a broad-reaching mobilisation campaign, in which the European Union could act as a driving force, essentially pointing out that, during last May's conference devoted – under the Dutch Presidency of the Council of the European Union – to occupational cancer, a number of governments had shown their willingness to move forward with these matters.

A proposal for the revision of the European Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive is currently under negotiation. The European Commission had committed itself to tabling proposals for 25 limit values in 2016 and to reaching a minimum total of 50 limit values in 2020. It has failed to meet its commitments: only 13 limit values were proposed in May 2016, and another five in January 2017. When asked about the fact that diesel particles did not end up on the list, Dr Takala challenged the Commission's argument that diesel particles were no longer a concern as they were not emitted from the newer types of engine. 'The Commission seems to think that employers change their machinery every five years, rather like motorists and their cars. Many old, high-polluting diesel engines are still and will continue to be in use for a number of years yet,' he explained.

US workers making BPA have enormous loads of it in them

U.S. workers in industries that use or manufacture bisphenol A (BPA) have, on average, 70 times more of the chemical in their bodies than the general public-levels well above what has been shown to impact reproduction, according to a study published in early January.

In 2013 and 2014, 77 workers at six different companies that make BPA, BPA-resins or BPA-filled wax provided urine samples after two consecutive days at work. The average total BPA in their urine was 70 times higher than a study of U.S. adults in 2013 and 2014, according to the study published in the *Annals of Work Exposures and Health*. The National Institute for Occupational Safety, the federal agency responsible for preventing workers from job-related injury and illness, led the study.

One worker's levels spiked up to 18 900 micrograms per gram of BPA in his or her urine at the end of the shift of the second day of work. The median level of BPA in the general public is a little less than 2 micrograms per gram.

In the current study, the authors identified 73 U.S. companies that produce BPA. However 15 did not respond to requests to investigate exposure and 15 said they no longer produced or used BPA.

Encouraging signs of change in EU occupational safety and health policy

On 10 January this year, the European Commission adopted a communication on the future of EU legislation and policy on occupational safety and health (OSH). ETUI researchers have studied the text and have identified positive signs of a shift in policy in favour of workers, particularly with respect to exposure to chemical risks. The Commission's proposals regarding a number of problems associated with the organisation of work, however, such as musculoskeletal disorders, remain distinctly unambitious.

'On the whole, the communication is less biased toward deregulation than a number of previous Commission documents. This is a positive development that may help to relaunch OSH policies in the European Union,' says Laurent Vogel, researcher at the ETUI.

Vogel welcomes the Commission's acknowledgement that European OSH legislation is a fundamental component of EU policy in this area.

The ETUI researcher nevertheless regrets that the Commission wishes to establish a 'peer review' process to reduce the administrative burden supposedly linked to national OSH legislation. European OSH directives lay down minimum requirements for Member States, which can therefore adopt measures ensuring greater worker protection than that laid down in EU provisions, such as lower occupational exposure limit values. Vogel is concerned that the peer review system will be used to put pressure on Member States that have taken measures which are more protective than the EU minimums.

While the ETUI acknowledges the considerable progress made in chemical risk prevention, the communication unfortunately fails to address the issue of asbestos, a far from obsolete deadly substance that continues to be present in a significant number of buildings.

With respect to musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), the communication provides for the 1990 Display Screen Equipment Directive to be updated. The ETUI notes that this text must be adapted in the light of technological developments, though the scope of the problem means that that measure alone is insufficient. MSDs are the most common complaint among European employees, and Europe's trade union movement continues to call for the adoption of a general directive on such disorders.

Work is good for your health? Only one French person in four thinks so

On 16 March, the French trade union federation, the CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail), published the initial results of a broad-ranging online survey about work. Only a quarter of the respondents feel that their work is 'good' for their health.

Between 22 September and the end of December 2016, around 200 000 people responded to an online questionnaire about various aspects of their working lives. The results of the survey reveal how a large sector of the French population have an ambivalent attitude towards work. Although more than three out of four respondents say that they 'like their work', and indeed more than half 'enjoy' it, only a quarter think that it is 'good' for their health.

One third of the respondents consider their work to be physically demanding (heavy loads, uncomfortable postures, noise, excessive temperatures, etc.). How the link between health and work is perceived is heavily influenced by socio-economic factors.

The trade union survey shows that there is a gulf between manual workers and managers, and between the low paid and the highly paid: 20% of workers who earn € 1 500 or less a month consider that their work is 'damaging' to them. Some 25% of manual workers share this opinion, compared with less than 5% of managers.

Here is another worrying figure: 12% of respondents think they are 'treated badly' at work. People with poor working conditions (doing things they find objectionable, unnecessary or mindless, without any sense of pleasure) are more frequently low skilled and in a low-grade job. There are three times more manual workers than managers in this situation.

Belgian court sentences Eternit at last

On 28 March, the Brussels Court of Appeal upheld the sentence imposed on Eternit in 2011. The Belgian court considered that the company did not take sufficient safety measures to protect its workers and the factory's neighbours, even though it had been aware that asbestos was highly carcinogenic since the 1970s.

Eternit was ordered to pay € 25 000 in compensation to the plaintiffs, the Jonckheere family, as opposed to € 250 000 at first instance. Asbestos took a terrible toll on this family, who lived near the Eternit factory in Kapelle-op-den-Bos, a village 20 km north of Brussels. The father, a former engineer with Eternit, his wife, Françoise Vanoorbeeck, and two of their five sons died from cancers attributed to asbestos exposure.

It was Mrs Vanoorbeeck who brought legal proceedings against Eternit. After her death, her son Eric carried on the fight against the former asbestos cement manufacturer. Eternit is now owned by the multinational company Etex, a world leader in roofing and façade-cladding materials.

Shift work and heavy lifting may reduce women's fertility

A physically demanding job or work schedules outside normal office hours may lower a woman's ability to conceive, suggests research published online on 7 February in *Occupational & Environmental Medicine*. Researchers say women who work nights and irregular shifts have fewer eggs capable of developing into healthy embryos than those who keep regular daytime hours.

The study, which involved two groups of women undergoing in vitro fertilization (IVF), examined egg quality among 313 women who had completed one IVF cycle as well as the total number of eggs in the ovaries of 473 women at a fertility clinic.

There was also a reduction of around 15 per cent in the number of eggs ready for fertilisation in women with jobs requiring heavy lifting, including nurses.

Co-author Audrey Gaskins said shift work could cause a reduction in fertility through 'disruption in circadian rhythm that's affecting normal hormone production and menstrual cycling, particularly for women who switch between day and night time work'.

She said it was difficult to say why jobs involving heavy lifting might reduce fertility, but suggested the body's response to repetitive physical stress could affect a woman's ability to produce good-quality eggs.

The participants, who had an average age of 35, were part of an ongoing Harvard study looking at the factors that might affect fertility called Environment and Reproductive Health (EARTH), which started in 2004.

Editorial

230 000 lives sacrificed to industry lobbying?

Laurent Vogel

ETUI

On 10 January 2017, the European Commission submitted the second proposal to revise the Directive on protecting workers from carcinogens. Workers were in for an unpleasant surprise: instead of the 12 substances expected, the Commission proposed occupational exposure limit values for only five new carcinogens.

The crux of the matter is not the number, however, it is the choice of substances. For this second list, industry lobbying has focused on one objective: to avoid any regulation of diesel exhaust at work.

The Commission heard the industry loud and clear (read the article p. 6), omitting to include these emissions in the Directive, and thereby omitting to protect the three million or so EU workers who are exposed to them at work. If working life as a whole is considered, the total number of workers exposed during part of their career would amount to 12 million in 2010 and could rise to 20 million by 2060.

The carcinogenic nature of diesel exhaust has been established by a great deal of research. In 2012, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (the IARC, part of the World Health Organisation) recognised such emissions as carcinogenic to humans, while previously they had been considered as probably carcinogenic.

Following the publication of the IARC report, the industry did its best to cast doubt using the slick approach it followed for asbestos, lead and tobacco smoke. According to the industry, new diesel engine exhaust would pose far fewer problems for workers' health than that produced by older models. In short, lung cancers due to exposure to diesel exhaust at work would be a thing of the past. The tactic is crude: since there is a

long latency period between exposure and the cancers caused, we will have to wait 40 or 50 years for the epidemiological studies concerning populations exposed exclusively to emissions from the most recent engines.

The Commission was careful not to refer explicitly to the stance taken by the industry. In its impact study, it provides a technical legal argument, claiming that it was not possible to find a satisfactory legal definition distinguishing exhaust from newer engines from exhaust from old engines.

This argument is irrelevant both from the legal and the scientific perspective.

The Directive at issue does not set out any specific obligation regarding the purchase of diesel engines. That is not its purpose. What it does do is define a range of prevention measures. It is entirely superfluous to define diesel engine exhaust by referring to the year the engines were built.

Scientific data show that diesel engines operating in workplaces use a variety of technologies. Several different generations of equipment can be found. It would be ridiculous to try to separate emissions from some from emissions from others. The chemical composition of the emissions also varies in accordance with many parameters. What characterises all emissions is the presence of ultra-fine particulates which enter the pulmonary tract and are associated with different pathologies, such as respiratory diseases, lung cancers or cardiovascular problems. The level of emissions and their chemical composition, meanwhile, do not depend solely on the year of construction of the engines. Maintenance, cleaning, filter systems and combustion temperature are also important factors.

The Commission itself points out that, in the absence of legislative action, there will

The industry has done its best to cast doubt using the slick approach it followed for asbestos, lead and tobacco smoke.

be 230 000 deaths from lung cancer among exposed workers in Europe. This calculation relates to the period from 2010 to 2069. Any delay will be reflected in thousands of avoidable deaths.

The question of diesel illustrates the double standards applied in community policies. If 230 000 deaths linked to a food safety, water quality or air safety problem were foreseen, community legislative action would be taken much more rapidly, yet when it is a matter of protecting the workplace from cancers, anything goes to ensure progress at a snail's pace.

The European Parliament and the Council of Ministers will take the final decision in the coming months. An important battle will therefore have to be waged to create a balance of power that will overcome the barriers raised by the Commission and industry lobbying. ●

Human lives weighed against corporate profit

At the end of February, the European Parliament's Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) Committee backed a tightening of the Directive protecting workers against cancer-causing chemicals. Unions have won the first round of their fight with the industry. But the fight continues, with employers having more than one card up their sleeve – as witnessed by the investigation into industry lobbying strategies aimed at influencing European legislation on occupational cancers.

Rachel Tansey

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Industrial maintenance workers find themselves exposed to a wide range of carcinogenic substances.

Image: © Belga



The days when fat-cat factory owners could reap profits by letting their employees routinely inhale poisons are long gone ... Really? This is 21st-century Europe, not a 19th-century textile mill! We no longer accept profit as a justification for endangering human life ... Really?

Alas, in the case of occupational cancers, it seems that we do. Many companies do not want to be subject to rules that would save workers' lives, because stricter rules could increase costs. And certain European institutions seem to be all too willing to put employers' profits before employees' health. The European Union (EU) risks missing a key opportunity to prevent hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths resulting from workplace exposure to carcinogens – because of industry lobbying.

At present, the enormous costs of occupational cancers are not borne by the companies generating the risks, but by society and the victims. Without laws to protect workers, risks will remain high. Yet cancers caused by workplace exposure to carcinogenic substances could be dramatically reduced or even eliminated. It is estimated that there are 100 000 deaths every year in the EU which could be avoided through proper protection. But the lack of linkage between those producing the risks and those bearing the costs leaves industry with little incentive to take action. Risks will only be reduced if employers face binding and enforceable restrictions on worker exposure to carcinogens.

The healthcare costs of occupational cancers in the EU are in the realm of € 2.5 to € 4.5 billion. But the costs to cancer victims, and their family and friends, go much deeper – as anyone who has experienced cancer at first or second hand will know. Sadly, very many of us have. And it can be easy to succumb to the belief that cancer is simply an unavoidable reality of our modern world. But the view that the causes of cancer are 'random', with little that can be done to prevent it, has, says occupational health expert Jukka Takala, 'been strongly rejected by the scientific community, the World Health Organisation, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the International Commission on Occupational Health and others who consider it unethical to accept high levels of workplace exposures that could be tackled systematically'.¹

When the agony and grief of cancer are due to unnecessary exposure to carcinogenic substances at work, this is a colossal injustice, with employee lives being sacrificed to keep down company operating costs. And an injustice that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable workers.

The rhetoric of 'Better Regulation'

Instead of better EU laws on workplace carcinogens that could prevent many cancer deaths, an ideological framework promoted by the European Commission called 'Better Regulation' equates 'better' with 'better for big business'. 'Better Regulation' is about reducing the regulatory 'burden' on business, often regardless of the cost to workers, consumers or the environment. And the 'Better Regulation' framework has created new opportunities for industry to steer EU rule-making in a pro-business direction.

The revision of the EU's Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive, a legislative act covering workplace exposure to these dangerous substances, shows how industry employs the tools of 'Better Regulation' and co-opts its rhetoric to forestall and weaken public-good legislation. Industry lobby groups use euphemisms like 'simplifying' regulations, reducing 'burdens' on business, or 'harmonising' different rules – language that is lapped up by a European Commission with a self-professed mission to cut 'red tape'. The result of industry's efforts is that the Commission has delayed acting on workplace cancer legislation for ten years. Ten years in which 100 000 annual deaths from workplace cancers could have been avoided. A million lives sacrificed.

When the European Commission's hand was finally forced, thanks to pressure from trade unions, health bodies and several EU member state governments, it made a proposal that contained far too few, and too high, exposure limits for workplace carcinogens. The Commission's May 2016 proposal contained only 13 binding occupational exposure limits for carcinogenic substances, with the promise of 12 more by the end of 2016. But this promise was broken: in early January 2017, the Commission added a measly 7 more substances to the directive, and only 5 of these had exposure limits. Notably absent was exposure to diesel fumes, to which three million workers in the EU are exposed at work.²

This total of 18 occupational exposure limits listed in the two proposals, many of which are too high to adequately protect workers, is a long way from the 50 exposure limits recommended by the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and Environment, and called for by the Dutch, Belgian, German and Austrian governments. And even further from the 71 substances and processes considered by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) as requiring an EU-wide exposure limit.

But not everyone has been unhappy with the Commission's proposals: many

industry lobbies have been patting themselves on the back.

Digging through records of lobby correspondence between industry groups and the European Commission revealed some of the tactics used by industry lobbies to delay and water down the revised Carcinogens Directive. These included using voluntary initiatives to delay regulation, attacking studies whose results didn't serve their interests as scientifically unsound, commissioning ones that did, and pushing for greater influence via more impact assessments. Some industry lobbies even tried to pit different EU rules against each other, pushing standards down to the least 'burdensome' option.

The silica dust saga

The case of respirable crystalline silica, better known as silica dust, illustrates how the myth of self-regulation has been used by industry to ward off binding legislation. Exposure to silica dust is commonplace, especially in construction, mining and metalworking, but it can also cause lung cancer. Industry successfully kept silica dust out of the Carcinogens Directive for ten years by insisting that NePSi, a voluntary agreement on crystalline silica's 'good handling and use', was sufficient to protect workers' health.³ It is a classic industry tactic to pre-empt regulation by indicating that industry is already committed to tackling the problem.

But NePSi does not even measure the effectiveness of any measures to lower worker exposure to silica dust. Instead, it focuses on raising industry awareness and sharing best practices – for which it receives public funding from the Commission! But what is really needed are strict and enforceable rules.

1. EU Parliament urged to beef up fight against occupational cancer, *The Parliament Magazine*, 16 December 2016, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/eu-parliament-urged-beef-fight-against-occupational-cancer>
2. European Commission fails to protect workers against diesel fumes, ETUI, 11 January 2017, <http://www.etui.org/Topics/Health-Safety/News/European-Commission-fails-to-protect-workers-against-diesel-fumes>

3. NePSi (the 'European Network for Silica') is comprised of signatories (15 employers' organisations, 1 employees' organisation) to the Social Dialogue Agreement on Workers' Health Protection Through the Good Handling and Use of Crystalline Silica and Products Containing It. It does not cover construction, the sector with the majority of exposed workers.

Despite its ineffectiveness, NePSi has been a useful tool for industry to fend off effective regulation of silica dust.

Twenty industry associations, led by the Industrial Minerals Association (IMA) Europe, made the thinly veiled threat to the Commission that since 'progress does not happen without industry commitment', it should stick to minimising silica dust exposure 'through the use of good practices' (i.e. voluntary) rather than regulating with exposure limits (i.e. legally binding). But they also suggested that, should the Commission regulate silica dust, NePSi signatories should be exempt. This is a plainly ridiculous demand: exempt us from being subject to a law to protect workers' health, because we're already voluntarily protecting workers' health!

The industry lobbies also argued that the Carcinogens Directive shouldn't include silica dust because it is 'ubiquitous'. This is perverse! Quite the contrary, the fact that silica dust is a danger in many industries and thus affects millions of workers, is very much a reason to include it. They also pushed for more say for the industry sectors concerned, including through impact assessments. But cost-benefit impact assessments based on stakeholder input ensures regulation is viewed through the lens of competitiveness, side-lining the protection of workers' health.

When it became clear that an exposure limit for silica dust could no longer be avoided, or bypassed, industry lobbies changed tactics and pushed for it to be implemented under less 'burdensome' regulation. The 'Industry Silica Task Force', comprised of several lobby groups including IMA Europe, commissioned a study from a consultancy firm. The study concluded that a silica exposure limit under the Chemical Agents Directive would cost industry far less than one under the Carcinogens Directive, because of the latter's stricter risk management requirements. A legal evaluation concluded this wasn't possible, putting an end to this industry strategy; unless of course, the strategy was simply a delaying tactic.

Finally, however, after delaying action for many years, industry interests still took precedence: the Commission proposed an exposure limit that is twice as high as that recommended by trade unions, or that existing in the USA, and which would fail to prevent around 2000 deaths from silica dust exposure in the EU every year.

Industry over-REACH

Certain industry lobbies have also pushed for workplace cancer legislation to exempt them from the EU's REACH regulation. For

example, a cluster of industry lobbies calling themselves the 'Cross-Industry Initiative for better regulation in chemicals management' (run by lobby consultancy Hanover Brussels) has zeroed in on the 'Better Regulation' goals of simplifying legislation and removing 'duplications'. The industry initiative is comprised of corporate lobby groups including car lobby ACEA, US big business group AMChamEU, metals lobby Eurometaus and mining lobby Euromines. They cynically reckoned that exposure limits under the Carcinogens Directive would not be very strict (thanks to their influence) and would be weakly enforced. They consequently gambled that they could exempt chemicals from costly market authorisation under REACH by arguing that they would be adequately regulated under the Carcinogens Directive. In other words, they argued against a need for two safety nets, viewing risk management under REACH and exposure limits under the Carcinogens Directive as an unnecessary duplication of rules. They subsequently argued that only the less 'burdensome' option for companies should be kept.

But REACH and the Carcinogens Directive are not duplications. They have different scopes, serve different purposes and are both necessary. REACH, for example, is more effective at encouraging the substitution of the most dangerous substances by safer alternatives. REACH also takes a chemical's intrinsic hazard as its starting point, while

the Carcinogens Directive takes 'feasibility' into account i.e. not eliminating all risk. Unlike REACH, the Carcinogens Directive does not apply to consumers but only to workers (but excluding the self-employed). Essentially, waiving REACH market authorisation for a chemical because it already had an exposure limit in the Carcinogens Directive would open up dangerous loopholes, reducing overall protection against cancer.

The Cross-Industry Initiative however has not only tried to pit different EU rules against each other. It has also pushed for more say for industry over the setting of exposure limits, and less say for the European Parliament. With the innocuously sounding demand 'for a more modern and lighter approach' to adopting exposure limits, it has pushed for affected industries 'to be requested to contribute' to impact assessments. This would give industry more say, and more sway, over the rules that govern it, ensuring that the impacts given most weight are those which impact its profits. Even more disturbingly, it lobbied for a 'less onerous decision-making process' to set exposure limits via processes that only involve the (industry-permeable) Commission, and bypass the only elected EU institution, the European Parliament.

Worryingly, the Commission appeared to be receptive to the Cross-Industry Initiative's self-interested ideas. Correspondence shows Commission officials describing the

Lobby battles over other carcinogenic substances

Rubber dust and fumes: The European Tyre & Rubber Manufacturers Association (ETRMA) warned a Commission advisory body that including 'rubber process fumes and dust' in the Carcinogens Directive would 'impose a disproportionate burden on EU rubber manufacturing in comparison to non-EU competitors... creating a potential impact on EU employment.' Instead, ETRMA wanted the Commission to take 'into account the improvements to workers' protection made by industry over the last 30+ years'. Lo and behold, despite being urged to do so by worker representatives, the Commission did *not* include rubber dust and fumes in its May 2016 proposal, or in its second proposal of January 2017.

Formaldehyde: There is still no exposure limit for formaldehyde in the Carcinogens Directive, despite pleas from employee organisations

representing woodworkers and furniture-makers. Over a million employees in the EU furniture sector face a lack of protection against formaldehyde emissions from materials used in furniture production. The Commission's own Scientific Committee on Occupational Exposure Limits (SCOEL) also recommended a binding exposure limit. But the voice of industry groups was, apparently, louder. The European Panel Federation (EPF), Kronochem, a German company manufacturing resins for wood-based panels, and Formacare, the employer organization representing European formaldehyde producers met with the Commission to underline the 'extreme difficulty and economic cost for the industry' of complying with the SCOEL limit. They referred to an 'independent' study (commissioned by EPF and Formacare) which, they claimed, demonstrated 'safe use' of formaldehyde for workers. Should an exposure limit need to be set, the study recommended a dangerously high limit of 0.4 ppm; twice as high as the limit called for by the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBBW). In July 2016, the industry finally got off its backside, recommending a limit of 0.3 ppm.

The result of industry's efforts is that the Commission has delayed acting on workplace cancer legislation for ten years. Ten years in which 100 000 annual deaths from workplace cancers could have been avoided. A million lives sacrificed...

4. Launched in January 2016, the REFIT Platform consists of a Stakeholder Group, with 18 members and two representatives from the European Social and Economic Committee and the Committee of the Regions, and a Government Group, with one high-level expert from each of the EU's 28 Member States.

5. BusinessEurope *et al.*, *Letter to European Parliament Employment Committee*, 4 January 2017, https://www.buinessseurope.eu/sites/buseur/files/storage/publications/2017-01-04_employers-ep_empl_-_carcinogens.pdf

Initiative's 'valuable insights' and 'thoughtful suggestions' as 'most welcome', with the Commission 'happy' to arrange further meetings to discuss its suggestions. Notes from a January 2016 meeting revealed that the Initiative's proposals would be considered by the Commission REFIT Platform. REFIT is one of the main tools of the 'Better Regulation' agenda to reduce the 'burden' on business from EU legislation.⁴ A June 2016 opinion showed that the Initiative's wishes had been picked up by the REFIT platform's government group, which mirrored the Initiative's rhetoric, indicating that REACH authorisation may not be necessary where workplace legislation provides sufficient 'regulatory control of risks'.

Parliament won't let the wool be pulled over its eyes

In October 2016, at a hearing of the European Parliament's EMPL committee, employers association BusinessEurope (Brussels' most influential corporate lobby) urged MEPs not to slow things down by changing the Commission's Carcinogens Directive proposal. This was a predictable line for industry to take: it was quite happy with the weak and underwhelming proposal from the Commission, so didn't want Parliament to make amendments that might impact profits by requiring them to properly protect their workers from cancer.

But since Europe will be stuck with the exposure limits set in the Carcinogens Directive for many years to come, workers' organisations instead deemed it far more important that sufficient time be taken now to achieve adequately protective limits in the directive and add further dangerous substances.

In January 2017, a throng of industry lobby groups including BusinessEurope, ECFIA, IMA-Europe and Eurometaux wrote to the EMPL Committee rejecting any amendments that would promote stricter (i.e. lower) exposure limits, better monitoring of employees' health, or the addition of other dangerous substances (including those toxic to reproduction).⁵ They implied that the sharing of best practices among corporations made stricter regulation unnecessary, and expressed concern over 'drawn-out and difficult discussions with the Council and Commission' that could result from such amendments.

This is an extraordinarily weak argument. Invoking possible 'drawn-out and difficult' discussions as a reason to uphold a bad legislative proposal is absurd. It is the role of the EU institutions to engage in thorough discussions to produce rules that genuinely serve the public interest. And, it is job of MEPs to amend Commission proposals to better reflect the interests of the public they're elected by. It is not their job to protect company profits at the expense of the health of millions of workers across Europe, dependent on the EU's revised workplace cancers legislation for the foreseeable future.

The outcome of this protracted battle between industry interests and workers' health will ultimately depend on how our law-makers balance costs to business against human lives. 2017 is set to be a pivotal year in this battle.

A first victory was won by the proponents of legislation providing greater protection for workers at risk from carcinogenic substances. On 28 February, the European Parliament's EMPL Committee voted by a large majority for amendments providing *inter alia* for stricter limits than those proposed

Refractory ceramic fibres

Refractory ceramic fibres are used in insulation. ECFIA, the lobby group for the High-Temperature Insulation Wool industry, argued that an 'adequate' exposure limit on ceramic fibres in the Carcinogens Directive would put 'less administrative burden' on industry than REACH authorisation. But its notion of 'adequate' is far from that promoted by trade unions as sufficient to protect workers. ECFIA commissioned a study from consultancy firm Everest Consulting Associates, which recommended a 'technically and economically feasible' exposure limit of 0.5 f/ml. By contrast, trade unions recommended 0.1 f/ml, citing evidence that certain fibres 'exhibit a carcinogenic potency comparable to asbestos'. But ECFIA intimated that 'compliance costs' for this limit would result in production processes being relocated. In other words, if the EU forces them to properly protect their workers from cancer, they might just close their factories!

The tripartite committee tasked with advising the Commission on safety and health issues, in which employers, governments and workers are equally represented, reflected this split. The employers' side described 0.5 f/ml as a 'protective' limit, but conceded that the limit should be 0.3f/ml. The workers' side recommended a limit of 0.1 f/ml, as exists in the Netherlands and Germany. Which limit did the Commission go with? The employer's limit, 0.3 f/ml.

by the Commission for wood dust, hexavalent chromium and silica dust. This is the basis upon which the Parliament started in March 2017 negotiating the directive's text with the Council of Ministers.

How those amendments fare in the face of a tide of industry lobbying will be a litmus test. It is of paramount importance, and a matter of justice, that the EU institutions hashing out this legislation recognise that corporate profits can never be valid justification for endangering human lives. ●

Further reading

This article is based on the December 2016 report published by CEO (Corporate Europe Observatory), *Using 'Better Regulation' to make things worse: Industry tactics to delay and weaken workplace cancers law*, by Rachel Tansey, <https://corporateeurope.org/environment/2016/12/better-regulation-make-things-worse>. See report for full references.

Journalism, an increasingly precarious profession

Special report coordinated by
Mehmet Koksal (EFJ) and Denis Grégoire (ETUI)

In these uncertain times, saying that journalists are getting bad press would be an understatement. Political leaders, whatever their colour, are now starting to publicly pillory them. Press representatives used to be a homogeneous, urbane, trendy caste, pacing the corridors of power, frequenting the cocktail bars. For the last few years, the increased presence of star TV newscasters in glossy magazines and the omnipresence of certain columnists in talk-shows have obviously not helped boost the profession's image among the public.

At the side of this absolute minority of VIP journalists, the vast majority modestly pursue their work of informing the public, well away from the spotlights. Most of them still make a decent living out of it, though a growing minority is not managing to earn a decent wage. The phenomenon of long-term trainees and bogus self-employment is nothing new. For many years now, many budding journalists have seen this as the only way of getting a foot on the career ladder. After all, haven't they got to earn their spurs? The problem these days is that such "probationary periods" are tending to become a permanent status. To such a point that budding journalists – and not just them – just can't imagine gaining an open-ended employment contract.

Looking specifically at the printed press, the Internet has become synonymous with free access to information, accelerating the decline in sales.

The 2008 crisis triggered a collapse in advertising revenues, which newspaper owners and managing editors – more and more of them business school graduates – used as a pretence to "streamline" their operations. The consequence: newsrooms are empty, the "survivors" are on the brink of exhaustion, and much of a newspaper's content is supplied by an army of invisible freelancers.

In Europe, freelancers now constitute one-third of journalist union members. Isolated, having to compete against each other – and even sometimes against the hordes of non-professional unpaid "informers" churned out by the social media –, they are prepared to do everything to build up a reputation and work with certain media in the long term. Despite their extreme precariousness, they are little inclined to join forces.

"To work in such professions, you have to pay: you pay for the enjoyment you get out of it, you pay for the prestige they give you", stated two (precarious) authors nearly ten years ago in a book highlighting the impoverishment of certain intellectual professions, including journalism (*Les nouveaux intellos précaires*, publ. Stock, 2009). Since then, the situation has got a lot worse, to the point that journalists are beginning to question the role and sense of their profession, with a growing percentage of them even thinking about doing something completely different. One cloud more gathering over our democracies ... in these uncertain times.



Image: © Martine Zunini

Burnout among journalists, a symptom of discontent in newsrooms

The rise of new technologies and new ways of producing and consuming information have significantly changed the profession of journalism. Access to information has become more democratic and has increased the size of media audiences. Digital tools have made it possible to diversify journalistic formats and genres. Media companies, however, have focused on the web without defining their managerial strategy and without investing the necessary financial resources. This has had an impact on journalists' working conditions and welfare at work.

Hélène Brédart

Journalist

Internet and the social media have fuelled competition between different media, encouraging them to give precedence to headline news, in many cases to the detriment of information reliability.
Image: © Martine Zunini



In October 2015, a study by the French journalists' union (SNJ) and Technologia, a consultancy in the field of occupational risk assessment and prevention, revealed disturbing trends¹. Among the 1 135 journalists canvassed, over a third were thinking of leaving their jobs. Almost 65% of interviewees felt that their working life was affecting their health, with faster working speeds being pinpointed as the primary cause of fatigue and stress. The research showed that protective measures taken by journalists to alleviate work-related stress were mostly sound (relaxing with family, sleep, practising sport), though the need to monitor the risk of occupational burnout in newsrooms was underscored.

Academic research carried out in Flanders some years previously had studied the risk of burnout in the media². According to that study, more than one in five journalists (21.4%) had a high risk of burnout. The combination of pressure at work and poor work-life balance was a major contributor to the risk of occupational burnout.

Is journalism still a viable profession? Does it continue to offer the conditions required to build satisfying careers? Over the past decade, universities, trade unions and journalists' professional associations have been studying the development of journalistic practices. They have observed that the work of newspaper industry employees is becoming more intense and more profit-driven, while the boundaries between editorial lines (the 'popular' or 'quality' press) and media platforms (broadcast or print) are blurring. This process has implications for journalists'

welfare at work, respect for professional ethics and professional identity.

A growing demand for multi-skilling

Used originally merely as showcases for classical media, webpages are now recognised as information platforms in their own right. In Europe, many media companies have pooled their digital and traditional output through 'bi-media' strategies. Journalists as a whole have had to familiarise themselves with online tools, even if they had to expand their editorial, technical and/or image processing skills to do so. Nowadays, journalists have to produce content in and for multiple media formats, such as articles that combine text, photos and video, for example.

This demand for multimedia journalism calls for flexibility and multi-skilling, though it is not always backed up either by investment in training or additional payment proportional to the work provided. In this connection, a study in 2014 by the French *Observatoire des Métiers de l'Audiovisuel* [audiovisual professions observatory] found that: 'If journalists do adapt, it is still on the own initiative of individuals who train themselves on the job out of personal taste or by necessity, or who choose to ask for training in the use of the new media. (...) Organisations give little thought to training.'³ The study also showed that the proliferation of qualifications is very often not covered in written agreements or conventions, hence the lack of corresponding wage adjustments.

In the Netherlands in the same year, meanwhile, the Dutch Journalists Association

1. Bouéroux M., et al. (2015) *Changements et évolutions des métiers du journalisme*, Cabinet Technologia.

2. Teugels M., Van Hoof E., De Witte H. (2009) Is er een crisis op de redacties? Een onderzoek naar burn-out bij beroepsjournalisten in Vlaanderen, *Over.Werk*, 4, 120-126.

3. Brunel A., Bouéroux M., Chanut-Edert J., Lablanche P. (January 2014) *Etude sur l'évolution des activités des journalistes dans le cadre des nouveaux médias et les réponses en matière de formation* [Study of the development of journalistic activities in the light of the new media and training responses], Technologia SAS & CPNEF.

(NVJ) noted that the same opportunities for training were not available to all journalists. The NVJ was outraged, observing that, while all media companies now demanded multimedia skills, training for freelance journalists was financed only by magazine publishers (jointly, and with public aid). 'We hope that freelancer training will be included in the new collective agreement under negotiation this year, in 2017. Publishers would then be obliged to co-fund the training of all journalists,' explained Yvonne Dankfort, an NVJ representative.

An ever-increasing workload

While journalists now have to analyse a multitude of data on the web and produce copy for a range of media (print or broadcast, Internet sites, social networks, live interviews with journalists), these new tasks, rather than replacing their former duties, are additional to their daily work. The size of newsrooms has

not kept pace with this upward curve. Following the decline in advertising revenue, sales and/or state contributions to public service media, media companies have been unable to invest in additional human resources. In a great many cases, they have restructured their staff (via social plans and voluntary redundancies), leading to a scissor effect: fewer staff for an increasing number of platforms.

Unsurprisingly, a development of this kind puts journalists under time pressure. Research carried out by Cardiff University in 2008 found that British print journalists produced three times as much copy as they did 20 years previously. This study moreover took only printed press output into account. An increase of this size was shown to have an impact on information quality: journalists leave their offices less, have a limited time in which to check their sources and rely increasingly on press releases.⁴ 'Most journalists are now required to do more with less time, a trend that inevitably increases their dependence on "ready-made" news and limits opportunities for independent journalism.'

A study by Ghent University in Belgium showed that eight out of ten journalists who [...] work for online media had as their main occupation print or broadcast journalism.⁵ While the researchers stress that journalists do not 'multitask' all of the time (they generally focus on a single medium), they highlight the commitment implied by such a change on their working hours: multimedia journalists said that they spent an average of 48.9 hours a week on their work.

Steve Paulussen, one of the Belgian researchers, explains that 'the idea that technology leads to an increased workload may sound paradoxical since new technologies allow journalists to gather and produce news much easier and faster than ever before'. According to this academic, convergence projects, which require journalists to work on a variety of platforms, have been encouraged by a market rationale which seeks to lower the cost of the workforce in journalism. 'However, history shows that the successive implementations of new technologies in media organisations, from the telegraph to the Internet and its related technologies, have always been accompanied by processes of rationalization. (...) In other words, it is not technology per se, but the associated management's obsession with cost reduction and productivity maximization which leads to increased workload.'

This view is shared by Paco Audijs, a Spanish freelance journalist and member of the European Federation of Journalists' Broadcasting Expert Group (BREG): 'One day,

4. Lewis J., Williams A., Franklin B., Thomas J. (2008) *The quality and independence of British journalism*, Cardiff, Cardiff University.

5. Paulussen S. (2012) Technology and the transformation of news work: are labor conditions in (online) journalism changing? in Siaper E., Veglis A. (dir.) *The handbook of global online journalism*.

6. Deleu C. (1998) Médias et nouvelles technologies: le journaliste pressé, *Les cahiers du journalisme*, 5.

press barons decided that it was "necessary" for journalists to work more, on several platforms, with fewer rights. Restructuring is not the natural consequence of technological renewal but a consequence of a discourse on the (global and highly political) speed of change.'

A new temporality: immediacy

Journalists' relationship with time has changed due to their increased workload but also because of a new web-driven temporality. The media have always exploited ways to increase speed. Havas, for example, the first press agency, used carrier pigeons to transmit London stock exchange prices.⁶ The rate at which information is produced, however, was radically altered by the Internet. On the web, there is no irreducible period in which to produce content. Information can be produced and broadcast immediately and updated continuously.

Information monitoring and content updating (journalists can now amend or enrich their copy) demand a considerable capacity to react and generate a significant mental burden. This is all the more true when journalists receive virtually instantaneous feedback on social networks. Many journalists now have a presence on these networks and like to meet their followers' expectations. Anette Andresen, a member of the EFJ Freelance Experts' Group (FREG), points out that

'It is not technology per se but the associated management's obsession with cost reduction and productivity maximisation which leads to increased workload.'

journalists now publish their reports on social networks and have to follow the comments and discussions raised by their posts. That is what their employers expect of them. They have to use their private accounts and spend time after working hours to engage in discussion and answer questions from Internet users.

Andresen, the director of the freelance service of the Norwegian Journalists Union (NJ), paints a damning picture of the consequences of this development: 'These additional activities mean that they are constantly online. They blur the boundaries between working time and free time, and between professional and private life. Keeping up with social networks and monitoring information take place outside working hours, so journalists are not paid for these additional tasks. This creates a feeling of stress: your free time is limited but your work is endless.'

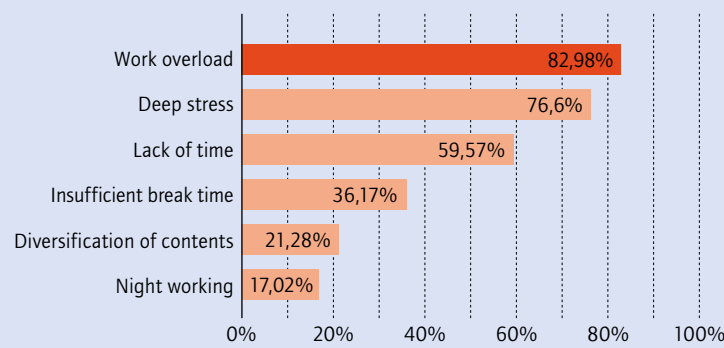
This new temporality has also caused journalists to pay less attention to professional ethics. In a competitive media environment, they must be able to publish information online at speed, and sometimes at whatever cost, since a correction can be made in a matter of seconds.

The following is just one of many examples of changes in this race for information. In an end-of-course thesis in 2014, a student at the University of Liège (Belgium) noted, in connection with a highly publicised shooting in Liège town centre, that the Francophone Belgian media as a whole broadcast what

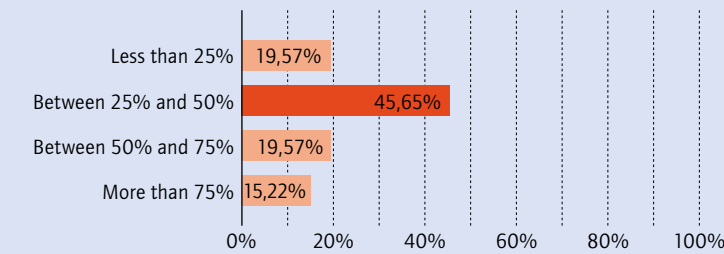
Taking the pulse of a profession

In the context of compiling this dossier on working conditions in the press sector, the European Federation of Journalists sent out a questionnaire to its member organisations in autumn 2016. Forty-nine national journalists' unions representatives from 19 European countries answered. The main results of the survey are presented below.

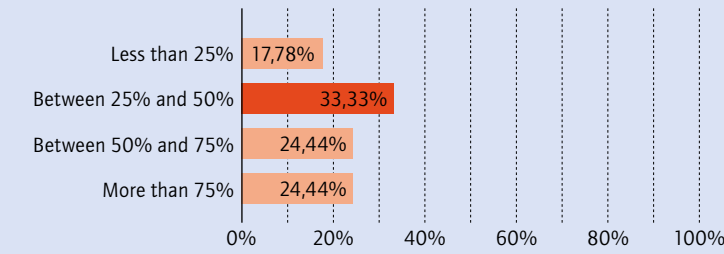
According to your experience or feedback received from members, which one of these concerns that could affect journalists' health and safety are the most common? (multiple answers allowed)



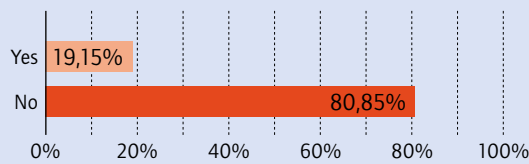
According to your experience or feedback received from members, what percentage of journalists ever felt any symptom of burnout (sleeping disorder, severe fatigue, declining self-confidence and motivation...)?



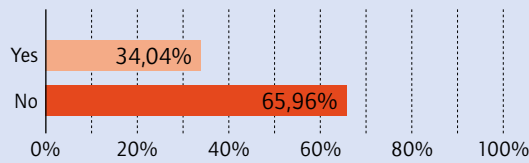
According to your experience or feedback received from members, what percentage of journalists ever thought of changing job because of their working conditions and/or health concerns?



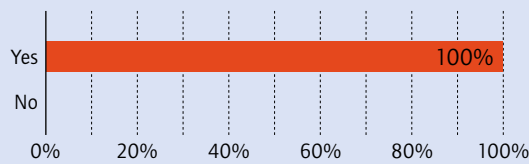
According to you, are the journalists' salaries fair in your country in comparison to the amount of work done?



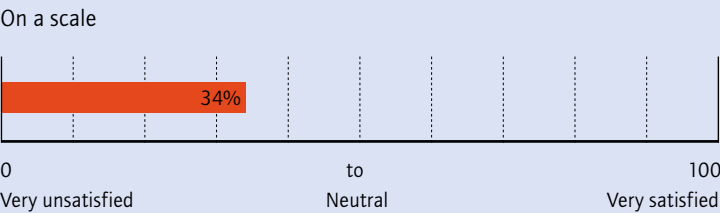
Do journalists get paid or given time-off for overtime?



Would you say that the working conditions for journalists have tended to deteriorate over the years in your country?



Please drag the cursor to define journalists' job satisfaction in your country



7. Wolf J., *La notion d'immédiateté de l'information à travers le traitement médiatique sur Internet de la tuerie de Liège*, Dissertation for a Masters in Information and Communication specialising in Journalism, unpublished, ULg, academic year 2013-2014.

8. Brédart H., *Des journalistes belges francophones quittent la profession: Analyse d'un phénomène socio-économique*, Dissertation for a Master's in Information and Communication specialising in Journalism, unpublished, ULg, 2013-2014 academic year.

9. Witschge T., Nygren G. (2009) Journalism: A profession under pressure? *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 6(1), 37-59.

In response to multi-skilling, rolling news and hyperconnectivity, initiatives calling for a return to a slower pace are now gaining ground.

turned out to be false rumours on their 'live' platforms.⁷ Journalists had in fact quoted each other and announced that several gunmen were on the run (whereas there was just one gunman who had been killed immediately by police officers).

She goes on to say that the new technologies enable different media to monitor each other in real time and find out instantaneously what competitors are reporting, which if anything is likely to encourage imitation. This self-referentiality raises issues regarding the accuracy and cross-checking of sources but also regarding information harmonisation. She also points out that the advertising revenue of digital media platforms is linked to the expected number of visitors and clicks. Journalists also use audience measurement tools, such as Google Analytics, which have changed the way they produce headlines for, write and illustrate their articles.

While rules of professional ethics are clearly not always complied with, several studies have shown that journalists are nevertheless anxious to carry out their work properly. In 2014, a Master's in Journalism student analysed the factors that motivate Francophone journalists to leave the media sector.⁸ The fact that it is not possible to carry out high-quality work (linked to a lack of time and influence over editorial choices) was a major motivation. 'Journalists are faced with a disparity if not a conflict between their aspirations, the idealised representation of their

profession and their own professional practices.' Dissatisfied with the quality of their articles, certain print journalists said they had adopted strategies to avoid responsibility for their content: concealing their identity, using their initials only, etc.

Towards a de-professionalisation of journalism

In a paper entitled *Journalism: A profession under pressure?*⁹, researchers from the University of London and the University of Södertörn (Sweden) explain that journalism as a profession is becoming less professional because there is less time for creativity, tasks are becoming increasingly technical, sources are not cross-checked as much and data are verified less. The division of labour (journalists, printers, typographers, editors, photographers), which played an important part in organising newspapers, has become less clear cut.

The researchers find furthermore that journalists have lost their position as 'pillars of information' who select and transmit facts vertically. Nowadays, anyone can publish and distribute content on a large scale. People build their own channels on the web and also help to produce information, since it can be taken up again in the traditional media. In this context, the National Union of Journalists (UK and Ireland) believes that one of the main reasons

for the reduction in the fees paid to freelance journalists is the existence of a large number of amateur information providers who are unfamiliar with the market and who ask for unrealistic fees, or who simply offer their content for the kudos of being quoted by a media outlet. Many professionals have therefore begun to doubt the role and meaning of their trade.

Responses to multi-skilling, rolling news and hyperconnectivity now advocate a return to a slower pace. In 2010, a manifesto published in German (subsequently translated into English and French) defined 14 fundamental rules of 'slow media'. These include ensuring rigour and respect for consumers and promoting worker specialisation (rather than multi-skilling). New media, such as the magazine *XXI* in France or *Jot Down* in Spain, respond to these criteria and favour long-format information without advertising or with advertising carefully selected to guarantee the independence of the journal.

The legislature also seems to have taken notice. A new provision in the French Labour Act now enshrines the right of workers to switch off. Since 1 January, French companies with over 50 employees must limit the intrusion of technology, particularly emails, into employee rest periods. This right seeks to ensure a better work-life balance. This is without doubt a world first that concerns all workers, including those whose life is heavily affected by inadvertent technological intrusion, i.e. journalists. ●

Desperately seeking news

As a young journalism graduate, he tried to earn his living doing the work he loved in his home country, but soon became disillusioned. But he did not give up. He has now spent 10 years in Brussels, doing bits of freelance work here and there. As a multi-platform reporter, he juggles languages as he juggles his pen, his microphone and his camera. Even so, he struggles to pay the rent. Anonymous report by a journalist of the 'precarious generation'.

Anonymous report

A protest action in front of the Paris broadcasting station called by *Génération précaire*, a French movement upholding the rights and positions of trainees in France.
Image: © Belga



Starting out

I left for Brussels at age 25, with nothing, to seek my fortune. I dreamed of being a star reporter. I thought: 'Brussels is where it's at, let's be there at the heart of things and let's go for broke.' Back in my home town, I'd spent three years working for the biggest local daily paper. Three years on the road, in search of stories, paid 20 euros a piece. 'You are brilliant, but it's a long, hard road, and I'm afraid it'll be 10 years or so before you get taken on permanently', I was told one day by the editor-in-chief. Ten years, that was too long. I didn't want to find myself still on the editorial staff aged 40 and worn out. At home, I had no bigwig to look out for me, I ain't no fortunate son, I didn't go to a school whose name opens doors – I couldn't afford it. Time to move on, then.

Working for peanuts in Brussels

I arrived in Brussels when the euro crisis was at its height. The print media and public opinion were discovering suddenly how important Europe was. Better late than never. Moving here was a smart move. I got to work straight away: I studied the workings of the EU, Community law and languages, because I needed to learn English and French fast. The only possible way of acquiring experience of Europe lay in getting a few euros together and doing internships. But my dream remained the same – a career in journalism. I pursued that dream as soon as I could, after my eight-hour daily grind of working as an intern, studying the workings of the EU and learning my languages.

I wrote my first articles for the foreign pages of the daily paper in my home town. Thirty euros or so per article wasn't huge, but it was a first step towards making it into print in Brussels. There was little room for self-expression in these pages, since the editors preferred to cut and paste agency releases. I took my courage in both hands and sent off a first e-mail offering my services to online publishers and websites. Obviously, quite apart from monetary considerations, that was not done, a dim view was taken of such approaches. Even though I talked big, there were those who realised that I was young, and took advantage of the fact: 'We can't pay you the going rates for Brussels, but if your articles are good, we'll publish them. With exclusive rights for us, of

course.' I was not prepared to write for nothing, which would have devalued the professional reputation I was keen to build through my hard work. But I was prepared to work for low rates, 15-20 euros gross per article, which was better than nothing, and at least it allowed me to save face.

Communications and rip-offs

Meanwhile, the months went by. I was now fluent in English and French, and I was comfortable moving around in the 'Eurosphere'. Little by little, I was developing useful contacts and finding relevant information. All I had to do was make some money. Thanks to my knowledge of languages and Europe, and thanks to my own dedication, I found a few small communications jobs: newspaper clippings, newsletters, press releases, posts for social media and speeches written for a number of leading public figures.

As journalism, however, that still wasn't enough. I wrote 20 or so articles a month, which earned me about 400 euros gross. It wasn't enough to live on, or even to survive, and you got ripped off in so many ways. A new website contacted me. They dangled the prospect of mind-blowing money and a promising future. To start with, I would be paid not in euros but in shares which would turn into real money – big bucks – after six months. I agreed. Every week, I wrote two in-depth articles on European policy, the euro crisis, the Greek bailout and a lot of other things as well. After six months, the financial promises were halved. After a further six months, all they were prepared to pay me was my expenses. In two years, I didn't receive a single euro. In the end, they stopped answering my e-mails, and I was even insulted on Twitter. A few months after ending my collaboration with this site, I learned that they were looking for a new collaborator in Brussels, to whom the same promises were being made. I hope he will fare better than I did. But it didn't end there.

A 'leftist' weekly for which I wrote occasionally went bust and disappeared only to resurface in a different corporate form, without paying me what I was owed, namely several hundred euros. Thank goodness this was a weekly that 'stood by the workers', otherwise I hate to think how things might have turned out.

I wrote 20 or so articles a month, which earned me about 400 euros gross. It wasn't enough to live on, or even to survive.

A golden opportunity

My luck seemed to be turning, however. After two years, a great opportunity came my way: the chance to work with the new online editorial team of a national daily. This paid 30 euros per article – not huge, but this was a daily publication. I put everything I had into this venture, at the same time continuing with my other tasks, without which I wouldn't have been able to pay my rent. I wrote every day for this site, complex articles, I did research, I made phone calls, visits, always at my own expense. When I was about to give up my work in communications and devote myself 100% to journalism, I asked for a minimum contract – a set number of articles for a set sum per month – only to be told that I still had to prove myself. Unlucky again.

Budget videos

After four years in Brussels, I was still learning my craft. The world of information was evolving, and videos were gaining ground over the written word, on the Web more than anywhere else. I realised that, if I didn't learn this new language, I might as well change my occupation. In the end, in the little free time I had, I got to grips, self-taught, with video recording techniques and an editing

programme. My first videos were flops, but once again, with tenacity and sacrifice, I mastered the subject. A year later, I was able to use a professional TV camera, a microphone and editing software. I paid for the equipment myself, nearly 5 000 euros in total. It hurts to think about it. My videos were screened on the Web, but what I got paid was always the same: 50 to 70 euros for a 2 to 3-minute video. Some clients asked me quite simply to submit a script of the content before they accepted it. In other words, I sometimes found myself going somewhere, filming and writing for nothing. But I hung in there. All in all, I was earning a bit more than for written articles.

TV on the road

I haven't said this yet, but I did so well making videos that, after a few years, I began working for television. I started collaborating with a national network. It paid better, but the work was complicated, and I had to do everything on my own: filming, adding the journalistic content, editing, dubbing, adding the music and voice-overs. I wasn't paid expenses, not even my travel and accommodation costs. Anyway, I began covering major European events, sometimes far away from Brussels. I car-pooled with BlaBlaCar, I slept on friends' sofas or travelled for several hours to avoid the cost of a hotel. I did the editing work at home, at night. One day, when I was doing a feature on the Calais Jungle, I hitchhiked from the migrants' camp to the Channel Tunnel. If it hadn't been for the TV camera I was holding, I might have been taken for one of those hapless souls myself. To complicate matters still further, central editorial departments are disorganised: they ignore e-mails, order services at the last minute and make ridiculous demands. But how can you say no when you are paid by the job?

Above all, stay healthy

By virtue of making videos, I have managed to make a living solely from journalism, dropping my communications work, but it has not been easy. Above all, one must not be ill. A day lost to flu is a day's lost income, and I can't afford that, it would be disastrous. So

far, I've been lucky, I've never had any health problems. I went to a physiotherapist for treatment of pain in my left knee. 'When did you injure it?' he asked. 'I haven't injured it, but prevention is better than cure and I can't afford to be on crutches for two weeks.'

In praise of quality

The problem with piecework – and its costs – is that there have to be so many 'pieces'. Some days, I write articles on the economy, politics and agriculture, and, at the same time, I am working on one or more videos. I envy those correspondents who write one article a day, or two at most, who have the time to read, to inform themselves, attend briefings and have a coffee with their sources, whereas I am obliged to work non-stop. I like to think I am infallible, though I often have the feeling that I don't deal with information as I should – unfortunately I don't have the time.

Brussels attacks

On 22 March 2016, there were two terrorist attacks in Brussels. The army moved in, followed by battalions of 'VIP journalists', special envoys, big names. They stayed in hotels costing 200 euros a night, ate lunch and dinner in restaurants, took taxis, moved around accompanied by their cameramen, sound engineers and drivers. But they needed us freelancers to get about in Brussels, because they didn't know the city, had no local contacts and didn't speak the local languages. In short, all they had was money, that's the least one can say. So these VIP journalists paid freelancers like me to guide them like sherpas in a city they knew nothing about but wanted to

talk about. They contacted me, but I said no. I preferred to report on events myself rather than act as their flunkey. Apparently, CNN sent nearly a hundred journalists to Brussels during the period of the attacks. As for me, I worked on my own for 18 hours a day, for three national media. I did my best.

Fortunate Son

Journalists in Brussels fall into two categories: those who have it all and those who have nothing. There are freelancers like me, who have to work through thousands of contacts and links in order to make ends meet at the end of the month, and there are the correspondents, journalists earning salaries of up to 3 000 euros, with their housing, cars and their children's schooling all paid for. This category includes children of politicians, journalists, ambassadors. Some of them are brilliant, others far less so. 'Why didn't you pursue a career in politics, Dad? I might have been a leading journalist today...'

To be honest, after nine years in Brussels, I gave up trying to find permanent employment. That's the honest truth. It is especially hard for a freelancer to get hired. Not impossible, but extremely hard. The freelancer is an ideal 'stopgap' for media departments that do not want to employ a correspondent. A collaborator of whom they can demand anything, a foot soldier to be sent into battle, information 'cannon fodder'. If you are unfortunate enough to be not only a freelancer but young as well, it is even worse: plenty of editors rub their hands in glee and make you the most ridiculous offers. For freelancers, there is only one rule: don't think about tomorrow; stay firmly focused on the here and now, because tomorrow is another day. ●

Some days, I write articles on the economy, politics and agriculture, and, at the same time, I am working on one or more videos.

Freelancers: instruments and victims of deregulated working conditions

The result of waves of redundancies, the decline in the number of journalists with open-ended employment contracts in Europe has gone hand-in-hand with a proliferation of atypical jobs, especially 'gig' work. Workers hired under such contractual agreements are finding themselves faced with obstacles in defending their professional and social rights. This cheap workforce has become symptomatic of the precarious situations of journalists.

Hélène Brédart

Journalist

For a growing number of journalists, precarious employment is no longer something they all have to endure at the bottom of the career ladder, but is becoming a permanent situation.

Image: © Boris Delire



Four years ago, some twenty Italian MPs expressed their concern over the low remuneration received by freelancers in a parliamentary question addressed to the European Commission, citing the results of a study conducted by the journalist organisation *Libertà di stampa, diritto all'informazione* (Lsdi), in which the correspondents of Italy's major newspapers including *Il Messaggero*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Tempo* and ANSA, the national press agency, stated that they earned no more than € 5 – 20 for writing variable-length articles. This situation is no different in the broadcasting sector where local channels pay journalists around just € 15 for shooting a feature and its voice-over.

In 2015 the organisation published a new report, showing no change for the better: the average income of self-employed journalists amounted to € 11,241 p.a., equivalent to one fifth of what their employed colleagues were earning!¹ A large majority (83%) of the self-employed journalists, i.e. freelancers, earned less than € 10,000 p.a., i.e. € 40 less than the poverty threshold determined by the National Statistics Institute (ISTAT). Surprisingly, freelancers account for a fair slice of the workforce, representing 65.5% of journalists recognised by the National Social Security Institute for Italian journalists (INPGI).

Turning to France, fifteen freelancer collectives published an opinion column on 16 March 2017, targeting media employers and denouncing the continual decrease in their rates over the last ten years. 'Our opinion column highlights the increasing precariousness of our remuneration, which takes no account of how many years we have studied or how much experience we have. There are a great many freelancers who earn just a few hundred euros a month, despite working 70 hours a week.'

A little more than one fifth (22%) of card-holding journalists are freelancers. 'This figure is growing from year to year, as seen by the fact that 66% of all new press cards are issued to freelancers or people on fixed-term contracts. In contrast to popular thinking, we are not "greenhorns" – 57% of us are older than 35. Median monthly wages amount to € 1,960 gross, compared to € 3,469 for journalists with permanent employment contracts – despite the fact that we all have the same training. 30% of freelancers earn

1. Rea P. (2015) Rapporto LSDI sul giornalismo in Italia, *La professione giornalistica in Italia*, Aggiornamento 2015, Liberta Di Stampa Diritto All'Informazione.

less than € 1,500 gross a month. And who's talking about a 35-hour week? Our working hours are elastic – to breaking point.'

Whether they work for the printed or digital press or for broadcasting companies, whether they are paid by character, word, line, page, hour, a daily or monthly flat-rate, there are a great many freelancers living under difficult financial conditions in Europe. In many regions, 'gig' rates have remained unchanged for years. Or even worse, they have been reduced. This is probably one of greatest challenges facing journalist unions and professional associations.

We should also remember that these financial difficulties are often compounded by limited access to social security (unemployment benefits, maternity leave, work incapacity, pensions).

Legal obstacles

Freelance journalists have a long tradition of unionisation in Europe, with professional organisations in only a limited number of countries – Greece, Ukraine, Serbia and Turkey – not officially admitting them as members. However, there are hardly any collective agreements protecting their remuneration. In 2015, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) carried out a survey to assess such protection among 40 unions and professional

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associations in 33 countries. Among those surveyed, more than half confirmed the impossibility of getting their self-employed members covered by collective agreements. Denying them this fundamental right (the right to collective bargaining is recognised for all workers under international labour law) stems from both a lack of willingness on the part of employers and certain legal factors.

To start with, regardless of whether we are talking about labour codes or collective agreements, labour law in many cases continues to require the existence of a contractual relationship between an 'employer' and an 'employee'. In the United Kingdom, unions must also obtain 'recognition' by employers, i.e. an agreement allowing the former to negotiate on behalf of staff working for the latter. Since the 1990s, a right to collective representation is recognised when more than half of employees express a wish for a union to take part in collective bargaining. This legal provision does not however apply to self-employed workers.

The president of the UK National Union of Journalists (NUJ), Tim Dawson, pointed out that, unlike other Western European countries, 'the majority of UK media companies are hostile to unions'.

'Although we have managed to conclude collective agreements in several workplaces, agreements for freelance journalists are very difficult to negotiate and enforce. Employed

journalists have a recognised right to union representation, whereas freelancers do not. This makes things a lot more complicated, over and above the challenges raised by workforce fragmentation', he explained.

Elsewhere in Europe, attempts undertaken by freelancers and their unions to collectively negotiate gig rates have been ruled illegal under the European principle of free competition.

Twenty years ago, the Danish Competition Authority initiated proceedings against Dansk Journalistforbund (DJ), the Danish journalists' union, accusing it of illegally fixing prices by recommending minimum rates to its freelancer members. This ruling was appealed against, with the subsequent ruling stated that self-employed journalists who performed work on a basis equivalent to that of employed workers were not subject to competition rules. As for freelancers working on a more self-employed basis, they are sometimes excluded from collective bargaining. In 2010, the Dansk Journalistforbund again lost a legal battle against magazine publisher Aller Media. Of 700 self-employed journalists, less than one hundred were considered to be 'comparable to employees' and thus covered by a new collective agreement.

In Ireland, the Competition Authority warned the majority of organisations representing freelancers that recommendations concerning rates were, in its view, illegal. The 'gig guide', containing recommendations for rates, has been removed from the NUJ website. In 2016, members of the Irish Senate unanimously adopted a draft law amending competition law to allow self-employed workers to conclude collective agreements. 'There

is a great chance that the law will be adopted before summer 2017. We are benefiting from support from all parties', said Seamus Dooley, NUJ deputy Secretary General.

We should remember that in 2011, the Irish Congress of Trades Unions (ICTU) sent a complaint to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), stating that Ireland was not complying with its obligations under ILO Convention 98 – the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention. Last year, this complaint was ruled as admissible. Its outcome could mark history, especially as, in the meantime (in 2013), the European Commission has confirmed, in reply to a request from the Irish Parliament, that EU legislation does not allow self-employed workers to bargain collectively.

This conflicting legislation (collective bargaining vs. free competition) does not apply to all EU Member States. In certain States, self-employed journalists benefit from an agreement, and sometimes even from guaranteed rates, without competition authorities finding fault with this.

Rates too low

In Italy, a low-rate policy is applied by the majority of printed press and broadcasting companies (see above). In 2014, following intensive negotiations, an agreement was concluded between the Italian Journalists' Union (FNSI) and newspaper publishers, under which freelancers were to receive a minimum of € 250 for writing twelve articles. Journalists were not very enthusiastic about these rates (i.e. € 21 per article). 'Many journalists considered these rates to be too low.

The Labour Tribunal put a stop to this agreement which anyway had never been applied', explained FNSI delegate Anna Del Freo.

According to her, the journalists' organisations were having difficulties negotiating with employers who used freelancers to run their businesses flexibly. 'These days, it has become difficult to negotiate better working conditions and wage increases. Employed journalists benefit from a robust collective agreement. And that's the reason why employers prefer to recruit bogus freelancers, despite this being forbidden by law.'

Olivier Da Lage, representative of the French National Union of Journalists (SNJ), similarly stated that the situation was not conducive to bargaining. 'Short-term contracts have become the rule. Employers do not want to enter into medium- or long-term commitments, a fact linked to financial uncertainty. This in turn also puts pressure on permanent staff', he said. He went on to explain that manager profiles had changed. 'We have been seeing this trend over the last 25 years, and it is now commonplace. Fewer and fewer journalists are taking on management roles. These days, managing editors are no longer journalists but legal experts who run a press company like any other company, whatever the sector.'

An agreement does not automatically mean protection

In Germany, the law on collective agreements (*Tarifvertragsgesetz*) provides for an exception with regard to self-employed journalists, considering them as dependent workers when at least 33% of their income (for other trades this rate is 50%) comes from a single employer and thereby exempting them from all competition regulations. Several agreements stipulate collectively agreed remuneration rates both in the printed press and the broadcasting sector.

Michael Hirschler, a member of the EFJ's Freelance Experts' Group (FREG) representing the German Journalist's Federation (DJV), nevertheless pointed out that only public broadcasting companies actually paid these rates. 'In the private broadcasting sector, companies are out to make money. That's the bottom line. The German newspaper

These days, managing editors are no longer journalists but legal experts who run a press company like any other company, whatever the sector.

publishers' federation has signed a collective agreement because that was part of the negotiations with the employees. But newspapers don't care a fig about what their own federation is doing: they are just not paying the rates set in the agreement. And what if a journalist dares to demand to be paid the agreed rate? Quite simple. He won't get any more gigs from the newspaper.'

At the end of the day, this exception foreseen by the law is not very effective. 'In the current economic situation, freelancers don't dare go on strike. They have no work guarantee. However, it's difficult to improve collective contracts without a strike. But we have no strong bargaining position. Far from it, we have to get down on our knees and beg – a really distressing situation', summarised the German trade unionist.

In the face of such non-compliance with agreed rates and the drop in the value of gigs, the Austrian journalists' union (GPA-djp) set up a website in 2015 where freelance journalists could post cases of unfair treatment, thereby highlighting what journalists are experiencing and calling on the media companies to react. The union is also reporting employers suspected of working with 'bogus self-employed' journalists to the health insurance company, possibly leading to employers being fined and/or being made to employ them. Since the beginning of this year, some ten such cases have been reported.

Repercussions on professional organisations

In 2011, the EFJ noted that certain unions and professional associations were getting worried about the increasing rarity of permanent jobs among organised members². 'The old structures of solidarity and commitment which we used to take for granted are disappearing due to dismissals, subcontracting and the increase in atypical work. Traditionally unionised members are becoming increasingly rare.'

Freelancers sometimes have to take on other work, but this can lead to them not fulfilling the membership criteria of professional organisations. Renaud Dubois, a journalist working for a local Belgian TV company, stated: 'I get paid € 115 gross for a gig,

In existence for a long time, alternative media companies refuse to pursue profitability at any price.

i.e. for shooting a feature, editing it and the voice-over. That includes my travel expenses. Certain features involve more than 10 hours of work. When I invoice this amount via an interim contract, I cannot write down more than 4 hours of work, because otherwise the rate would be illegal, i.e. below the minimum wage.' He is not a member of the Belgian Association of Professional Journalists (AJP). 'As I can't get by as a journalist, I've started making advertising videos and getting paid for commercial work. But this is incompatible with the status of a professional journalist in Belgium.'

In addition, the feeling of belonging is also difficult to come by in an environment of individualised career management. In Romania, the University of Bucharest's Research Institute (ICUM) has published two studies on journalists below 30 years of age working for magazines and the digital press.³ These studies highlight the fact that, though their working conditions are extremely difficult (they sometimes have to work more than 60 hours a week), they are against joining a professional organisation, a fact mainly explained by an individualistic approach to employment relations and a lack of concrete benefits from being a member.

Employees not better off

In several Eastern European countries, the precarious situation of journalists is not limited to freelancers, with even regularly employed journalists affected. Since the

2. Bittner A. (2011) *Managing change in journalism innovation and trade union in the news industry*, Brussels, European Federation of Journalists.

3. Surugiu R. (2013) Labour conditions of young journalists in Romania: a qualitative research, *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 157-161. Surugiu R. (2012) Working for Glossies. A case study on young magazine journalists in Romania, *Journal of Media Research*, 5 (3), 21-28.

4. Cagé J. (2015) *Sauver les médias. Capitalisme, financement participatif et démocratie*, Seuil, La République des idées, 128 p.

privatisation of the media in the 1990s in Poland, there is just one collective agreement, that of the Polish public radio company.

In Montenegro, there are no collective agreements. 'The employers are not legally bound to conclude agreements, but just to negotiate them. And negotiations can drag on *ad infinitum*. The latest case: for years now, we have been negotiating a collective agreement with the TV company Budva. But, although nearly all provisions have been agreed, the employer just refuses to sign the document', explained Marijana Camovic, president of the Montenegro media union, SMCG. Unions for the private media were set up just two or three years ago. 'But they are still not in a position to put any pressure on the employers, forcing them to the negotiating table', she said. In Albania, numerous journalists are working under simple verbal agreements on their wages and working conditions.

New business models

In the face of this lack of bargaining power on the part of journalists and their representatives, authors are now looking at new media governance models. In her book *Sauver les médias* (Save the media), Julia Cagé⁴, Professor of Economics at Science Po Paris, puts forward the idea of creating a new legal status, that of a 'not-for-profit media company'. At the crossroads between a foundation and a public limited company, this model would supervise the power of shareholders, be open to

participative financing (crowd funding) and offer a new 'home' to publishers and readers.

In existence for a long time, alternative media companies refuse to pursue profitability at any price. Whether employees, freelancers or volunteers, journalists are the ones taking the decisions. In France, for example, the magazine *Alternatives Économiques* is published by a SCOP (*société coopérative et participative*), in which the employees have a majority shareholding. The remaining shareholders are the readers (forming an association) and a civil society investment company. The only funds

allowed to finance its further development are any profits made from the venture. In 2016, *Alternatives Économiques* raised more than € 100,000 via a crowd-funding campaign.

In Belgium, the quarterly magazine *Médor* is organised as a social cooperative with a rotating system of editorial responsibility. For each issue, three journalists share the roles of 'pilot', 'co-pilot' and 'visual pilot'. Journalists are paid by gig. To establish the price of each gig, the journalists used the rates recommended by the Association of Professional Journalists as a base, increasing them by 25 – 100%. ●

Further press occupations under threat

Denis Grégoire
ETUI

Nathalie Simon's CV reveals 20 years of experience in publishing and the press, including many assignments for leading French magazines such as *Télérama* and *L'Express*.

Now aged 53, she still finds herself running after assignments. "Since leaving Roularta, I've had great difficulty finding steady work", she admitted. "I managed to get a week's work at Easter for the French consumer magazine *60 Millions de consommateurs*, but nothing more. Even if their sales are doing well, their budget for freelance work is very limited." To somewhat boost her income, she is also working with the French publishing house "Seuil Jeunesse".

The never-ending crisis of the printed press has not only left journalists out in the cold, but also may other writing professionals responsible, like Nathalie, for such specialist functions as "proofreading", "copyediting" or "sub-editing", background occupations contributing to the quality of information, both in terms of substance and form.

Nathalie Simon started her career at *Télérama*, employed under a series of fixed-term contracts. "At that time, I wasn't looking for a permanent job. I wanted to maintain a certain amount of independence, able to set my own course. And I also wanted to work in publishing. At the end of the 1990s, the magazine sector was doing very well, with advertising revenues at their peak. It wasn't difficult at all to find work in the sector", she explained.

In theory, an employer may only resort to fixed-term contracts for precisely defined and temporary tasks and functions within a company. To prevent abuse, the legislator provides for a waiting period (called in French "*délai de carence*") when a fixed-term contract comes to an end. For example, at the end of a 4-month fixed-term contract (120 days worked), the company must wait 40 days before concluding a new fixed-term contract.

Despite these measures supposed to encourage employers to convert short-term employment contracts into permanent ones, Nathalie Simon has never enjoyed any other status than that of a non-permanent employee. In 2010, after working with *Télérama* for 13 years and having twice been refused a permanent contract, she took her case to the labour tribunal. She would have been able to have had her fixed-term contract reclassified as a permanent one, but her relationship with the magazine's management had deteriorated so much in the meantime that she preferred to negotiate a "formal" dismissal and be awarded compensation.

The second hard blow for the copy-editor came in 2015, when French telecom billionaire Patrick Drahi acquired *L'Express* from the Belgian media group Roularta. "A quarter of the workforce was shown the door", remembered Nathalie Simon, who had been working for the magazine for four years – and she was one of them.

She now questions whether such specialist writing occupations have any future. Can the traditional media, most of which fighting to survive, continue to afford the luxury of such services? In the face of competition from the social media, and more generally from online information sources, quality requirements are going down the drain.

"We get requested to 'vaguely' correct the texts. Our work is becoming more and more technical, to the detriment of our journalistic skills. You are seeing this in the quality of articles", she complained. "I'm a great fan of good writing, viewing any grammatical errors in an article as inadmissible. Verifying information and spelling, checking that names have been written properly – all of this takes time. But one editor just told me 'You're not Balzac', when I asked for more time to improve a text."

The new owners of the main French newspapers and magazines, nearly all of them billionaires, obviously have other priorities: newspapers are well on their way to becoming just another commodity.

'The market is detrimental to the free and independent production of information'

After 23 years spent working for the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*, in September 2013 journalist Ricardo Gutiérrez became general secretary of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), which unites 71 organisations from 43 countries representing more than 320,000 journalists. In the face of the major crisis hitting the European press, he pleads for new business models and practices better reflecting society's diversity and aspirations.

Interview by
Denis Grégoire
ETUI

Images p. 25, 27:
© Martine Zunini



In a recent survey (see p. 15), the heads of national journalists' unions unanimously stated that working conditions in the press sector have deteriorated over the past few years. How has this happened?

Ricardo Gutiérrez – Journalist are trapped by a pincer movement making their working conditions increasingly precarious. On the one side, the traditional press business model is under pressure through the rise of digital media. Kiosk sales have gone down and advertising revenues have collapsed. This has left us with a succession of redundancy packages. Editorial teams have been cut back – *Le Soir* staff numbers have dropped 40% in 15 years – with the consequence that workloads have increased substantially. Press companies are requiring journalists not just to write for the printed press, but also to produce articles for their company's digital platforms. We are witnessing a terrible work intensification in editorial teams.

Alongside the total breakdown of the traditional financing model, the legislative environment is becoming increasingly difficult, rolling back press liberty throughout Europe, even in long-established democracies. Anti-terrorist legislation is taking its toll on journalism. The adoption of laws permitting mass surveillance has had a clear impact on the protection of journalistic sources. The LuxLeaks process in which a French journalist and two whistleblowers have been charged is in this respect symptomatic of a very worrying development.

In the face of such attacks, all we can do is to denounce the apathy of the European Union which is not fulfilling its role. The Commission needed just a year to adopt the directive on protecting business information (trade secrets). But when we talk about protecting whistle-blowers or installing systems for boosting editorial independence vis-à-vis media owners, we often find European institutions dragging their heels.

As regards press freedom, should we not also be concerned about the concentration of the media in just a few hands? In France, for example, billionaires are buying up major newspapers and magazines one after another.

One expects journalists to play a role as 'watchdogs of democracy', acting as a counterweight. But this requires resources and time, both are which are increasingly less available to journalists. We are seeing a growing increase in precarious working conditions and a deterioration in journalists' pay, in particular among freelancers dependent on gigs. Practically one third of our members are now freelancers.

This is a considerable number, especially when we consider that in certain countries, and Turkey in particular, journalists' unions are forbidden to offer membership to self-employed journalists. This precariousness obviously has a negative impact on how journalists go about their work.

Unfortunately, I am not seeing many reactions on the part of journalists themselves when it comes to the growing breaches of press freedom and the deterioration of their working conditions. It's as if the profession does not see itself as legitimised to fight for its own rights. It's as if we are afraid of abusing our ability to access the media for fear of being accused of defending a corporation, although exactly the opposite is true: we are not talking about a corporatist fight but a battle to defend the right of citizens to free and independent information.

But journalists are not just having to fight to defend their independence. Many of them, especially the young ones, are having to fight to even make a decent living, to survive...

Here in Belgium, there are journalists who work as freelancers for digital platforms for € 50 gross for 10 hours of work. Under such conditions, how can they fulfil their mission as 'watchdogs of democracy'? Though the term may sound a bit bombastic, it's still one of the key roles of journalists. But at € 5 an hour, it's obviously impossible to achieve.

One symptom of the crisis in the profession is the explosion in the number of burn-out cases (see the article on page 12). A burn-out is not just the consequence of work-related exhaustion due to an excess of work, but also a manifestation of the feeling of no longer achieving one's ideals at work. A burn-out affects people driven by high personal ideals at work, for example employees in the medical sector. Journalism is one of those professions with an awful lot of personal investment, not for journalists' own particular benefit but for the community. But now, journalists are finding themselves in concrete situations at work which prevent them from attaining such ideals. This is worrying, not just for the

Bio express

- 1966** • Born in Liege, Belgium
- 1988** • Degree in journalism from the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)
- 1990** • Joins *Le Soir*, the Belgian newspaper
- 2007** • Teaches in the ULB's Department of Information and Communication Science
- 2007-2013** • Board member of Belgium's Association of Professional Journalists
- September 2013** • Appointed secretary-general of the European Federation of Journalists

profession, but for society as a whole, as journalism is one of the key pillars of democracy. Without it, democracy goes down the drain – exactly what we are seeing now.

Ten years ago, a journalist working for a newspaper wrote just one article a day, while today they are having to write three or four. It is just not possible to write four articles a day and properly accomplish one's mission.

But what is causing this deterioration? New technologies? The social media invasion of journalism? Our just-in-time cult?

When I was a journalist, I observed the progressive change of in-house editorial production flows. In the old days when the journalist out in the field was the key figure in the editorial team, information filtered upwards through the hierarchy, i.e. a 'bottom-up' flow.

As a result of job cuts, more directive management methods have had to be introduced: editors-in-chief sit down together at the start of the day and, based on what they have heard on the radio or read in other newspapers, dictate to their subordinates what they are to write, without taking any account of what is actually happening on the ground. A

Our members are mainly like Benedictine monks with habits that scratch, freelancers who live hand to mouth, who work more and more gigs, yet who see the rates paid for these gigs dropping everywhere.

gap has appeared between editorial production and reality. In some cases, journalists are given orders which are completely out of line with reality. But if editorial production stops reflecting reality, you'll lose your readership. If you stop being a mirror of reality, readers lose their trust in you, turning instead to bloggers who speak of things resembling their life.

This is a very dangerous phenomenon. If one of society's checks and balances loses its credibility, it becomes useless and senseless. We are seeing increasing societal anger with the media. Populist parties are already spreading the idea that all journalists are part of an intelligentsia out of touch with reality. Apart from a very small minority of 'star journalists', this image in no way reflects the reality of our profession. Our members are mainly like Benedictine monks wearing habits that scratch, freelancers who live hand to mouth, who work more and more gigs, yet see the rates paid for these gigs dropping everywhere.

In your view, several recent editorial developments, a priori positive for news quality, can be interpreted as a confession of weakness.

'Fact-checking', something very much en vogue in many top media is worrying for several reasons. Journalists who set out to uncover lies can be seen as an interesting cog in the check-and-balance role of journalism. But

Our current media production, our current press companies, our current journalists no longer reflect the society they write about.

when publishers start setting up 'fact-checking' units, this is done to the detriment of all other journalists providing 'normal' news coverage. We can easily imagine a world where those in power produce fake news which is then thrown out to the journalist dogs like a bone for them to gnaw on. While these 'fact-checking' teams are busy verifying the information, subjects such as unemployment, climate change, etc. get put on the back burner.

Another worrying sign of the times is the profusion of editorial columns, with opinions and debates supplanting news. Again, this might a priori seem to be interesting. One could even say: look, the newspapers are starting to fuel the ideological debate. But in reality they are doing this because it is a lot cheaper than having to use professional journalists. Asking an external editor to provide, in most cases free of charge, a 'carte blanche', an opinion, is a low-cost way of filling pages. Paying a journalist to spend two or three days

researching the subject in question is obviously a lot more expensive.

What we are seeing is a shift from the world of journalism to the world of communication. The less we engage in journalism, the more communication will fill the gap.

In your view, which new media business model is needed to get out of this deadlock?

I am a great believer in citizens re-appropriating the task of editorial production. I defend Julia Cagé's¹ vision of the markets no longer being in a position to ensure the survival of the media. Advertising is no longer able to support newspapers. The 'free market' is detrimental to the free and independent production of information. It is leading to a concentration of media companies, reducing editorial staff and putting enormous pressure on journalists. I am a great believer in the rise of new business models, such as cooperatives, but backed by such modern arrangements as crowdfunding. We're not talking about those cooperatives popular at the end of the 19th century.

One could imagine citizen-financed digital platforms where journalists could individually sell their articles without the intermediary of a publisher. I foresee journalism without publishers. A self-employed journalist, working in a specific field with a high level of credibility, could sell his articles straight to a customer, via platforms exchanging information between citizens who want to be informed and journalists producing the information they are looking for. This would be a way of re-establishing the tenuous link between citizens and journalists.

In the same vein, it would also be necessary for editorial teams to better reflect today's society. Caricaturing this, it would seem that what we have at the moment is a press dominated by white journalists producing 'mono-form' information mainly for a male readership. This is a finding that has emerged from the surveys conducted among our member organisations on diversity in editorial teams and content diversity. Strangely enough, there are parallels here. Our current media production, our current press companies, our current journalists no longer reflect the society they write about. ●

1. A French economist, advisor to Benoît Hamon, Socialist candidate in the French elections, and author of the book *Sauver les médias. Capitalisme, financement participatif et démocratie* (Seuil, 2015).



An unemployed journalist among the Idomeni refugees

Antonios Repanas, an accomplished and well-known sports journalist in Greece, found himself out in the cold when crisis hit. Unemployed after sixteen years working on a major national daily, he adopted a completely new focus by going to the Idomeni camp and reporting on the refugee crisis. As a result of this decision, Antonios feels that he is today once again fulfilling his vocation to keep people informed, even though his output is disregarded by the media in his own country.

Antonios Repanas

Freelance journalist, www.humanstories.gr

Translation from the Greek by Kathleen Llanwarne

Images p. 28, 29, 30, 31:
© Antonios Repanas





At a distance of two kilometres discarded objects of all kinds could be seen strewn everywhere in the fields on both sides of the road: clothes, shoes, blankets, sleeping bags, remnants of food and packaging, rags, nappies. Evidence that thousands of people had passed through this area on foot. When we were half a kilometre away the Idomeni encampment came into view. This is the place through which more than a million refugees passed within less than a year in the course of the biggest refugee population movement seen in Europe since World War II.

It was November 2015 and since Christmas of the previous year I had been unemployed. I had gone to Idomeni with a friend who worked for Médecins du Monde (MDM) and a team of volunteers from 'Argo', an independently run alternative therapy programme. These people had volunteered to clear the fields around the village of the accumulated rubbish. My purpose in following them had been to collect stories in the field

and to write some articles for MDM. An Italian MDM coordinator had been looking for a journalist prepared to come to Idomeni every day to write about the people in the camp. The articles did not have to be particularly dramatic; it was simple human stories that were wanted. Though this particular cooperation project did not in the end work out – because the first texts I produced were considered too slight – it had brought me to Idomeni. My reason for coming there had been to collect stories from ordinary people, and I had talked to these people and heard many of their agonising tales.

Up to that point, most of what we had been able to see, hear, and read on this subject in the Greek media related to the general refugee crisis and the major overarching issues, with perhaps the occasional powerful account of some individual refugee experiences. It was all very piecemeal, with reports focussing principally on out-of-the ordinary events. For this reason I decided to continue spending as

much time as possible in Idomeni in order to write about ordinary day-to-day happenings in the refugee camp and to describe the lives, past and present, of the persons and families temporarily accommodated there.

So there I was and there I began to work, in the field, as a recorder of refugees' stories. The prologue to it all, however, had been losing my job and realizing that it would be almost impossible to work as a newspaper journalist in Greece in the coming years, given the radical changes currently affecting the whole media environment.

'When a storm hits'

'When a storm hits, some build shelters and others build windmills', says a Swedish proverb frequently quoted at administration council meetings by Makis Voitsidis, former chairman of the Union of daily press journalists in Macedonia and Thrace. From the safety of the 'shelter' where I found myself until Christmas 2014 – as a sports columnist employed for 16 years by *Lambrakis*, the largest publishing business in Greece, signing articles in *Ta Nea*, the daily with the largest readership in the country, and sometimes in *To Vima*, the Sunday newspaper with the largest circulation – this proverb seemed evidently to refer to the only solution to which any of us could resort should we find ourselves caught in an employment storm. Yet a storm is an utterly different phenomenon depending on whether you are observing it from the safety of a shelter or are out in the open and fully exposed to it. When you are caught in a storm you freeze up and become so numbed by the pain that you can no longer function. All you can think about is where you might shelter, where you can hide yourself away until the storm is over. Under such circumstances, the idea of building a windmill is really the furthest thing from your mind.

The 'storm' in the Greek press began at around the same time as the economic crisis. Over the months and years I saw – as a member of the abovementioned trade union administration council – increasing numbers of my fellow journalists becoming unemployed. There were many with whom I had worked in the past and others whose work I had admired from afar. I knew that these were quality professionals and that, if they had become unemployed, it was because they had been unlucky enough to find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. The economic crisis in Greece stirred up additional turbulence in the press. The newspapers had already forgotten that what they were supposed to be selling was quality news reporting, investigation, reliable and up-to-date facts and information. Instead, in the years before the crisis erupted they had been basing their sales on 'offers': music CDs,

Rather than recruiting journalists, they took on managers and advertising executives, demonstrating ever-increasing contempt for the product that, logically speaking, they should have been supplying to their readership.

DVDs of successful films, books, rugs, electrical devices, and so forth. They had founded their survival on bank loans but there was absolutely no way in which these debts could be serviced from their sales. Rather than recruiting journalists, they took on managers and advertising executives, demonstrating ever-increasing contempt for the product that, logically speaking, they should have been supplying to their readership. The news media, having taken it upon themselves to create this kind of environment, found, when the economic crisis broke out in Greece, that they were simply unable to 'sell' to their readership credible news and factual reporting. Readers turned their backs on DVDs and the other incentives on offer and no longer looked to the newspapers on sale in the kiosks for the supply of serious news reporting. After all, the newspapers themselves had for years been educating these same readers to expect newspapers to contain *not* serious journalism and reporting but merely free offers and DVDs. In such an environment it appears virtually out of the question that any journalist who loses his or her job will be in a position to continue to earn a living from journalism.

The crisis in the Greek press reminds me of a forest that has become full of dried branches and undergrowth. Such forests frequently catch fire and are destroyed completely, after which their rebirth can begin. The field of Greek journalism has already caught fire, and flames consume everything without distinction. They burn fruit trees and wild plants, bushes and plantations. Everything is burned down and has to be consumed in the flames; then the fire will be extinguished and the forest can begin its rebirth amidst the ashes.

This was the kind of environment in which I found myself at Christmas 2014. I remember that many colleagues, on hearing that I had lost my job, phoned and told me that I had no need to worry. 'You have an excellent CV. You'll easily find a new job', they commented encouragingly. Given my employment record of sixteen years writing for the largest-circulation daily in Greece; four and a half years at the third Greek TV channel; three at Super Sport, the Greek subscriber sports channel; two on the best-selling Thessaloniki daily; and six on the highest-circulation newspaper in northern Greece, anyone would be inclined to think they were right. And yet, given the current state of the press and journalism in Greece, I knew that in my specialist niche of sports reporting there was no way I would find a job in the coming years.

I had been a member of the Thrace and Macedonia journalists' trade union council for three years and was well acquainted with the facts of the situation as far as unemployment was concerned. It is my belief that no situation can be more fundamentally uncomfortable. I remember that numerous colleagues would

suggest, 'well, now that you have plenty of time, why not drop into the office for a coffee?' I did go once or twice, but I soon stopped. Early on in my unemployment I also went a few times to the sports ground and there I felt even more uncomfortable. My former colleagues were all working, looking for news, interviewing players, identifying the decisive feature that would explain which side won and which lost, while I simply watched the game and left the ground before the press conference began. My feeling was that I simply no longer had any business being there at all.

Idomeni as an opportunity

Idomeni represented for me, as well as a learning opportunity, the chance to 'build a windmill'. Without being initially aware of it, I was beginning to cover a significant gap in the hitherto available news about the refugee situation. My initial curiosity to get to know these people subsequently led me to want to enable others to get to know them too; to want to tell the world, in other words, that the refugees are people no different from the rest of us. Indeed, the refugees that I met in Idomeni, the Greek islands and northern Greece, really are just like us. Gradually I began to recognise, among these people and the tales of their lives, my very own family's story. Both of my mother's parents were refugees from Asia Minor: my grandmother, Marika, came from Balya; my grandfather, Antonis, from Aivali¹. They came to Greece from Asia Minor in 1922.

My grandmother arrived as an orphan with her two sisters Katina and Despina, following exactly the same route taken by the refugees today, from Smyrna to Lesbos and from there to the Greek mainland. Her parents and other five siblings had been killed in Asia Minor. She and her sisters were found, through the Red Cross, by their mother's brother who, having also lost his own family in Asia Minor, adopted them.

On the first few days, arriving at Idomeni, I got out of the car cautiously and somewhat fearfully. Because, ever since 1986 when I signed my first newspaper article, I had worked as a sports reporter, refugee issues represented a completely new world for me. It was in early November that I began to go increasingly frequently to Idomeni. Whenever there were developments or events in the camp, I would immediately post photos or videos on my Facebook page. Little by little I overcame my fears and began to hold more extensive conversations with the refugees. I would ask them about their journey, about their lives in the countries they had left behind, about aspects of their living conditions in the Idomeni camp. At that time the borders were still open but in mid-November, and especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris, the first problems began to surface. The Balkan route was closed for all nationalities except Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans, leaving thousands of refugees from Iran, Pakistan and Morocco, principally, but also Bangladesh, Algeria and other African countries stuck in Idomeni. On 2 December the Iranians blocked the border passage and

1. Both cities are located in the Balıkesir province of northwestern Turkey.





Idomeni and the refugee situation gave me the opportunity to experience a rebirth in journalism.

Even those colleagues from other Greek media channels who were responsible for reporting refugee affairs were well disposed towards me. A relevant point here is that I was not in competition with them as, initially, I was writing only on Facebook, later on Aquaplanet, and towards the end on Humanstories.gr. For these colleagues I myself represented a source in relation to events at Idomeni because I was never short of time and was on the spot nearly every day. I could afford to spend hours on end with the refugees in the camp, gaining their trust and learning more about their difficult experiences. Frequently colleagues from other Greek media channels phoned me, in the context of their own reporting missions, with a request for information or for help in contacting someone within the camp.

As from February 2016 Idomeni became the major game board in refugee affairs around which governments and politicians moved pawns that were nothing other than human lives. On account of my experience on the ground, several foreign media channels expressed interest in working with me. Idomeni and the refugee situation thus gave me the opportunity to experience a rebirth in journalism – working exclusively, it should be pointed out, with foreign channels and on Humanstories.gr because, within Greece itself, the situation remains still the same. The fire that began almost simultaneously with the crisis is still raging, forcing ever more journalists into unemployment, reducing even further newspaper sales and the credibility of what mainstream media remain. In the press, the crisis is much more one of management than of journalism. Managers in the media have failed to understand that the environment has changed and that what they are trying to sell is no longer of interest to anyone; at the same time, they lack the courage to fundamentally change their media profiles so as to appeal to a new readership. Now is the right time to build windmills: it is a matter of taking the pulse of the new environment, of demonstrating adaptability, and of being prepared to take risks. ●

the troubles began. Idomeni, in late November and early December, and particularly at night, was not a very safe place to be.

Throughout that period I was posting refugee stories and photos on Facebook. Whenever there was any new development in the camp I would report it immediately, directly from my mobile, accompanied by a short text. Though quite a number of colleagues 'liked' my posts, never did I receive an offer of cooperation from any of them. Many congratulated me on my work but none proposed to host my articles on their web page – apart from one colleague, Stelios Moshoulas, who had a website on water sports Aquaplanet.gr and asked me whether I would like to publish my articles there. This is how I came to be publishing, on a website dealing with water sports, reports on the refugee situation.

Adjusting to the facts of the new situation

For a journalist who had worked for around thirty years exclusively as a sports reporter, the transition to refugee issues was no easy step. Yet it was immensely interesting to begin investigative journalism in a totally new field. I had at my fingertips the basic principles of journalism; I knew how to seek out sources; I had made a name for myself in the press – albeit as a sports columnist – and this was of help to me in approaching sources, especially in the world of politics and culture, the police, and the Greek NGOs, but also among the local population.

Quite frequently when I gave my name I was asked my opinion of one of the Thessaloniki football teams. On a number of occasions, through conversations about football, I managed to gain access to sources that would have been unavailable to an accredited journalist dealing with refugee issues or a freelance political journalist. While some indeed found it strange that I was writing about refugee questions, many – especially ordinary – people opened up much more easily and were prepared to help me with my investigations because I was familiar to them from my role as sports reporter. What also helped a lot in this respect is that, as I have explained, I had been working for the last sixteen years on the highest-circulation – but also highly reputable – newspaper in Greece *Ta Nea*. It often happens that the media channel for which you work, or have worked, somehow rubs off on you so that you embody particular characteristics in a way that causes people to position themselves differently in relation to you. Generally speaking, it is difficult to undertake reporting unless you represent a particular media outlet. People tend to be suspicious of journalists who say they are freelancers because they like to know where the things they are telling you will be published. Nor are you likely to gain much credibility if you announce that you publish your articles on Facebook. If I mentioned Aquaplanet, the reception was a bit better. Subsequently, after I had created, together with two colleagues, the Humanstories.gr website, I started to feel perfectly comfortable telling people which media outlet I represented.

Recognition of occupational cancers: Belgian families' fight for justice

For more than ten years, the Metalworkers' Federation (a member of the Belgian Trade Union Confederation FGTB) has been supporting the families of four workers suffering from blood cancer. Despite proof that the workers were exposed at work to benzene, a solvent known to cause cancer, the public body responsible for paying compensation to people suffering from occupational diseases is contesting the link to their work.

Denis Grégoire
ETUI

In contrast to the majority of families of workers stricken by occupational cancers, Franco Gomez's family took the decision to fight against the Belgian system of recognising occupational diseases.
Images p. 32, 34:
© Martine Zunini



Ten years later, recalling the medical appointment at the Oncology Unit in the André Renard Hospital in Herstal (East Belgium) remains an ordeal for the whole family, and especially young Nydia. 'She was taking her exams when the disease was diagnosed. My Dad wanted to protect her at all costs, and he tried to play down the consequences', her elder brother Francisco remembered.

Since 2006, the Franco Gomez family has been fighting an exhausting battle to have the disease which killed their father on 30 May 2011, just a few days after his 59th birthday, recognised as work-related. Francisco Franco Molina spent five years fighting multiple myeloma, a cancer of the bone marrow.

'The first time I saw the doctor, he told me straight away: *Madame, as you know, we've got an excellent palliative care centre here at the hospital*', his widow Maria-Dolores Gomez remembered. Yet he managed to live a further five years. Five years of repeated stays in hospital, sometimes in a sterile room, five years of chemotherapies, radiotherapy sessions and major surgery. True to his political and union commitments, Mr Franco Molina remained a 'tough nut' right to the very end.

Trichloroethylene to wash your hands with

He was just four years' old when the family left Andalusia, fleeing the poverty there. Back then in 1956, Belgian coal mines were suffering from a shortage of workers. The supply of Italian miners had dried up after the Bois du Cazier disaster in Marcinelle (Charleroi) where 262 miners – half of them Italians – had lost their lives. Belgium thus had to start looking elsewhere for workers for its then flourishing industry.

The Franco Molina family settled in Herstal, in the industrial suburbs of Liege. The father was hired by one of the region's many mines. At the age of 18, Francisco started work at Métal Profil, a company producing shelving for stores and warehouses. Following restructuring in 1979, the company was renamed Polypal.

In contrast to the mine and the blast furnaces, this company offered young workers a working environment a lot less off-putting than that experienced by the first generation

1. A machine for forming sheets of steel, aluminium, stainless steel or zinc.

2. Called Fedris since 1st January, following the merger of FMP and the Fonds des accidents du travail.

3. Other than the cases of Mr Franco Molina and Mr Soares, one former female worker died from multiple myeloma, while a male worker's non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is now in remission.

of immigrants. Nevertheless, they also had to work with dangerous products, without being aware about how toxic they were.

'On arriving at the factory, the steel coils were greased with mineral oil so that they could easily pass through the roll-forming machines'. We subsequently had to remove the grease from the machine's drums using petroleum or a benzene-based product', remembered Pierre Soares, a former colleague of Francisco Franco Molina.

'We also used trichloroethylene. For us, it was a product just like any other. At that time, nobody associated it with cancer. To get the grease off our hands before the lunch break, we would use it to wash our hands', the worker remembered. He also recalls that there were no partition walls inside the factory, meaning that everybody was exposed to the particulates emitted by the diesel engines of the fork-lift trucks, to welding fumes, to vapours given off by lead-based paint, etc.

Given 15 days to live

A few weeks after Francisco Franco Molina was diagnosed as having multiple myeloma, Pierre Soares learned that he too was suffering from cancer. 'When the doctor told me I had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, I didn't react. I'd never even heard of such a disease. The young doctor then said: "*You realise you've got cancer?*" I then asked him: "*How much time have I got left?*" Without hesitation, he told me "between 15 days and three weeks".'

Pierre Soares initially refused all treatment, imagining it to be unbearable and

'We also used trichloroethylene to get the grease off our hands. At that time, nobody associated it with cancer.'

useless. But he was finally convinced by a young woman doctor to take part in an experimental protocol. For the next five months, he underwent a particularly painful chemotherapy. 'During my sessions, my wife would touch me to check whether I was still alive', he remembered.

With his cancer in complete remission since 2011, Mr Soares can be considered a survivor, with all that this implies in terms of physical and psychological sequels. 'I've got permanent pains throughout the left side of my body. I have to take anti-inflammatory drugs and also benzodiazepines to endure the pain. I've had to give up my allotment', he went on to say. 'And my children have had to see a psychologist', he added.

The ordeal of being given this diagnosis and then undergoing that initial treatment was compounded by the announcement in summer 2006 that the Whittan Group, the British shareholder of Polypal, was going to relocate operations to the Basque country in Spain.

With the help of an association of doctors sensitized to occupational diseases, the FGTB's metalworkers' union compiled a report and submitted it to the FMP (*Fonds des maladies professionnelles*), the Belgian agency responsible for compensating workers suffering from an occupational disease².

Benzene is one of the chemical agents listed as causing occupational diseases. An exposure investigation confirmed that the workers had been exposed to benzene. Nevertheless, the four applications³ to have the Polypal cases recognised as work-related were all rejected.

The families contested this ruling before the labour tribunal, which then appointed new experts. These followed the FMP reasoning, stating that there was no proof of any relationship between the two types of cancer and exposure to benzene.

FMP and the oil industry

A jump to 2009. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has updated its monograph on benzene, taking the latest scientific findings into account. Linked to the WHO, this top body with regard to cancer has long recognised benzene as a proven carcinogen for humans, though mainly for leukaemia. The IARC now for the first time established a 'positive association' between exposure to benzene and multiple myeloma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma⁴.

On the basis of these new findings, the families and their union were able to obtain a new appraisal, leading to a new labour tribunal ruling. This finally recognised the four cases' work-related link and called on the FMP to pay compensation to the victims or their families. Despite this court ruling, the FMP did not give up its position, instead submitting an appeal.

While not contesting the fact that the four former Polypal workers were exposed to

benzene while at work, in its view this exposure was not the main cause of their diseases.

'To be able to speak of an occupational disease, it needs to be proven that the disease is at least more frequent in cohorts of people exposed to a determined harmful influence than in the population at large. The work-related nature of the disease is established at the level of a group, not at that of an individual', the FMP argued.

Not accustomed to having its decisions contested in the courts by workers, the agency commissioned a university professor to conduct further desk research. 'The FMP continues to rely on studies financed by the oil industry', said Jilali Laaouej, the doctor who is providing the victims with scientific support in their struggle against the FMP.

For Esmeralda Cué, a former Polypal worker and now working for the FGTB's Liege metalworkers, the FMP is seeking to gain time and discourage the few victims daring to contest its decisions.

An encouraging ruling

On 7 February 2017, the Liege Labour Court passed down a ruling in the case. Though the new ruling means that the plaintiffs will have to continue waiting, it does open up certain prospects benefiting the victims' families and

⁴. Benzene, IARC Monograph, 2012, p. 249-285.

possible further victims. The Belgian courts have now come up with a definition of the causal link between work-related exposure and a disease which is diametrically opposed to the one used by the FMP.

'In practice, the FMP is accustomed to only recognise a disease as work-related when it is statistically proven that there are twice as many people suffering from it in an exposed cohort of workers than in a non-exposed cohort', Jilali Laaouej explained.

In the view of the doctor, who represents the FGTB on one of the FMP's scientific committees, this approach has been swept away by the labour tribunal's ruling. The 7 February ruling stipulates that 'a simple correlation between risk exposure and a higher number of cases within the exposed cohort than in the population at large, provided that the correlation is sufficiently high and plausible, would be sufficient to convince the Court that the exposure constitutes the main cause of the disease'.

Put in less legal terms, this basically means that the court recognises a heightened risk of disease vis-à-vis the population at large as sufficient to establish a link between the occupational disease and exposure at work.

According to the doctor, if this interpretation were to become case law, it could upset the whole system of recognising occupational diseases in Belgium.

'It is a scandal that victims of their work in Belgium have to resort to the courts to have the harm incurred recognised. We hope that the outcome of this case will help improve the recognition of occupational diseases, not just of cancers but also the many other mental health problems associated with the degradation of working conditions', said Dr Laaouej.

To determine whether there is a heightened incidence of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and multiple myeloma among former Polypal employees vis-à-vis the population at large, the tribunal has appointed a new expert, this time a haematologist and professor emeritus of the universities of Namur and Louvain.

Through the appointment of this new expert, who still has to familiarise himself with the whole case, the Franco Gomez family feels it is back at square one. 'We still can't see any light at the end of the tunnel. Six years after our father's death, we still can't mourn for him properly. But whatever happens, we will continue fighting to the end', said Francisco Franco Gomez. ●

The family of Mr Franco Molina in front of the former buildings of Polypal in Herstal.



The African farm labourers' rebellion

In a village in the poor, neglected region of Basilicata in southern Italy, a small group of people from Darfur in Western Sudan have set up home. These refugees work the tomato fields. They were hired by the caporali, intermediaries employing questionable practices, who offer their services to the landowners. Their working and living conditions border on slavery. Elsewhere in the Mezzogiorno, others, from Tunisia or West Africa, long since suffered a similar fate and then rebelled.

Alessandro Leogrande

Writer

On 3 March 2017, a fire destroyed the shantytown of Rignano Garganico in the Pouilles region, costing the lives of two Malian workers.

Image: © Belga



The town of Metaponto overlooks the sea on the Ionian coast, in Lucania, where the Apennines gradually give way to a vast, fertile plain. This former colony of Magna Graecia is rich in archaeological remains: the columns of a temple from the sixth century BC still rise above a grassy meadow. Otherwise, Metaponto is just another nondescript coastal town catering for the tourist industry that has shaken up the south of Italy. From June to September, a myriad of hotels, campsites and holiday villages fill up with tens of thousands of holidaymakers: a tanned throng that occupies the area for a few weeks, only to abandon the coast, the shores and the discotheques once autumn comes.

For the rest of the year, Metaponto's population is no more than a few hundred. The landscape takes on a ghostly look, like an abandoned television set: tourism disappears, and all that remains is agriculture that depends on work by foreign labourers. When the cold weather sets in, Metaponto turns into a forgotten little African village, inhabited by a settled community of Darfurians who have fled the wartime massacres. They number around 40, members of the Zaghawa people. All of them are young and male. In the hope of better days, they live from one day to the next from their work in the fields.

Tomato-picking under the *caporali*

One of them is Abdullah Aziz, aged 32. He came to Italy seven years ago. He boarded a boat in Libya and landed in Lampedusa, before being taken to Crotone, where he stayed for 20 days. He was granted political asylum for two years. 'When I left the camp,' he explains, 'I went to Naples, where there were other refugees from Darfur. We worked in the countryside for a while. After Naples, we went to Foggia for the tomato harvest. I didn't speak Italian then, so it was difficult to find work. Of all the jobs I have done, tomato picking was the hardest. We were paid by the crate, not by the hour. Some *caporali* pay € 3.50 a crate, others € 5, depending on the variety of tomato and the quality.'

Abdullah Aziz picked as many as 15 cratefuls in a day, on his own. If a crate holds 300 kilograms of tomatoes, this amounts to four-and-a-half tonnes harvested in one day. Of the € 50 he managed so painfully to amass, he had to pay € 5 each morning to the *caporale* for a lift into the countryside by van, and then more money for water and ramshackle

1. In the Mezzogiorno, 'caporali' (singular 'caporale') means the gangmasters who mediate between the employers and the seasonal farm labourers. The system is akin to a mafia operation.

accommodation. 'We did this work for two months, up until the end of the season. In September, I went to Milan. I took a six-month course, but unfortunately I didn't find a job. So I came back down south and ended up in Metaponto, where some distant relatives of mine had moved to.

'Here, they grow oranges, strawberries, grapes, artichokes and fennel. There's work from March to November. There isn't much work in winter, but we stay here anyway. We go to the café, we play cards together. That's how we spend the days and months. We work for several different bosses, not just one. I work three, four or five days for one person, and when it's finished, I try to work for another. To find work, we go to the square, next to the phone box by the pharmacy. Or to the little square in front of the station. You get there at 5 a.m. and wait. Here, it isn't the *caporali* who come, but the bosses themselves. They come and say 'I need three or four people.' And then they choose. We work for seven hours, from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m., and we're paid by the day – € 30 with some, € 35 with others – it depends. Sometimes the police or the tax authorities carry out checks. That's when the boss tells us to scarper and come back the next day to finish the job.'

Abdullah Aziz has a residence permit for political asylum. He has to renew it every two years, but renewal formalities take several months. Each time, the Police Headquarters issues him with a receipt for the application. This happens with all refugees: the receipt is

a kind of substitute document certifying that a person is not 'undocumented' and cannot be expelled.

Each morning, the Metaponto bosses check the farm labourers' permits. They get out of their ATVs in their galoshes and checked shirts and scrutinise the documents. They employ these men in the shadow economy, and would not even dream of setting things straight, but there is a different reason for checking that they are not 'undocumented'. Employing someone in the shadow economy is not particularly serious, whether they be Italian, 'regularised' immigrants or political refugees – the risk is no more than an administrative sanction. But if you are caught employing 'illegals', you can be charged with facilitating unlawful immigration.

200 euro to rent 20 m²

Back in Darfur, Abdullah Aziz had never worked the land. Before he fled the country, he had been a trader. He came here alone. Now he hears from his family only occasionally.

For more than a year, Abdullah Aziz and the other refugees lived in tin shacks under a bridge. But it was cold at night: the air is always damp near the sea, and he hates the sea. He has never been for a swim in his whole life, and the thought terrifies him. Now he and two others live in a one-room flat owned by an Italian, paying him € 200 a month in rent.

The four-by-five metre room is on the ground floor of a low-cost block of flats, far away from the holiday villages. The entrance is through a small door covered with a fly screen, with a small window above. The wall opposite is half covered by a lowered shutter, in front of which stands a cupboard used as a pantry. Next to it is a camping stove and a fridge. To the left, a small bathroom has been carved out, and the three camp beds are flattened against the walls. To complete the picture, there is a small table with a black-and-white TV set standing on it, a wardrobe containing the men's few items of clothing,

For years, the seasonal workers in their hundreds literally slept under olive trees, even when it rained.

The power of the *caporali* derives from the vulnerability and solitude of the farm labourers.

slippers scattered here and there. The middle of the room is occupied by Abdullah Aziz's pride and joy: a large, brightly coloured carpet. He tells me it was a gift from a friend.

Apart from in summer, life here is cut off from the world outside. Abdullah Aziz does not seem to mix with anyone except his compatriots. Not with any association, nor with the local community, nor with the trade union, nor with a lawyer. His only external contacts are with other Darfurians, better integrated than they are, who live in Rome. And so, unknown to them, around their little village, invisible walls, growing ever higher and more impenetrable, have been constructed.

Here in the flatlands of southern Italy, time seems to pass without anything changing. There are no ups and downs. But, from time to time, farm labourers revolt, as happened in the summer of 2011 in Nardò, in the province of Lecce (Puglia region), 140 kilometres from Abdullah Aziz's one-room flat.

The farm labourers' rebellion

It was all captured on video. There is a rapid succession of images. In one corner is a pile of crates, in another the workers are in a huddle. The crates are empty – no one is picking tomatoes any more. A few metres away, lording it over them, a *caporale* is sitting on an upturned crate, yelling. He orders the workers to get moving, get back to work, not to let things go to their heads. But the pickers do not move. No, actually, two or three of them do go over to where the *caporale* is sitting. They say no, no one will be working today, and fold their arms. They have had enough of being treated like slaves.

The strike of the African farm labourers in Nardò, at the heart of the Salento region, started spontaneously one morning at the end of July 2011. A worker, who had filmed it all, showed me the video. He told me what

the images meant, in a mixture of Italian and French. The man received threats for capturing these moments for posterity on his mobile phone. 'We'll slit your throat,' threatened the *caporale*'s henchmen.

But, as he told me proudly before stopping the video and slipping the phone into his trouser pocket, the threats meant nothing to him. That was when I realised that a mental barrier had finally been broken down.

The Nardò strike was a turning point in the recent history of the Mezzogiorno region. For the first time, foreign farm labourers, working on the backbreaking task of tomato harvesting, rebelled against the people exploiting them. It all started on the morning of 28 July, but tension had started mounting in the preceding days. To understand how such a sweeping rebellion movement, which no one had foreseen right up to the preceding day, was able to come about, it would be useful to run through the timeline from the

start. Most of all, it would be good to know what several hundred immigrants were doing in Nardò, deep in the Salento region (Puglia).

Seasonal workers have been coming to Nardò to pick watermelons, the region's main agricultural crop, for at least 20 years. Initially, it was Tunisians who came to work in the region, joined later by men from Sub-Saharan Africa. For years, the seasonal workers in their hundreds literally slept under olive trees, even when it rained. Every day they worked in the fields for 8 to 10 hours, supervised by the *caporali*. At night, they were left under the trees, until a new harvesting day began.

Then, in the summer of 2010, something changed. An anti-racist association, Finis Terrae, persuaded the local authorities in Nardò to set up a reception camp for immigrants employed in agriculture during the summer months. The association took over a farm a few kilometres away from the outermost dwellings, the Masseria Boncuri. In the



Images p. 37, 38:
© Alessandro Leogrande

internal courtyard, it set up blue tents, like the ones used in civil protection operations.

Even in its first year, the camp housed several hundred workers. But that is not all: the campaign '*Ingaggiarmi contro il lavoro nero*' ('Defy the shadow economy and hire me') was also launched. The people from Finis Terrae, together with some volunteers from the Active Solidarity Brigades, informed the labourers about their rights, and as a result around one hundred of them succeeded in obtaining a proper contract, even if only for a few days.

A strike captured on a mobile phone

In 2011, there were further developments. The Masseria Boncuri camp was again fitted out with blue tents. Several hundred Tunisian, Ghanaian, Ivorian, Sudanese and Burkinabe labourers arrived. But it was a bad season. The watermelons stayed in the fields. This was partly because of a drop in Italian consumption (since, at that very time, there was a scare story that watermelons were carrying *Escherichia coli* bacteria) and partly because of increased competition from the other countries of the Mediterranean Basin. As work was rare, few labourers were employed. And those who were gathered little more than scraps. At the end of July, when the watermelon season was in jeopardy, the tomato season started.

Tomatoes are not a very big crop in Nardò: 300 hectares, as opposed to 3 000 hectares for watermelons. However, because of the crisis, all the labourers at Boncuri preferred to stay on, to earn at least something. And this is where a gulf opened up, since, as we know, the conditions prevailing in tomato-picking are even more deplorable than those in watermelon-picking. In Nardò and elsewhere, the people harvesting the 'red gold' are paid € 3.50 for a crate. They are not paid

by the hour but per crateful. In Nardò too, a crate contains approximately 300 kilograms of fruit, and in a 10-12-hour day, an untrained man can fill six or seven. That's all: Abdullah Aziz's 15 crates are an unbroken record.

The farm labourers gradually came to realise that these jobs were a fraud. It was only a short step from there to breaking point. The rest was achieved through the close living conditions at the farm. The power of the *caporali* derives from the vulnerability and solitude of the farm labourers. It becomes absolute when they succeed in controlling even the labourers' living quarters. By contrast, if the accommodation (however insecure it may be) eludes the grasp of the *caporali* and is shared by hundreds of labourers, the situation changes. To coin a well-worn phrase, unity is strength. For the rest, there were the surreal images that I saw on that proud man's mobile phone. An atavistic strike, like those at the very beginnings of the workers' movement that shook the countryside of Apulia

and Emilia over a century ago, but played out on the screen of a mobile phone.

A life ruined by the crisis

The strike threw up several spokesmen for the protest. First, Yvan, a 27-year old from Cameroon. His story is quite unusual. Yvan is a student at the Turin Polytechnic who wants to finance his studies. He speaks fluent Italian, and his speeches stir up the farm labourers while, at the same time, he responds cogently to the journalists' questions. He came here by chance, after one of his friends told him about 'fabulous wages' from agricultural harvests in the Mezzogiorno region.

He pointed out something to me that I was able to confirm straight away from people in the camp: 'A lot of the labourers are former factory workers from the north who were laid off.' They are not newly arrived in Italy. They were already employed in factories, including

A veritable circuit of exploitation exists: from the south to the north of Apulia, from Calabria to Sicily, from Campania to Basilicata.

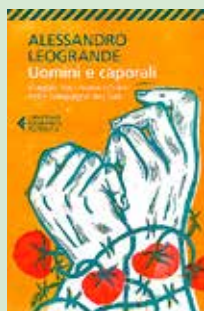


Immigrant exploitation: three books to explain the issue

People fleeing the wars and dictatorships that have given rise to a bloodbath in Africa, in the hope of building a new life in Europe, often end up falling victim to serious forms of labour exploitation. The case of the *caporalato* system in the southern Italian countryside is, admittedly, an extreme manifestation, but it is only the tip of the iceberg of a much broader system. The dramatic Mediterranean crossings, and their corollary of deaths and missing persons, and the highly precarious working conditions which survivors are often forced to endure, are two sides of the same coin.

It is impossible to grasp that nature of these journeys if one does not take the trouble to analyse the political, economic and social causes that impel hundreds of thousands of men and women to leave Africa and the Middle East (and the exodus prompted in recent years by the Syrian conflict is merely the most striking example). But, at the same time, there can be no talk of integration without an investigation of the new forms of labour exploitation.

I have devoted three of my recent works, all published in Italy by Feltrinelli, *Uomini e caporali* (2008, latest edition 2016), *Il naufragio* (2011), and *La frontiera* (2015), to this issue, and to the way in which absence of analysis is leading to a lack of understanding and xenophobic impulses.



2. The legislation was finally adopted only in autumn 2016.

in major companies, in Piedmont, Lombardy and the Veneto region, and lost their jobs because of the economic crisis. They then started travelling around the Salento, northern Apulia, Basilicata and Calabria regions, looking for a job in agriculture, and coming up against a very different world.

Habib and Ben Salem are two other spokesmen. Both Tunisian, they have been familiar with Nardò since the start of the 1990s. At that time, they were already coming to the region for the watermelon harvest. Ben Salem lived in Orta Nova for several years, until a *caporale* set fire to his home as the result of a dispute. In his view, the south is still synonymous with lawlessness, violence and the bullying, by a minority of people, of many Italians and foreigners alike. He then found a better life 'up north'. For 10 years, he worked in Belluno (Veneto), in a solar panel factory. In the end, he was laid off.

As for Habib, after his first years of watermelon picking, he moved to Empoli in Tuscany, where he was joined by his wife and children. For him too, things went well for 10 years. He had a house and a proper contract in the construction industry. Then, with the crisis, it all fell apart. After he lost his job, he could no longer afford his rent. His wife and children went back to Tunisia, and he returned to Nardò in an attempt, like all the others, to scrape together a few hundred euros by picking watermelons and tomatoes. Habib is one of those who observe Ramadan. He does not eat or drink anything before sunset, even on days when the temperature climbs well above 40 degrees.

Yvan is more laid back, but Habib and Ben Salem are driven by a mute rage: sometimes disconsolate, sometimes more furious. It is the rage of lives ruined by the crisis, an apparently never-ending reversal.

Of the many I heard, I was particularly struck by the story of a certain Ghanaian man. He had lived in Libya for a long time, earning 30 dollars a day as an oil well worker. When war broke out, he decided to come to Italy. He told me he had made the right choice: if he had stayed, he would probably have been lynched as a suspected Gadhafi mercenary. But when he arrived in Nardò, he realised that pay was far lower than in Africa.

Cracks in the system

The total blockade of the camps lasted two weeks. At first, no one was working. The

buses of the *caporali* returned empty. Then, hunger, and the fear that the strike would not produce immediate results, gained the upper hand, and, as the death threats of the *caporali* against the spokesmen grew more frequent, many labourers began to give in, and went back to working in the same conditions as before the strike, even sometimes for a significantly lower wage of € 2.50 a crate.

After two weeks, a good half of the occupants of the Masseria Boncuri had fallen back into the clutches of the *caporali*, contributing to the early completion of the tomato harvest, while the other 150 or 200 continued the protest, calling for an institutional round-table discussion. That summer, the Nardò farm labourers secured three meetings with Apulia regional authority leaders, partly thanks to the CGIL trade union's mediation. Discussions then began on the initial measures to be taken against the *caporalato* system, and the need to adopt a national law penalising and outlawing it².

But that is not all. Thanks to the whistleblowing by the labourers who had stood up to their *caporali*, the local Anti-Mafia Directorate in Lecce was able to carry out an enquiry named after the most powerful *caporale* in local farming: Saber Jelassi, also known as 'Giuseppe the Tunisian'.

As a result of this enquiry, several *caporali* and some major farm operators in the area have been sent for trial (the case, which has seen an impressive number of witnesses take the stand, is still in progress). From the court proceedings, it appears that planning the organisation of exploitation is a bureaucratic exercise. The surprising thing is not only the close network set up between the *caporali* and certain farm operators, but also the close connections between the *caporali* in the main regions of the Mezzogiorno. A veritable circuit of exploitation exists: from the south to the north of Apulia, from Calabria to Sicily, from Campania to Basilicata. The labourers who move on from the watermelon harvest in Nardò to the tomato harvest in Cerignola, then to orange- and mandarin-picking in Calabria, to set out again on the same circuit, are always the same.

And then the images of the Nardò strike spring back to mind. Today, as in the past, exploitation in agriculture feeds on the vulnerability and invisibility of the farm labourers. In the summer of 2011, cracks started appearing in both. Viewed closely, this sequence of events marked the start of the long march towards a new state of awareness. ●

Into the hidden depths of Fukushima. An enthralling graphic narrative by a member of the decontamination team

Anyone in search of an anti-nuclear tirade should look elsewhere, because not a word of criticism against the nuclear industry can be found on any of the 550 pages of the graphic novel trilogy *Au cœur de Fukushima* [*In the Heart of Fukushima*]. On the contrary, the author, who hides his identity behind the pseudonym 'Kazuto Tatsuta', goes to great lengths to dispel the 'false rumours' circulating about the decontamination operations. 'I told myself that this was my chance to talk about my own experiences at the power plant, and to reveal the "hidden truth" which had never appeared in the media,' he writes as justification for his *manga* trilogy.

Although he is reluctant to reveal specifics about himself, the *mangaka* (manga artist) who follows his heartfelt dream of working in Fukushima emerges as an odd character. We find out that his passion for *manga* does not by itself pay enough for him to continue living in Tokyo, and that he is therefore forced to undertake a variety of odd jobs on the side to make ends meet – until March 2011, when the tsunami and the resulting nuclear disaster awaken in him a desire to serve his country.

Although Tatsuta's unshakeable commitment to producing an impartial account of his experiences is ultimately irritating, it also heightens the impact of his tale; the fastidiousness with which he depicts his work in graphical form makes for an enthralling read, and the veracity of his drawings and the attention to detail in his descriptions of the different parts of the site and the equipment used (such as radiation detectors) open doors for readers which would otherwise have remained closed.

Despite his stated wish to avoid any controversy, Kazuto Tatsuta reveals fascinating details of the inner workings of the nuclear industry, perhaps without even realising that he is doing so. The first volume of the trilogy describes the many twists and turns he was forced to navigate before finally being allowed through the gates of the Fukushima plant, betraying the opacity of a recruitment system which involves vast numbers of intermediaries but which prevents ordinary Joes being

deployed immediately on tasks in the vicinity of the damaged reactors. After applying through a temping agency, he is recruited by a small company on the bottom rung (level six of six) of the sub-contractor scale used by TEPCO, the famous Japanese nuclear operator.

He portrays the owners of these small companies as dodgy individuals sporting thin moustaches and wearing black pinstripe suits; 'They secure a name for themselves as sub-contractors by getting as many people onto their books as possible, even if they have never been awarded an actual contract. Some of them pocket the training bonus for new recruits and then vanish off the face of the earth.'

His job involves performing maintenance and logistics tasks in a break room used by workers carrying out decontamination operations – a thankless role which is mainly limited to cleaning toilets, but one which Tatsuta (as might have been guessed) performs, 'without passion, but without complaining'. Before long, he gets bored, however, and attempts to rise up through the ranks of sub-contractors to a role more in keeping with his ambition to become a 'decontamination soldier'. He expresses his regret that 'I haven't managed to find a role in a high-activity area'.

After a hiatus of several months, during which he returns to Tokyo, Tatsuta is taken on by a company responsible for repairing the coolant lines to the spent fuel storage ponds, and he finally gains access to the holy of holies.

Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 Reactor, or more precisely its metal skeleton, which is all that can be seen on the images shared and reshared on the Internet after it was hit by a hydrogen explosion, has become an enduring symbol of the events of March 2011. Tatsuta's drawings of the Unit 3 Reactor are chillingly beautiful, all the more so because the *mangaka* limits himself to a palette of black and white. 'This whole area gives me the creeps,' admits the normally intrepid author, who by this stage has finally succeeded in donning the uniform worn by the decontamination team.

Tatsuta differs from many other undercover journalists in that he makes no attempt to expose the failings of the system.

Nevertheless, his drawings – such as those showing waste removal operations in the depths of the Unit 3 Reactor – cannot fail to raise questions in the reader's mind.

The rubble is cleared by robots, since any humans coming into direct contact with the waste would be exposed to levels of radioactivity with immediate health impacts. The job of the four-man team to which Tatsuta was assigned is therefore to work as fast as possible to deliver a robot as close as possible to its work site, before running away and taking refuge behind thick mobile lead shields. After finding that the 50-m cable tethering the robot (developed by the US army) keeps snagging, the workers come up with the idea of placing cones (identical to those used around construction sites) between the cable and the angles of adjoining walls. One could interpret this 'DIY' solution as evidence that decontamination teams are forced to think up work-arounds of their own in order to carry out their work.

As a good nuclear soldier, Tatsuta never betrays the slightest doubt that his country has the technical and human capacities to overcome a disaster on this scale. Western readers will find it hard to avoid drawing parallels with the willingness (famous to the point of cliché) of the Japanese people to sacrifice themselves for others, particularly given that the author closes his trilogy with the following words; 'I would at least like to keep working here until I reach my annual radiation dose limit.'

— Denis Grégoire

Au cœur de Fukushima.
Journal d'un travailleur
de la centrale nucléaire
1 F [In the heart of
Fukushima. A worker's
memoir of the 1F
nuclear power plant]

Kazuto Tatsuta,
éditions Kana,
three volumes, 2016

The fortunes and misfortunes of an undercover sociologist working in a call centre

The scene is both comical and pathetic at the same time; young men in suits and ties, some hopping about on the spot and others (visibly less comfortable) barely moving their lips and forcing a smile, are singing along to a pop song by *The Killers* while a portly man of around 50 works himself up into a frenzy of movement and emotion, urging them to sing louder. The man is Neville Wilshire, manager of a call centre in Swansea (Wales) which employs around 700 people, and the main protagonist in the reality TV series *The Call Centre* shown on BBC3 in 2013 and 2014.

'Each new recruit has to sing. I want enthusiasm. Enthusiastic people sell, happy people sell, miserable bastards can't. So, if they can't sing and they can't enjoy it, they might as well leave.'

In another episode, which can still be viewed on YouTube, Wilshire parades a 25 yearold employee who has recently broken up with her boyfriend through the open-plan office, shouting, 'Any single blokes here? I've got a desperate female!'

Although this is a reality TV show, with all the embellishment of truth inherent to the genre, Jamie Woodcock – a research fellow at the prestigious London School of Economics (LSE) – nevertheless believes that *The Call Centre*, with its outrageous hero who cites 'Napoleon... a dictator' as his source of inspiration, is a fairly typical example of the industry's preferred management style.

'This ridiculous statement is not just a performance for the TV programme; it also indicates how much power managers and supervisors have on the call-centre floor,' writes the young sociologist in his book *Working the Phones*.

The book is based not only on research findings from the field of sociology, but also on Woodcock's own observations during a six-month stint of work in a call centre selling insurance while he was writing up his PhD thesis. This allowed him to experience for himself the new management techniques popular in the sector, which he believes have their roots in ideas appropriated from the expanding cult of self-improvement and New Age spirituality: 'What can now be called "liberation management" starts from the

position that no one can exploit workers better than workers themselves.'

In one of the many examples of techniques aimed at infantilising the call centre workers, a small laminated sign is placed on a new recruit's desk mid-call by the quality control team after he has made a certain number of calls. Upon finishing his current call, he must go and sit on a small folding stool next to the team leader's desk, where he is asked to listen to recordings of his calls and rate how well they went. The team leader then tells him what he did right or wrong, and awards raffle tickets for particularly good calls. Raffles are drawn every two months, with prizes including gift vouchers for big London shops or games consoles.

Woodcock uses the term 'bullshit jobs' – borrowed from an LSE colleague, the American anarchist anthropologist David Graeber – to refer to the type of work available in this sector, which employs one million people in the UK.

The author explains that this provocative term was not coined to describe jobs such as waste collection, which are unpopular and often badly paid, but which have to be done by someone to prevent our society descending rapidly into chaos.

It refers instead to occupations which are of dubious benefit to society, and the sociologist found it particularly interesting that call centre workers struggle to explain to others exactly what their job entails. This has obvious implications in terms of social protest.

According to Woodcock, 'If there is an element of work that is socially important, fulfilling or indeed enjoyable, then it is worth staying and fighting (...). When work is stripped of these features almost entirely, then the refusal of work not only becomes a useful strategy, but it is also something that emerges organically from the labour process itself.'

Woodcock describes the many strategies dreamt up by call centre workers to avoid the threat of alienation, which he regards as inherent to the job: asking pointless questions to lengthen the brief team meeting routinely held before each new shift ('buzz session'), offering to trade the aforementioned gift vouchers with their superior in exchange

for permission to leave work early, attempting to drag out cigarette breaks (smokers and non-smokers alike) and so on. The ultimate act of resistance is simply to quit.

Woodcock believes that call centre workers have room for manoeuvre when it comes to improving their working conditions, despite the major obstacles which stand in the way of collective mobilisation in the sector (lack of trade unions, permanent surveillance by line managers, high staff turnover, lack of job security, etc.).

Yet although he makes no secret of the fact that he takes a militant approach to the mobilisation of workers, with frequent references to the Marxist heritage and, in particular, the Italian *operaismo* movement, his own attempts to mobilise workers are unconvincing.

Woodcock succeeds in meeting a number of colleagues in a pub after work with the aim of thrashing out a strategy of collective resistance, but his endeavours run out of steam: 'The difficulties in trying to involve workers in a more formal manner are not surprising. The refusal of work was not limited to a rejection of working at the call centre itself. It also extended outside the workplace: not wanting to talk, read or write about call centres after work ended.'

'The future success of trade unions in call centres will depend in no small measure on their ability to contest and redefine the frontiers of control on terms desired by their members. This requires a break from the conception of unions as service providers for a shrinking base of members, and a move towards the building of combative organisations that are focused on workplace struggle,' he concludes.

— Denis Grégoire

**Working the Phones.
Control and Resistance
in Call Centres**

Jamie Woodcock,
PlutoPress, 2017, 200 p.

HesaMag

#16

The impact of digitalisation on workers' health

www.etui.org