

Workers feel used and abused

Stress, pressure from above, disregard, abuse from customers and more are all daily fare for most supermarket workers. Add in job insecurity across the sector, and it is small wonder that psychosocial risks are taking a toll on a growing number of employees.

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Standardized work procedures lead to a loss of identification with work.
Image: © ImageGlobe



1. Health and Safety Executive (2001) *Tackling work-related stress – a managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being*.

2. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2012) *Working conditions in the retail sector*. Available as a computer file on www.eurofound.europa.eu. National reports can also be downloaded. They show that little is still being done to prevent psychosocial risks in the retail industry.

3. A region to the south of Paris comprising six departments: Cher, Eure-et-Loir, Indre, Indre-et-Loire, Loir-et-Cher and Loiret.

4. It is available in various versions, including GHQ-28 and GHQ-12. GHQ-28 (28 questions) covers four areas: severe depression, anxiety, social dysfunction and hypochondria, while GHQ-12 (12 questions) returns information on perceived psychological difficulties. There is a 4 point scoring system for each question: terms 1 and 2 are scored 0, terms 3 and 4 are scored 1. Scores range from 0 to 12, and a score equal to or greater than 4 indicates the existence of a psychological disorder.

5. The full results of this "action-oriented research" survey (in French) are available at: www.universitepopulairedeleige.org > Observatoire du bien-être au travail.

6. *Ergodistrib. Rapport final de l'étude : enquête et études de postes*, Centre interservices de la santé et de la médecine du travail en entreprise (CISME), p. 18. Available at <http://www.fcd.asso.fr>

"All staff have access to an onsite occupational health unit which offers massage and reflexology. The company also subsidises gym membership for their staff," reports UK supermarket chain Sainsbury, while its rival Sainsbury claims that "There is no stress here because we constantly listen to staff." These are extracts from press releases issued in 2001 as ripostes to a report¹ criticizing British companies for their failure to engage with the rise in work-related stress.

Eleven years on, has anything changed? Have supermarkets faced up to the scale of the problem and finally asked questions about their responsibility? Perhaps not, if a European report² on the retail industry is anything to go by. Published in July, the report by the Dublin Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions finds a connection between the emergence of psychosocial risks and the growth of contingent employment in the retail sector, and specifically the spread of fixed-term and part-time employment (especially among women). Longer trading hours and more store opening days are also singled out as eating away at work/life balance.

Two epidemiological studies have looked at the mental health of workers in France's mass retail industry. The Epigrandis study was launched in 1998 and involved 768 employees of supermarkets located in the Rhône department (Lyons region). Five years later, a new survey was done among 1002 employees of 86 supermarkets in the Centre region³. Both surveys were done using the same type of mental health assessment tool: the *General Health Questionnaire*⁴, which was administered to the workers via occupational doctors.

The outputs of both reveal a concerning level of mental health problems among a significant share of French supermarket workers. 35.3% of participants in the Epigrandis survey display signs of psychiatric disorder and 10.7% signs of depression. The 2003 survey in the Centre region found a quarter of supermarket workers were suffering from mental distress, rated as significant in 6.2% of cases.

The Centre region survey revealed a number of risk factors for work-related illness, they are: gender (30% of women versus 18% of men), age (31% of over-40s versus 24% of under-40s), experience in the sector (31% of those with over ten years' service with large retailers against 22% of those

with under 10 years' length of service), and store size (32% of hypermarket workers against 23% of supermarket workers).

The study also provides a link between mental distress and work experience and work organization factors. The risk is higher among respondents who reported they have been or are being bullied at work, do not feel fulfilled, feel unfairly treated, see no career prospects, feel that their suggestions are disregarded, feel that others (colleagues or others) are unfairly treated, get no recognition from management, do not have enough time to do their job, etc.

Added to these findings are those of other smaller-scale surveys which reveal significant levels of dissatisfaction with methods of work organization that put human factors second to productivity-chasing. Testimonies from workers and their union reps confirmed this groundswell of discontent in the sector.

Time pressure

The feeling of "forever rushing" is extremely widespread among supermarket workers. A 2008 trade union survey of 782 workers in the Liège region (eastern Belgium) found that 45% thought they did not have enough time to do their job during working hours and 70% thought that extra demands were forever being made of them⁵. Another survey funded by the French federation of retailers and supermarkets, and so not calculated to put a blot on the situation, actually found close to 80% of workers feeling that they had to rush their work and 47% were unable to stop and take a moment's rest outside official breaks⁶.

A target of scanning 3,500-odd items an hour through a checkout (nearly one item a second!) would seem to leave the staff of hard-discounter Aldi little time for chatting over coffee and biscuits. "It's a notional target set by head office and new employees tend to cotton on pretty quickly that it can't be done," says Cathy, a shop steward in a southern Belgium store.

The health impacts of this maximum productivity demand are offset slightly by multitasking – Aldi's other golden rule. All Aldi supermarket employees have to alternate between checkout operation, goods pallets unloading, shelf-stacking and even store cleaning. It is a way of avoid monotony and reintroducing a form of freedom of job organization.

Checkout assistants work only 25-hour weeks, but have to be available Monday to Saturday.

"So that some of our colleagues who have bad backs can keep working and not get sacked on medical grounds, we arrange it so that one of us whose health will stand it will do more pallet unloading and give their checkout hours to their colleague," says the union rep. This way of reclaiming ownership of work time organization can obviously only happen where there is strong solidarity in the workforce, which seems to be the case in the German discounter's Belgian stores (see Box).

7. *Situation of female employees in super- and hypermarkets* (2008) Karat Coalition, Warsaw. Available at www.karat.org > Resources > Publications.

8. Benquet M. (2011) *Les Damnées de la caisse. Grève dans un hypermarché*, éditions du Croquant, p. 78.

Manuel has worked in volume retailing for 36 years. He started out in a Belgian supermarket which was taken over in 2000 by the French giant Carrefour. He sees the well-being of workers declining as a result of flexibility requirements and puts that down to the change in the company's shareholder structure. "Checkout assistants work only 25-hour weeks, but have to be available Monday to Saturday. You get very few breaks, and they aren't paid now. It's all about *just in time* and squeezing out any idle time," argues the union rep.

Relations with bosses and customers

Having work rosters set by management is a big stress point in supermarkets, because rostering can be used as a means of punishment. This is especially feared by women workers, not just for the personal inconvenience, but for the upset it can cause to family arrangements.

"The schedule is a reward tool, but more often a punishment tool for the staff: employees who had taken a sick leave, vacations or dared to claim their rights are punished with unfavourable shifts and work days (for example New year's Eve)," complains a report by a Polish gender equality lobbying group⁷.

This relation of dependency on line superiors is a clear breeding ground for high-handedness and a sense of injustice for those who are not in their manager's good books. Jobs may be standardized, but working conditions are clearly personalized. "The work is organized how managers want," as Marlene Benquet sums it up in her book on checkout operators, *Les damnées de la caisse*⁸.

What tips the balance of power even more against employees is the vulnerability to poverty of a growing number of them. Low pay and the spread of short-time – very common among women workers – mean that even workers on permanent contracts find it increasingly hard to make ends meet. Françoise, a trade unionist in a store recently taken over by the Mestdagh-Champion chain, inveighs against the persistent and increasing burden of poverty among her colleagues, especially divorced or separated women who may also be lone mothers. "A growing number of women workers do cash-in-hand cleaning to top up their pay-packets", she says.

"It's a personal belief about what's right and wrong"

Marie-Antoinette is the manager of an Aldi supermarket in a suburb of Liège. Manager and... union steward. Two hats which you might think couldn't be worn together, but in the hard-discounter's Belgian stores they can, because they are managed by an employee without executive status, who can therefore stand as an employee rep in the workplace elections.

"I've worked at Aldi for 28 years. I started as a checkout assistant, and then became an assistant/manager. I set up a shop stewards' committee in the store. I became a manager afterwards, but kept on fighting the union fight. It's a personal belief about what's right and wrong!", says Marie-Antoinette.

It's an unusual situation, but not exceptional. Other Aldi store managers in Belgium are also union officials. But to see this as evidence that the famous German retailer looks benignly on this type of career path would be overstating

the case: "I had to prove that I could be a union steward and manage the store and staff properly; there are certain subtle pressures; I was given to understand that I had to run a tight ship; I get the feeling that managers with union duties have to be more on their toes than others."

As small – up to 15 employees – workplaces staffed mainly by youngish women with few formal qualifications, Aldi supermarkets do not look like naturally fertile ground for trade unionism. But appearances can be deceptive.

"The average union membership rate is close to 80%, and most were already rank-and-file unionists. As soon as they are hired, we organize a 'union welcome day', and the union reps from the different stores meet monthly to swap information. I also do a regular round of a dozen stores in the region to brief staff on new developments, especially in employment law, and give a run-down on the discussions at the last works council and health and safety committee meetings."

It seems that the workers have every confidence in their "union rep-manager" because Marie-Antoinette was re-elected in the May 2012 workplace elections.

The Belgian volume retail industry is highly unionized, but trade union leverage in pay and work organization bargaining seems to be on the wane. Different forms of enforced competition between stores in the same group – some more blatant than others – can be a way of quietly brushing demands under the carpet. The option of choice in Belgium is franchising. The chain contracts out the management of a store to a self-employed manager. He buys the brand's products, but his staff do not come under sector collective agreements. It may be good news for customers, but not for the workers: the employees have no union representation, Sunday work is more common and not paid as overtime, and pay is often lower – up to 30% less.

Customer-facing work can go either way: it can be a risk factor, or promote well-being at work. Many workers complain of abusive language and behaviour by impatient customers, a commonplace occurrence at checkouts and service counters. "Customers want it and they want it now; they don't want to wait.irate customers will also take it out on us if the promotional products they came in specially for have run out," complains Manuel.

9. Elodie Montreuil is the author of *Prévenir les risques psychosociaux. Des outils pour agir sur la pénibilité et préserver la santé au travail* (2011) Dunod, 224 p.

A growing number of women workers do cash-in-hand cleaning to top up their pay-packets.

Conversely, contact with customers can be sustaining, give value to work, be a means of reclaiming ownership of the idea of service that has been obliterated by work organization methods designed to "squeeze out idle time" – read: waste the least possible time on customers. And where productivity demands and the proliferation of control methods (computers, CCTV, etc.) virtually rule out conversations with colleagues, any opportunity to interact with customers is valued.

"They are the last ones you can have a personal contact with. But it's getting harder. Just enough time for a quick 'hello', and then

you cut it short. We don't like it, and nor do the customers, especially the older ones," reflects supermarket deli-counter worker Evelyse.

New technologies

Élodie Montreuil⁹ is a consultant with Secafi, a workplace O&M consultancy for employee representative bodies. In 2009, she was called in by the Health, Safety and Working Conditions Committee of a big supermarket chain that had just put in a bank of four self-service express checkouts.

Lack of social support at work breeds a sense of isolation.

Image: © Martine Zunini



Caring about the environment, but not its employees

Colruyt is a well-known and highly popular supermarket chain in Belgium. The family business, whose current CEO Jef Colruyt was knighted by King Albert II this July, wins good press coverage for its "green business" image. An early adopter in renewable energy, the group announced in 2009 that solar roof panels on its stores and its involvement in wind turbine projects near to its distribution centres and out in the North Sea would probably be able to supply 100% of its energy consumption by the end of 2011.

But while the group is free with its figures and press releases about its carbon footprint, it is much more tight-lipped about its employment and working conditions.

For example: between 2008 and 2011, Colruyt reported an average of 65 employment terminations a year for "frustration of contract" due to a worker's permanent work incapacity on health grounds. This figure classes Colruyt with the "hard discounters" (75 cases at Lidl

and 55 at Aldi compared to 34 at Delhaize and 25 at the Carrefour Market supermarkets). "Most are due to backache, tennis elbow (inflammation of the tendons located near the elbow, *ed.*) and stress. Colruyt complies with the statutory redeployment procedure, but the jobs offered are always at headquarters just outside Brussels, which effectively forces out those who live far away from the capital," complains Eric, a worker representative on Colruyt's works council.

The supermarket group recently replaced its shopping trolleys with models that can hold more. "Management found that even with bigger trolleys than before, customers still filled them to the top," says the union steward. The problem is that in Colruyt supermarkets, customers don't put their items onto a conveyor belt; instead, the checkout assistant has to take the items out of one trolley, scan them, then put them in another empty trolley. They have to do this throughout the working day.

"Even with the old-style trolleys, item handling was a cause of severe musculoskeletal disorders among staff; with the new ones, they have got many times worse because workers have to bend over further to get the items still at the bottom of the trolley," says Eric.

"The introduction of self-checkouts has radically changed the job; it has turned checkout assistants into customer assistants. Some workers felt at a loss to cope with situations they were unprepared for. Their job is actually now to handle four clients at a time instead of one, and deal with problems from the machines going wrong or mistakes by customers unused to them," says the expert on psychosocial risks.

The stress of these situations was compounded by the employee's loss of the protective barrier provided by the conveyor belt. "They found themselves alone, standing face-to-face with multiple customers and no alarm button to hand to call security staff," noted Élodie Montreuil.

The whole industry is now computerized, especially the distribution hubs where workers have become slaves to the machine.

Order pickers no longer get their orders from a line supervisor but are computer-directed via a headset and a speech synthesis voice-picking system that tells them where they should be and what to do at every moment. Pickers no longer manage orders or even goods – they respond to a sequence of coded instructions.

"The two factors that shaped the job of order picking – responsibility for the order and the ability to plan ahead and reconfigure the flow system to put together a 'good pallet' – have gone (...) This purely reactive kind of behaviour is utterly abnormal both physiologically and psychologically. Only machines work like that," says Philippe Davezies, author of an enlightening report on the introduction of this new technology in distribution warehouses¹⁰.

"Because it is anathema to humans to be ordered around by a machine the whole

day long, workers tend to react by speeding up the pace of the voice control," observes Davezies, a research-lecturer in occupational medicine and health at the Lyon 1 University. He explains the paradox: "The gap between the work done and what the worker aspires to creates major distress. Forcing themselves to work faster helps them to stop thinking. It is a defence mechanism common among workers in Taylorist-type work organizations."

The inroads made by these new technologies across the mass retail industry heighten the feeling of dehumanization, the impression that customers and workers are just ciphers. "Everything we do now is controlled. You can't talk with colleagues any more, and you're scared to make a mistake because the computer system can directly identify the employee who made it", concludes Evelyse. ●

10. Davezies P. (2008) *Enjeux de santé liés à l'utilisation de la commande vocale sur les plates-formes logistiques*, Institut universitaire de médecine et santé au travail-Université Claude Bernard-Lyon 1, 47 p.