Spring 2021 Special report Workers in the food chain ● Europe Covid-19, the virus with an aversion to trade unions ● International The bitter taste of Chilean fruit sold in Europe ● From the unions Covid-19: their stories, our story ● Carte blanche Women and lead exposure: a long history
European Parliament votes overwhelmingly for improvements to Carcinogens Directive

With over 94% of the vote, on 25 March 2021 the European Parliament approved significant amendments to the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive. All amendments were suggested by EU trade unions, which have made the fight against occupational cancers one of their priorities.

Among the proposed modifications are an extension of the Directive’s scope to include reprotoxic substances and the inclusion of hazardous medicinal products in its Annex I. A risk-based methodology for setting occupational exposure limit values to make them more protective was also widely supported. Other improvements include obligations imposed on the EU Commission to set up an action plan for the adoption of 25 extra OELs for carcinogens by the end of 2021.

Inter-institutional negotiations are expected to start in May 2021. If confirmed, these changes could come into force in all Member States in 2023.
The Good, the BAD and the Ugly

Tony Musu
ETUI

In early 2020 things turned ugly when the SARS-CoV-2 virus broke into our lives like a house burglar, turning our society upside down. To arrest its progress, most governments have had to introduce unprecedented lockdown measures and restrictions on our freedom. More than a year after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virus has infected more than 136 million individuals and killed three million people worldwide. As this edition of HesaMag goes to press in April 2021, the numbers for the EU27 are 28.4 million people infected and as many as 645 000 deaths.

There are a number of studies clearly showing that work is a major channel of virus transmission. This is hardly surprising, as on average we spend more than 80 per cent of our working time indoors and in contact with other people. Healthcare staff are particularly exposed to the risks of infection from SARS-CoV-2, the causal agent of Covid-19, as are those working in the transport sector (taxi, tram and bus drivers), sales assistants, delivery personnel and all those people who have to work in close proximity to one another in factories, warehouses and abattoirs.

And as far as occupational health is concerned, Covid-19 is no exception to the rule: it is always the precarious jobs that involve the highest risks.

According to a study by the Institut Pasteur, the second biggest source of transmission of Covid-19 (28.8 per cent of infections) is someone in the workplace, just behind family members (33.1 per cent). In the Netherlands, the estimated proportion of infections contracted at work is 15.4 per cent, while one study in Italy places it at 19.4 per cent. Whatever the case, despite the uncertainties surrounding this, there is no doubt that a considerable proportion of infections occur at work, and a certain percentage — one might say a "good" percentage — of infections could be avoided if appropriate preventive measures were introduced at the workplace.

The second biggest source of transmission of Covid-19 is at work.

References:

4. https://oem.bmj.com/content/77/12/818
After all, the prevention of Covid-19 infections is not just a public health issue, as employers’ organisations suggest, in an attempt to let themselves off the hook: it is also an occupational health issue.

A recent report\textsuperscript{5} by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) stresses that: "The SARS epidemics including the recent Covid-19 pandemic [...] have shown that urgent measures are needed to protect workers from the impact of a transmission of infectious diseases from animals to humans" and "a broad range of occupations could be concerned by such diseases, although at the onset this may not have been recognised".

In Europe, we have specific legislation in place to protect workers against biological hazards at the workplace: the Biological Agents Directive\textsuperscript{6} (BAD). Unfortunately, it has to be acknowledged that this legislation, which theoretically applies to all workers in the EU27, has two major failings. The first is that the BAD, adopted more than 20 years ago, is not at all suited to a pandemic situation.

The second concerns the failure to abide by the Directive’s classification system for biological agents. According to the text, biological agents are to be classified into one of four risk groups, based on predefined criteria. The higher the risk group, the stricter are the protective and preventive measures to be taken at workplaces. However, the European Commission classified SARS-CoV-2 in risk group 3, even though at the time it was classified, in June 2020, it met all the specific criteria for group 4, presenting a high risk of spreading without any vaccine or treatment being available. On this basis, in August 2020 a Spanish trade union filed an application with the Court of Justice of the European Union for annulment of the group 3 classification.

This under-classification, probably driven by a fear of imposing on employers the strictest measures, wrongly regarded as obstacles to economic activity, was a terrible mistake. Clearly, a large proportion of infections at work, and consequently within the families of infected workers, could have been avoided by classification in group 4. This would also have issued a strong signal to all employers that the prevention of infections at work needed to be addressed as a most serious matter.

If, as in Sergio Leone’s epic story, we want the Good to win out in the end, this Directive urgently needs amendment — just as all the trade union organisations in Europe have been clamouring for. It must be made fit for the context of a pandemic, to ensure that all European workers benefit from protection and prevention methods that are most appropriate to such a situation.●

The Biological Agents Directive urgently needs amendment.

\textsuperscript{5} Biological agents and prevention of work-related diseases: a review, EU-OSHA, 2020.
\textsuperscript{6} Directive 2000/54/EC.
Analyses and communications of all kinds have monitored the periods of compulsory lockdown we have experienced over the past year, culminating in a collective effort to compile an enormous catalogue of errors and inconsistencies committed by governments, organisations and companies in the management of a predictable crisis — with as yet uncosted consequences that will last for decades to come.

And yet, the world’s first 2 634 386 victims — comprised chiefly of elderly people and staff from care homes — seemed to disappear almost under the radar. It would appear that we have all played a part in sacrificing them, in cowardly fashion, amid a climate of apocalyptic panic. The death of a generation of elderly people, or even just the absence of a moment of silence to mourn them, is likely to weigh heavily on all our consciences.

In light of this “under-the-radar” loss, we should reflect on the fatal effects of an untrammeled policy of privatisation of healthcare and care homes in Europe. A recent report by the Corporate Europe Observatory, for example, states that close to 60 per cent of all deaths in the first wave of Covid-19 infections in European countries are directly linked to elderly people in care homes, and argues that: “squeezing profits for shareholders out of health and care services comes with risks: deteriorating working conditions, worse pay, reduced staff levels, greater workloads, more stress, and shortcuts in training and protective equipment, all of which affect safety and quality of care.”

Deaths in care homes a worldwide tragedy

As early as August 2020, a story on care homes in Belgium highlighted the fatal error of excluding them from the general strategy to counter the pandemic. By denying tests, masks, isolation and access to emergency care for the elderly in hospitals with spare beds, the Belgian authorities unwittingly encouraged the virus to spread, leading to more than 5 700 deaths in the first wave of the pandemic.

1. Tansey R. et al. (2021) When the market becomes deadly: how pressures towards privatisation of health and long-term care put Europe on a poor footing for a pandemic, Brussels, Corporate Europe Observatory.
3. ibid.
and placing the country top of the world rankings in terms of number of deaths per capita. Despite having the finger pointed at it, however, Belgium was not alone in this error of judgement. Figures show that over 40 per cent of the first deaths from Covid-19 in the United States under Donald Trump were also linked to elderly people in long-term care facilities. Meanwhile, the story pointed out, “Spanish prosecutors are investigating cases in which residents were abandoned to die. In Sweden, overwhelmed emergency doctors have acknowledged turning away elderly patients. In Britain, the government ordered thousands of older hospital patients — including some with Covid-19 — sent back to nursing homes to make room for an expected crush of virus cases.”

The journalistic reflex is to point the finger at mismanagement in order to identify those responsible and bring about redress, but it is also useful to highlight a few examples where things turned out very much for

### Number of deaths caused by Covid-19 worldwide as of 11 March 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Deaths from Covid-19</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>846 636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>784 156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>488 498</td>
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<tr>
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<td>407 099</td>
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<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>106 893</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>1 099</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2 634 386</strong></td>
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The death of a generation of elderly people, or even just the absence of a moment of silence to mourn them, is likely to weigh heavily on all our consciences.
the better in similar circumstances. One such example is the Mariemont care home (Belgium), which was founded in 1985 by the socialist and Christian mutual health insurance funds and trade unions, initially to save jobs that were threatened following the closure, by ministerial decision, of a small public hospital specialised in caring for minersworkers with silicosis. "The key thing that differentiates us from multinational companies answerable to shareholders is that we are a non-profit partnership comprising volunteer directors," explains Martine Ranica, the Chair of Maison de Mariemont. "Whereas elsewhere profits are used to pay dividends to investors, in our care home the profits are fully invested to improve residents’ lives and staff working conditions. Unlike authorities that are subject to strict rules authorising calls for tenders, we were able to react very quickly to purchase protective equipment for all residents and staff. As a result, we didn’t have a single case in the first wave. In the second wave, we had to isolate families and staff to contain the spread. We invested in tablet computers and training for carers to encourage virtual meetings between residents and their nearest and dearest. As I speak, over 90 per cent of our residents have been vaccinated. Our chief aim is to ensure everyone’s wellbeing."

A similar message from the Netherlands on the importance of social dialogue and the absence of a profit motive is provided by LOC Waardevolle zorg ("valuable care"), a non-profit network set up in 1978 and maintained by a thousand "users’ councils" (cliëntenraden) representing, in total, more than 600 000 people involved in the care sector. When questioned on the network’s acute emergency management of Covid-19, coordinator Thom van Woerkom has clear memories of the telephone call received by his colleague on 17 March 2020. "It was around 10 in the morning; we were having a leisurely bite to eat when we had an urgent call from an official in the Health Minister’s office. He explained that there would be a meeting in 30 minutes with the Minister. The only point on the agenda was the closure of the centres to visitors. We were in shock. No one could visit their nearest and dearest, and no one could leave the care homes; it was like a prison for the residents and those to whom they were closest on the outside. Two weeks later, we held a consultation with the members of the Management Board, the works council, and the users’ council, and made an initial tripartite recommendation to the authorities for regional re-evaluation of infections coupled with a gradual re-opening. On 25 May, some establishments had already secured controlled relaxations, whereas in other countries care homes still had to be in full lockdown."

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**PPE and stable jobs**

A recent scientific study6 goes even further, stating that death rates from Covid-19 are lower in care homes where staff are unionised than in others where there is no employee representation. Using cross-sectional regression analysis to examine the association between the presence of healthcare workers and Covid-19 mortality rates in 355 care homes in New York State, researchers showed that the mortality rate was 1.29 percentage points lower in care homes where unions were present, representing, according to the study, a relative reduction in the mortality rate among residents of 30 per cent compared to similar facilities without unions. Unions are known to facilitate access to personal protective equipment (PPE), one mechanism that may explain the link between the presence of unionised staff and lower Covid-19 mortality rates. Another explanation relates to the fact that unions generally demand high staff-to-patient ratios, paid sick leave, and higher wage and benefit levels. They educate workers about their health and safety rights, demand that employers reduce risk of exposure to known hazards, and give workers a collective voice that can improve communication with employers. In a care home, these elements result in lower staff turnover and therefore restrict virus transmission. In Sweden, for example, the high proportion of temporary workers (on hourly contracts) working in multiple care facilities is cited as contributing to the virus’ rapid spread. PPE and a low infection rate would appear to be the two main positive effects that proper workplace representation in care homes can have; apparently Covid-19 is a virus with a particular aversion to trade unions.

These are positive examples illustrating the flexibility and pragmatism necessary for effectively responding to health emergencies in care homes in a way that ensures the physical and mental wellbeing of the elderly. As a point of contrast, perhaps we should also touch upon an example of the management of for-profit facilities.

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Almost one year after entering lockdown, the Spanish government broke one of the great information taboos associated with the pandemic by officially announcing that “since the beginning of the pandemic, 29,408 people have died in care homes after contracting the coronavirus”, accounting for more than 40 percent of the 72,085 deaths in the country to date. But for some, this explosion in the mortality rate was not the biggest concern. In an article for magazine *Viento Sur*, Raúl Camargo, former left-wing member of the Spanish parliament, deplored the words of one Spanish employer organisation which had voiced its regrets that an economically “unproductive” group (i.e. the elderly) may have delayed economic recovery and damaged businesses. Camargo linked this brutal economic logic to the presence of “vulture funds” in the Spanish elderly care homes market (*residencias de mayores*), explaining how French companies were taking advantage of deregulation and privatisation of the sector to cream off profits for their shareholders. And with more than 8.7 million Spaniards over the age of 65 and only 12,263 available beds, Spain is naturally regarded as a highly lucrative market. However, moving beyond the case of Spain alone, the continuing pressure for deregulation, to the private sector’s benefit, is also present at European level, even at the height of the epidemic.

As soon as the pandemic is behind us, some people will undoubtedly, and quite justifiably, rush out to bars and restaurants to celebrate. Others will also spend time visiting the graveyard to say a proper goodbye to their loved ones who died in care homes: the people most forgotten in this crisis the world over. It’s always easy to turn the page. But it’s difficult to hide the dead… especially when all of us bear some of the guilt.

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*Trade unions educate workers about their health and safety rights.*

A recent scientific study shows that death rates from Covid-19 are lower in care homes where staff are unionised than in others where there is no employee representation.

Photo: © Belga
Workers in the food chain

Special report coordinated by Tony Musu and Mehmet Koksal
The next time you see an attractively packaged food product in a supermarket or an advertisement, take a moment to think about all the links in the chain that that product passed through to get to you. To help stimulate the thought process, this special report offers you an insight into the daily lives of the food chain workers, who are sometimes forced to take disproportionate risks to meet our needs for food.

To whet your appetite, Tony Musu sits down with the General Secretary of EFFAT (European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions) to discuss the future of the European agricultural model, providing us with some pointers for a much-needed update. Next, Bethany Staunton takes a hard look at the meat industry and the catastrophic impact of Covid-19 on workers, which prompted Germany’s legislature to introduce a ban on subcontracting. Berta Chulvi and Tania Castro investigate the working conditions of seasonal migrant labourers working for agri-food producers in Spain. Hugo Bourvier and Sadak Souici report on fishing, from the lowering to the hauling in of the nets, with the only fisherwoman in Lorient, France. We stay offshore with Angelo Ferracuti for a very moving article remembering the Italian fishermen who have perished at sea. Laura-Maria Ilie and Florentin Cassonnet look into the situation of Romania’s small farmers, who are facing up to strong competition from European supermarkets. Bianca Luna Fabris tells us about the day-to-day lives of bicycle couriers in the United Kingdom who earn a meagre wage while now also having to deal with the virus. Lastly, Louise Pluyaud meets disabled workers in the catering sector, and the restaurateurs who are doing things differently to support them. We look forward to hearing your views. Bon appétit!
Kristjan Bragason, elected General Secretary of the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) at its Zagreb congress in November 2019, has a lot of issues on his desk, covering everything from reform of the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to its "Farm to Fork" Strategy, not to mention collective bargaining, labour mobility, gender equality and occupational safety and health. The main objective of EFFAT is to defend the interests of the 25 million workers it represents. We met with Bragason to talk about working conditions in agriculture and the problems caused by massive pesticide use.

According to Eurostat figures, agriculture is one of the most dangerous sectors in Europe to work in, with a high rate of accidents, occupational illnesses and deaths. What are the main occupational safety and health issues facing agricultural workers?

Agriculture encompasses a wide range of occupations, but there are some problems common to them all, for example musculoskeletal disorders due to repetitive movements or the carrying of loads, and accidents caused by the numerous kinds of equipment and machinery used. Because our jobs are mostly done out of doors, skin cancers from exposure to the sun are also very common. There is also a lot of precarious and undeclared employment in agriculture. Working hours are typically very long, which only makes the problems worse. In agriculture or forestry, workers perform certain kinds of labour alone, and if there is an accident it takes longer for help to arrive. Deaths are thus far more likely. In intensive farming for meat production or in aquaculture, we have zoonoses (infectious diseases transmissible from animals to humans). Given that enormous quantities of antibiotics are used, exposure to pathogens that are resistant to antimicrobials is another major risk to workers’ health in this sector.
And then, of course, we have all the health problems linked to the massive amounts of pesticides that farmers use. Official statistics for our industry record about 1,000 work-related deaths and 150,000 accidents every year in the EU-27, but these figures are certainly underestimates.

EFFAT has worked for years at European level to represent and look after workers in the food production chain. What is the most difficult situation you have been called on to manage in recent years?

Without doubt, it is the Covid-19 crisis we are living through at the moment. The whole food industry is, of course, part of the essential activities which cannot stop. In some businesses such as abattoirs and meat-packing companies, employees work in close proximity to one another in enclosed air-conditioned premises. These are real breeding grounds for infection and propagation of the virus. Employment there is precarious and not very unionised, and workers do not know their rights, so it is extremely difficult to enforce prevention1.

Pesticides can cause a range of health problems for workers exposed to them: skin irritation, allergies, poisoning, reproductive disorders like sterility or congenital malformations, cancers, etc. How could these problems be prevented?

Many users are unaware of the dangers they face. Workers are not sufficiently informed and trained in the use of pesticides, especially workers who are self-employed or illegal. Protective equipment is often inadequate, and its costs are illegally deducted from wages. The health problems linked to the use of pesticides and other hazardous chemicals are obvious but difficult to report, so one of EFFAT’s main demands is that every farm worker should have an official record of those s/he has used during his/her career. Above all, there are inadequacies in the law and the rules on the sale of these products, both nationally and at European level. Pesticides are supposed to be free of substances harmful to human health or the environment, but sadly that is still not the case. So we need to use less of these products in agriculture and tighten up the rules governing their sale, so that there is less exposure. Hazardous pesticides pollute the soil and groundwater and reduce biodiversity. Moreover, their residues are found in the food we eat. The solution is reducing the quantities used and introducing stricter licensing rules, not only for workers’ health but also for consumers and the environment. But it must be said that there is a lack of political will to make real changes in the use of pesticides in Europe. The agrochemicals lobby is extremely powerful and is able to influence both EU and national law-making. In addition, many pesticides banned in the EU are detected in food imported into the EU market. This must be prevented as it affects competition and consumers’ health. Under the Farm to Fork Strategy, the EU has committed to set a trade policy that supports a just transition and at the same time promotes a global transition to sustainable agri-food systems. These goals must now be pursued with determination. Here at EFFAT, we expect the EU to take the lead in stopping support for any practices that jeopardise human health and biodiversity.

Glyphosate, the herbicide most widely used worldwide, is highly controversial. Its manufacturers, including Bayer-Monsanto, claim that glyphosate and its commercial formulations are not harmful to health, whilst the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classifies glyphosate as probably carcinogenic to humans. Renewal of its licence in the EU will be debated in 2022. Where does EFFAT stand on glyphosate?

EFFAT calls for an immediate ban on glyphosate in the renewal process, which ends in 2022. Farmers will need to receive the necessary assistance to adapt to alternatives, but there is now enough evidence of the harmful effects of this herbicide (see box) to justify its removal from the market. We can’t have workers risking their lives by using glyphosate. Protecting their health is our number one priority along with safeguarding their jobs. In the debate about the renewal of its authorisation, workers’ health and safety must be central. This herbicide also raises the question of what kind of agriculture we want to promote in the EU. Glyphosate encourages monocropping and intensive farming, and it accelerates loss of biodiversity. We need a more sustainable approach to agriculture both in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Simply banning glyphosate in Europe will not achieve this on its own. A worldwide ban is needed too. The way to do it could be through trade agreements which don’t allow the importation of agricultural products containing glyphosate residues. That would also stop unfair competition from countries that still use glyphosate to keep production costs down.

Are there alternatives to glyphosate?

There are, and there could be even more if the agrochemicals industry was incentivised to invest more in research and development on alternatives to synthetic herbicides. An EU ban on glyphosate would probably trigger such investments. Weed control is possible without glyphosate or other chemicals of the same type. Crop rotation using a precise order is one of the oldest weed management measures of all. With mixed cropping, you plant several crops at the

"There is a lot of precarious and undeclared employment in agriculture."
between declared intentions and what actually happens. One of the aims of the Farm to Fork Strategy is to use funds from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to help farmers reduce their environmental impact and achieve the other goals set in the strategy. But in the ongoing CAP revision this ambition was not at all reflected in the positions of the European Parliament and the Council. For example, 80 per cent of CAP funds go to 20 per cent of the wealthiest farmers who continue to practise intensive farming. Another example: the European Union wants to reduce use of the most hazardous pesticides, but at the same time it signs a free trade agreement with Mercosur (a common market of several South American countries) which allows the importation into Europe of agricultural products grown there using dozens of pesticides that are banned here. So there’s a disconnect between the declared objectives and what actually happens. What is missing from this Farm to Fork Strategy and the CAP is a true social dimension. The European Commission should also set itself ambitious goals to safeguard agricultural workers’ social rights. There must be more coherence between different EU policies. In practice, this means that the objectives and principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights should be reflected in the CAP. Financial aid to farmers under the CAP should be made conditional on their respect of ILO conventions, national and EU labour law, and collective bargaining agreements. EFFAT is pressing for this “social conditionality” clause to be included in the final text of the CAP reform currently under interinstitutional negotiation at EU level. The clause is ethically necessary, it would tackle social dumping, and it is also the only way of ensuring that a substantial part of the EU budget is spent on improving working conditions in one of our economy’s most precarious sectors.

Why and how should the public take an interest in these highly specialised issues?

Yes, these are specialised issues, and we have a duty to translate them into language that everyone can understand. But, above all, they are political. The main problem in agriculture today and throughout the food production chain is the mad scramble to produce food as cheaply as possible. The environmental and social consequences of this approach are inevitable: soil erosion, biodiversity loss, labour exploitation, wage theft, and other labour abuses. It leads to a flouting of health and environmental rules,
"What is missing from this ‘Farm to Fork’ Strategy and the Common Agricultural Policy is a true social dimension."

and all the problems we’ve already talked about. Conventional agriculture is not sustainable. What kind of agriculture do we want for tomorrow’s world? How can we move things towards a model that shows greater respect for workers and our environment? It is a matter that concerns us all, and these are questions that each and every citizen of Europe should reflect on.

What role do you think trade unions should play in these areas?

Trade unions have an important role to play. The absolutely necessary digital and green transitions are expected to be disruptive for the agriculture sector. Our role is to make sure that the social dimension is taken on board throughout this process and that nobody is left behind. We stand side by side with the most vulnerable. Our job is to safeguard workers and ensure that their living and working conditions are good. That requires policies and laws that are fit for purpose. We are fighting to secure a ban on the most hazardous pesticides while protecting the competitiveness of the European agro-food sector in order to safeguard jobs and ensure that workers are treated with dignity and respect. Agriculture and all occupations in the food production chain are essential to our economy but also to our wellbeing. People in Europe need food security and a healthy environment and food. Agriculture must not disappear from Europe. The EU realises that our agriculture has to move towards a model that is more robust, more resilient and more sustainable. The trade unions will be an essential force in driving forward this change.

Glyphosate timeline

1974  Monsanto puts its first glyphosate-based herbicides, including Roundup, on the market. This active substance is a “total herbicide”, meaning that it acts on all plants.

2000  The patent for glyphosate enters the public domain and is marketed by numerous manufacturers.

2015  The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), part of the World Health Organization (WHO), classifies glyphosate as “probably carcinogenic to humans”.

2016  EFFAT launches a campaign to have glyphosate banned in Europe.

2017  Glyphosate is again licensed for sale on the European market up to 15 December 2022. Renewal is based on assessments by the European bodies responsible for regulating chemical risks (the European Chemicals Agency, ECHA) and pesticides (the European Food Safety Authority, EFSA).

The "Monsanto Papers" released as part of a lawsuit in the USA show that Monsanto manipulated the scientific debate and misled the public about the dangers of glyphosate.

2018  The German Bayer group acquires Monsanto for 66 billion dollars.

Dewayne Johnson, an American gardener who blames glyphosate for his cancer, is the first private individual to win his case against Bayer. The manufacturer is ordered to pay him 78 million dollars.

2019  An independent meta-analysis* shows that workers with high exposure to glyphosate-based herbicides have a 41 per cent higher risk of developing non-Hodgkin lymphoma (NHL, a rare form of blood cancer). Another study** of 315 000 European farm workers using glyphosate also found an increased risk of developing NHL.

On 10 May, an EU Assessment Group on Glyphosate (AGG) is appointed, comprising four EU Member States (France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden). Their role is to act jointly as rapporteurs on the herbicide. The AGG will deliver an opinion by June 2021.

On 12 December, the Glyphosate Renewal Group (a group of companies seeking the renewal of the approval of glyphosate in the EU) applies for a post-2022 licence to the AGG, the other Member States, EFSA and the European Commission. This application formally initiates the renewal process in the EU as provided for by Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009.

2020  Bayer announces that it will pay up to 9.6 million dollars to settle glyphosate-related litigation before the American courts, involving approximately 125 000 claims.

2021  Glyphosate remains the world’s most widely sold herbicide, with more than 850 000 tonnes used each year. Some countries have already banned it, however: Vietnam, Mexico and Luxembourg. Germany has announced a total ban from 2024.

2022  The European Commission will lay a proposal before the Twenty-Seven on whether or not the licence for glyphosate should be renewed.


Change a long time coming for subcontracted slaughterhouse workers

Germany’s new Occupational Safety and Health Inspection Act, passed in December 2020, has banned subcontracting in the meat industry, a practice that was exploited on a large scale to hire migrant workers on less favourable terms and conditions. In an industry that has long been dogged by harrowing tales of working conditions, a mass outbreak of Covid-19 in a meatpacking plant became a catalyst for reform. The Act is an important milestone for the sector not just in Germany but across Europe, where pressure along the supply chain has created similar problems in multiple countries.

Bethany Staunton
ETUI

Many factors make abattoirs particularly susceptible to transmission.
Photo: © Martine Zunini
"On the killing beds you were apt to be covered with blood, and it would freeze solid; if you leaned against a pillar, you would freeze to that, and if you put your hand upon the blade of your knife, you would run a chance of leaving your skin on it."

Upton Sinclair's classic American novel *The Jungle*, the story of an immigrant family from Lithuania working in the abattoirs of Chicago, was published in 1906 to both critical acclaim and public outrage due to its unflinching portrayal of the dire conditions in a meat industry dominated by big business and rife with exploitation and unsanitary practices.

Fast-forward over a century later, to June 2020. A mass Covid-19 outbreak in a meatpacking plant in the North Rhine-Westphalia region of Germany makes the issue of working conditions in the meat industry into the spotlight once again. More than 1500 workers, out of a 7000-strong workforce, test positive, leading to lockdowns of the nearby districts of Gütersloh and Warendorf and a lot of bad publicity for the plant's owner, the Tönnies Group. Tönnies is a behemoth in the German meat industry, far surpassing its closest competitors Vion and Westfleisch in workforce size, market share and turnover (7.3 billion euros in 2019, according to the company).

Many factors make abattoirs particularly susceptible to transmission, even in the best of conditions. "They stand shoulder to shoulder, sweating due to the hard work," says Johannes Specht, head of collective bargaining at the Food, Beverages and Catering Union (NGG), which represents meat industry workers in Germany. "They breathe deeply, it's air-conditioned and cold." However, it soon became clear that workers were labouring in circumstances that were far from "the best of conditions." In fact, what also helped the virus to spread so easily was the fact that many of them were living together in cramped quarters and travelling to the plant together in shared cars or public transport. Why? Because they were migrant workers, primarily from Romania, Poland and Bulgaria, hired indirectly by "subcontracting agencies" to work at the slaughterhouse. Suddenly, *The Jungle* didn't seem like ancient history anymore.

An open secret

Germany is renowned for its strong industrial relations system. Yet over the past few decades, companies in the meat sector have managed to find holes in the fabric of this system by hiring workers under various "alternative" forms of contract, such as subcontracted, temporary agency and posted work. Official information about the incidence of contract workers in the meat industry is only available for some companies, but Specht estimates that in 2020 some 30-35,000 workers (around one third of the meat industry workforce) had a precarious status, in some plants accounting for up to 80-90% of the workforce. Specht explains the implications of this: "Tönnies is not at all responsible for any of their working or living conditions. [The company's] line is: 'My main workforce is not mine'. Covid-19 put a spotlight on the situation."

It became clear from multiple research and investigative reports that subcontracting in this sector had become a business in itself. In their work on this topic, researchers Dorothee Bohle and Cornel Ban discovered this system to be sustained by a vast and complex "archipelago of recruiters". Bohle, professor of social and political change at the European University Institute, explains how "almost mafia-like subcontractors recruit and channel people to more powerful middlemen," who have contracts with the large German companies. In fact, "mafia-like" is a term that often comes up in interviews in reference to what Ban, associate professor at Copenhagen Business School, calls the "understudied actors of big meat" — from German multinationals to small-time recruiters in Romanian villages. In Bohle's words: "everybody benefits."

Such a system of precarious contracts made the monitoring of conditions and accordance with labour law that much more difficult. One of the biggest problems was working time: according to trade union sources, workers had often been found to be working 10, 12, even 16 hours a day. The next and related issue was pay. Despite the introduction of a statutory minimum wage in Germany in 2015 (currently €9.35, which is already lower than other western EU countries), unpaid overtime and unjust subtractions from salaries for living and travel costs meant that these workers were often earning far below what they should have been. This migrant, casual workforce was also to a great extent blocked from workplace representation. As Armin Wiese, NGG Detmold-Paderborn managing director and officer responsible for the Tönnies plant, explains, "The subcontracted workers could not participate in the [works council] election [with some exceptions]. As a result, these employees were not seen as part of their own workforce and therefore less responsibility was shown towards them." This, combined with "language barriers, a large fluctuation, and the poor experience of eastern European workers in their homelands with trade unions," made this mobile workforce a difficult group to organise. Finally, the problematic health and safety situation was further exacerbated by a low rate of workplace inspections, which were critiqued for often being announced in advance, giving the employers time to prepare.

Feeling the pressure

According to Thorsten Schulten, head of the collective agreements archive of the Institute of Economic and Social Research (WSI), things weren't always this way: "Up until the 1990s, we had branch-level collective agreements, so there was relatively high coverage. But then the whole system changed." The German meat industry began to rely heavily on labour from eastern European countries working in the abattoirs: the human cost

Europe, first via bilateral quota agreements with individual countries, before these were rendered unnecessary by the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007. The Posted Workers Directive (1996) gave workers and agencies the “freedom to provide services” in another EU country, while remaining under the labour law and social security system of their home country. In the absence of a statutory minimum wage in Germany (until 2015), this also meant workers could be paid the (far lower) pay rates of the sending country. In 2015, German firms agreed to stop using posted workers, instead turning to subcontractors based in Germany — now migrant workers were employed according to German law, but critics maintained that unlawful practices on the part of subcontractors, together with these large companies’ abdication of employer responsibility, meant that abuses continued.

Schulten is adamant: “The German meat industry has been following a wage dumping strategy and been very successful at it. The whole business model relies on cheap labour.” In his view, the reinstatement of industry-level bargaining is a vital element to achieving true reform.

But this is not just about Germany. After a reflective pause, the NGG’s Johannes Specht comments: “Trade unions in many countries are very interested in what is happening here because Tönnies was putting pressure not only in Germany but also in other countries because it was the number one producer. The NGG was even sometimes blamed because slaughterhouses elsewhere kept being closed down.” This is something that Enrico Somaglia, deputy general secretary of the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT), would concur with: “A very negative process has developed around Europe, because to remain competitive, in other countries the sector had to launch similar processes like subcontracting. Our affiliates complain a lot because a lot of jobs have been lost due to the unfair competition in Germany.” This process has been further intensified by the development of large retail chains with greater bargaining power, which demand cheap meat and a lot of it; Bohle points in particular to the influence of such German discounters as Aldi and Lidl, which she calls a “special breed” due to their emphasis on bargain prices. In this chain of pressure to maximise profits and drive down labour costs, the sector’s firms, workers and trade unions across the continent all feel the heat.

According to the “Meat-up Ffire” report, an EU-financed research project on the pork value chain, compared to Germany, several other meat-producing countries, particularly in northern Europe, have maintained higher labour costs and wider collective bargaining coverage in this sector. In Denmark, for example, a very high unionisation rate and an absence of subcontracting has kept slaughterhouse workers, both native and migrant, better protected. But such an industrial relations landscape is, unsurprisingly, not always seen as the most “favourable” environment for big business. Multinationals such as Danish Crown (Denmark) and Vion (the Netherlands) have moved many of their facilities to Germany over the years. In Belgium, where the labour costs in the industry are also comparatively higher and a binding industry-level agreement is in place, companies also began to relocate or subcontract activities to Germany. This actually culminated in a formal complaint about unfair competition and social dumping from the Belgian economy and employment ministers to the European Commission in 2013. In Italy, meanwhile, the sector is more fragmented into smaller businesses, trade unions are facing issues of “bogus co-operatives” and what EFFAT calls “collective bargaining dumping” — meaning the application of less favourable collective agreements than those in the meat sector through subcontracting to the “multi-service” companies. These are just some of the ways that companies are trying to compete in a highly competitive European (and global) context. In the words of Somaglia, “The meat sector is facing major challenges everywhere in Europe.”

A new chapter?

However, the wind could finally be blowing in the right direction for those pushing for reform. In December 2020, the Bundestag (German parliament) passed the Occupational Safety and Health Inspection Act (Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz), which immediately banned subcontracting in the meat industry (with a further ban on temporary agency work as of April 2021), as well as obliging the electronic recording of working hours and introducing a minimum workplace inspection rate, amongst other measures.

But will it be enough? Despite celebrating this watershed moment, unions still have many concerns, and not without cause. After all, hopes have been falsely raised before. Enrico Somaglia remembers, “In 2015, German companies committed to not using posted workers anymore. And in
the same year, we had the introduction of the minimum wage in Germany. And we all thought, ‘Ok now in Germany, it’s over. There is no exploitation anymore.’ But then they started with subcontracting.”

The fear now is that companies will find ever-inventive ways of evading this new law. Before it was even passed, Tönnies was reported to have founded 15 subsidiaries with fewer employees. While there is still much debate about whether this action would be successful or was even intended to circumvent the lower employee threshold for the contract ban — Tönnies declared that this did not disprove its intention to hire employees directly — the NGG remains on guard. Meanwhile, the vast network of intermediaries studied by Bohle and Ban will most likely not be disappearing into thin air. As Bohle points out, “Where these major players are, these middlemen also own part of the real estate that is then rented to migrant workers. So they cannot disappear from there.” And the companies themselves could start moving more facilities to other countries. In September 2020, there were reports of Tönnies planning a €75 million investment in a new pork-processing plant in Spain. Finally, as is clear from all of the above, working conditions in the meat industry is not just a German but a European problem, meaning that European solutions may be required. Bohle is certainly convinced of this: “[These practices] are going to be reproduced in other countries unless there is really a European re-regulation of these working relations.”

And this is exactly what EFFAT is fighting for. The organisation published “10 demands for action at EU level” which include “regulating the use of subcontracting in the meat sector” and “instituting a system of full chain liability covering both cross-border and domestic situations”, “a legally binding EU instrument ensuring decent housing for all mobile workers”, and “the urgent introduction of a European Social Security Number” to make it easier to perform checks on pay and conditions. In light of the chronic problem of ineffective workplace inspections, EFFAT are also calling for the greater empowerment of the European Labour Authority to carry out cross-border inspections. On this point, Wiebke Warneck, EFFAT’s Political Secretary for the food, drink and tobacco sector, emphasises the importance of looking at the bigger picture: “Generally speaking, we don’t have enough controls throughout Europe — the first big cut of labour inspectors came with the financial crisis. And it’s not just an issue in meat. It’s not just an issue in Germany.”

Infamy has long dogged this industry, peaking at various moments in history, often due to consumer, environmental or animal welfare concerns. Sinclair’s novel was a catalyst for the introduction of new food safety legislation in the United States. But the writer felt frustrated that his focus on working conditions went largely unaddressed, famously declaring: “I aimed for the public’s heart, and by accident hit it in the stomach.” This is a form of “dirty, difficult and dangerous” labour that we prefer not to speak of, that we outsource to the most vulnerable in our society who take on the burden of intense physical and psychological strain that it can involve. The enforcement of truly effective measures to protect them could mean a moment of reckoning for the entire industry.

FURTHER READING
EFFAT (2020b) Hungry for fairness: raising standards in the meat sector EFFAT’s 10 demands for action at EU level, adopted by the Executive Committee on 10 September 2020, Brussels, European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions.
The "orchard of Europe" is the nickname generally given to the region of Murcia on the south-eastern coast of Spain: its agricultural produce accounts for half of its exports. But appalling working conditions often lie behind its food production.

Serfdom in the orchard of Europe

Berta Chulvi
Journalist
Tania Castro
Photographer

It is already seven o'clock in the evening on Friday 27 November, and Octavio still does not know whether he will be working tomorrow. As usual, he is waiting for a WhatsApp message from his group leader. Sooner or later, he will receive a message telling him whether the rendezvous is at three or four o'clock tomorrow morning and where the bus will be stopping this time. It is common for farm labourers in Murcia to have between one and three hours' journey to work every day. Octavio, the migrant worker we have asked to follow throughout his day, normally works six days a week. He soon finds out, however, that he will not be working the next day, Saturday: "Sometimes it's nine o'clock before we find out," he complains. Octavio and his wife are from Peru. They came to Spain eight years ago. Like her husband, Octavio's wife also makes her living by working in the fields, through a temporary employment agency that calls if it needs her: if she does not receive a message, that means she is not working the next day. Her phone remains completely silent too. Octavio and his wife live entirely at the mercy of their work, and so does their three-year-old daughter.

If they had been required to work, they would have taken their daughter, wrapped in a little blanket, to her childminder at two o'clock in the morning. So it is not until after seven o'clock that the childminder also finds out that she will not be looking after the little girl the following day.

For Octavio, a day without work means one day's pay less at the end of the month, which will be reflected in a lower wage calculated on an annual basis. Octavio does not know how much he will have earned by the end of the year, even though his "permanent seasonal contract" specifies 40 working hours a week for 10 months a year. In the Murcian countryside and in other regions of Spain, it is very common for workers on permanent seasonal contracts to end the year with a lower total number of hours than expected. This is allowed by two particular clauses in the collective agreement for lettuce- and tomato-growing companies in the region of Murcia: the first provides that the call to work can be on a daily basis; the second specifies that days actually worked depend on "soil condition, the degree of ripening of the produce, orders, weather conditions, etc."

If you do not agree to be paid by the piece, you are just not called in to work.

Making actual hours worked reliant on orders, when this variable depends on many different factors, such as the company's business know-how and its pricing policy, theoretically infringes Article 30 of the Law on the Workers' Statute, the main piece of legislation governing workers' rights in Spain. Under the heading "Impossibility of performance", Article 30 provides that, if the employer is late in allocating tasks to the worker for reasons attributable to the employer, even though the contract

1. Not the worker's real name, to preserve his anonymity.
After getting out of the bus in the middle of the night, the workers change their clothes in the open air: there are no indoor changing facilities. We see them taking off their shoes and pulling plastic bags on between their socks and their boots to keep themselves dry, as the soil is drenched. Some of them actually wrap their shoes in plastic. They are all carrying backpacks and water bottles because they are not provided with food and water. Under health and safety legislation, water, lockers, toilets and canteens should be available to workers, 13 hours of work lying ahead for the adults, of which, at best, seven will be paid, because travelling time is not counted. Under the collective agreement, farmers are to pay them a rate of 6.93 euros an hour, but the working time regulations are a dead letter, because in practice the labourers are paid piece rates. The farmers call this mode of payment “incentive wages” and claim that they are consciously chosen by the worker, but the truth is more prosaic: if you do not agree to be paid by the piece, you are just not called in to work.  

between them is in force, the worker is still entitled to the wage, and no subsequent task may be imposed on him or her to offset the work lost. The legal sources consulted for this article stress that the two clauses of the collective agreement mentioned above should apply only in cases of force majeure (major weather events, failed harvests, etc.) but that they are often applied in ordinary circumstances.

**Thirteen hours of work and only seven paid**

As Octavio is not working this Saturday, Oscar Rommel, the trade union representative from the CCOO (Workers’ Commissions) confederation, introduces us to another worker we will be able to follow for a full day, a Moroccan called Amin (again, not his real name). We follow the bus that picks him up from a supermarket car park at four o’clock in the morning.  

"To get to the bus stop by four o’clock, you have to be up by two at the latest, because before you leave you have to prepare some food. That’s if you don’t have to take your kids to a childminder." Oscar’s wife also works in the fields, and this is how they have brought up their daughters. In the Murcian countryside, it is not uncommon to see mothers pushing prams through the villages in the middle of the night. These treks with the children are a foretaste of the
but, like so many other things, it seems that labour law has never reached Murcia.

The workers pile up their backpacks in a roofed-over area the company calls the "dining room", although the few seats are taped off in line with Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. It had rained so hard the previous day that the bus cannot drive into the farm. The workers have to cover the rest of the route on foot, first to the "dining room" and then another kilometre towards some lights in the middle of the site.

You can hardly make out the silhouettes of the workers. But you can see two white shapes, two container-like units on wheels, which the workers call "platforms". This is where the lettuces they pick out of the ground are packaged to be sent to a supermarket on the other side of Europe. The whole team has to work at the same rate as the platform. Amin and the 17 other people in his team get down to work. Together, between seven o’clock in the morning and four in the afternoon that day (with a 20 minute break for lunch), they will harvest a total of 26,680 lettuces. Each of them will have crouched down and stood back up 1,569 times to put a lettuce onto the machine: crouching down, taking two or three steps, struggling to raise their mud-caked boots, with a packet of plastic bags for the lettuces hanging from their waists, adding to the weight. It plays hell with their knees and their lower backs, and all they get for it today is 60 euros. Each day, when he gets home from work, Amin notes down his earnings in his little notebook. Some days he earns 30 euros, others 70. He rarely exceeds 950 euros gross a month. In any case, he does not have a guaranteed wage for each day of toil.

No mobile phones

On the farms, workers who have left their children many kilometres away cannot keep their mobile phones on them. It is as though, once they are on site, they no longer have a personal life. "If you want to be contactable in case something happens to your kid, you have to break the company rule: banning mobile phones," explains union rep Oscar Rommel. The company upholds this ban with the excuse that people can contact its offices in case of emergency: "If something happens to my son, the company has to find out which team I’m in, and where. We start work at seven o’clock and the offices don’t open until nine."

The ban on mobile phones was brought in three years ago to prevent the farm labourers from filming their working conditions and sharing them. The union representatives have also been banned from taking photos on their mobiles, but they have refused to comply.

They complain about the lack of respect and the authoritarianism both out in the fields and in the greenhouses and depots. In one of the greenhouses, a Spanish woman tells us: "rather than calling us by name, they whistle". Reprimands and punishments are also regularly meted out. One worker was laid off for three days because she had forgotten to shut the greenhouse door.

The sword of Damocles: the temp agency

It is illegal to use temporary workers if, at the same time, company employees are idle, but no one monitors the application of this rule, and the sanctions imposed by the inspectorate when trade unions raise the issue are derisory. Temporary workers are under contract with temporary employment agencies and made available to other companies. They have hardly any employment rights.

Ángel Torregrosa, who has been working in this sector for over 30 years, is clear about it: "Since temporary employment agencies and piece work came on the scene, job insecurity has increased relentlessly."

As luck would have it, the bus Amin is travelling on is heading for a farm a few kilometres from the one where Octavio would have been working if he had not been placed on leave. We go over to see what is happening and ascertain that Octavio’s place has indeed been taken by temporary workers. They are easily identified because they wear orange jackets, whereas the company staff’s jackets are yellow.

This colour distinction is another subtle element of an elaborate technique of work organisation. It reminds temps that they are second-class workers, and workers on a permanent seasonal contract that, if they protest, they will be replaced by temps. At a farm labourers’ meeting, two women and two men confirm this interpretation: "We don’t even talk to the temps," explains a farm employee from north Africa. "When we protest, they threaten to replace us with temps," comments one of the women.

José María López, Secretary of the Murcia section of the CCOO responsible for occupational health, provides us with figures on the use of temporary workers in the region. Between January and September, no fewer than 357,694 secondment agreements (in other words, temporary employment contracts) were concluded. In Spain, only Catalonia beats the Murcia region, with a further 27,963 such contracts signed over the same period. To realise the significance of temporary employment agencies in the
"When we protest, they threaten to replace us with temps."

region of Murcia, it is sufficient to compare these figures with the total number of contracts signed in each of these regions: according to State Public Employment Service data, in Catalonia, over the same period, the total number of employment contracts signed, including both permanent and temporary kinds, was 2 057 930, whereas in the region of Murcia it was 793 307. In other words, if all the temporary workforce were waged, the number of wage earners in this region would increase by 45 per cent.

**Exploitation by multinationals**

At last the bus drops Amin off at five o’clock in the afternoon. We have been waiting for him for an hour because he kindly offered to grant us an interview after his exhausting day. He was born in Fez and has three children. If he received the severance pay due to him he would leave, but he carries on because there is nothing else. As we are talking to Amin, we see dozens of buses arriving and hundreds of men and women getting out and crossing the roads to hurry home or to other buses. This tide of people dressed in colourful caps and clothing is marked out from the other pedestrians: it is on their backs that the business of big companies, selling their products all over Europe, is prospering.

These are not small companies; they are multinationals that are associated with Proexport with websites boasting an idyllic world of fresh, healthy produce. Their business has grown constantly over the past decade or so. In 2019, exports of fresh vegetables from the region of Murcia brought in the record amount of 6.61 billion euros. The main destination of these vegetables are the 27 member countries of the European Union, accounting for 6.08 billion euros, or 92 per cent of total exports. It is mainly these companies that refuse to pay their workers the statutory minimum wage.

José Ibarra, CCOO Secretary in the district of El Campo de Cartagena, tells us: “In 2019, the Spanish government agreed to increase the statutory minimum wage by 2.9 per cent, making it higher than the wage specified under the collective agreement for tomato and lettuce growers. What did the employers’ association do? It tried to increase the annual working period to bring the hourly cost down, depriving each worker of three cents an hour. That is only 54 euros per worker per year: a pittance. That gives you an idea of the mindset of these people. The new CCOO Industry Federation leadership in Murcia refused to support this draft agreement and spent a year trying to negotiate. But the employers insisted on maintaining the increase in the annual working period, so in October the union took them to court. On 19 November, the social court ruled in favour of the labourers: the minimum wage increase applied without any increase in working hours.”

**First strike in 29 years**

On 4 December 2020, the two largest trade union federations in Spain, the CCOO and the UGT, called a strike in the Murcian agri-foodstuffs sector to highlight this unacceptable exploitation — the first since 1991. The trade unions called on all workers of farming companies, whether permanent or temporary, to stop work. They demanded a collective agreement that provided for decent working conditions.

Enrique Bruna, the general secretary of the CCOO Industry Federation for the region of Murcia, is convinced that this struggle by agricultural labourers is also a struggle for the region’s economy and for food quality: “The history of the workers’ movement shows us that, in production sectors where there is a working class organised into unions who secure rights for themselves, product quality improves and companies become more efficient. If we want the foodstuffs we eat to be good, it is essential to improve the working conditions of the people growing them, harvesting them and preparing them for sale. It is not acceptable to seek support from the EU, as the farmers do, without at the same time offering environmentally friendly production processes and decent working conditions.”
When the *Chti’Breizh* returns from its day at sea after a long week stuck in the harbour, the halo of golden light around its crew might suggest to the three bystanders, hanging around by crane No. 1 in the auction market, a spirit of euphoria due to a good catch. But on deck, there is no joy in the weary expressions. Didier unties the rope to moor the boat, while 22-year-old Théo stands ready to pile up the 15 or so crates in which, under a pile of ice, the fruits of the day’s labour can be seen. “What a life!” he exclaims, his face veiled behind the smoke from his cigarette. And then, in a less pessimistic tone, he says: “60 kilograms of fish. Just about enough.” In the cabin, Anne Le Strat scans the quay and turns the rudder slightly. She is the only fisherwoman in Lorient. And what is even more remarkable is that this 12 metre net she is bringing in belongs to her. She is a fishing boat owner.

With its division of tasks, still highly gender-based — the men on the boats and the women working in bookkeeping, sales and fish processing — the sector is struggling to rid itself of its masculine image and culture. But there have been campaigns to highlight women’s contribution, and they are making progress. From fishing to filleting, we report from Lorient, one of France’s largest fishing ports, alongside these forgotten workers.

**The brave women of the fishing industry**

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She is always the one steering the *Chti’Breizh*: when it goes out to sea at two
Anne Le Strat uses her sonar to inspect the sea bottom. There is no guarantee that she will find exactly what she is looking for. She wakes the two sailors. After downing a quick instant coffee, they get dressed up in their gear: a yellow waxed jacket, another jacket, a scarf and some plastic gloves that do not keep you warm. That is plain to see: their hands are pink and swollen from the cold's bite. Less than five minutes after waking, they set to work and start casting the floats attached to the nets overboard. It must be six o'clock by the time all the floats are in place. Still in the cold, they clean themselves up a bit before changing. There is just time to snatch an hour’s sleep before they need to get dressed again. After some complicated manoeuvring, they then use a hook to recover the floats one by one. The pulley on the side of the boat hauls in the nets. One of the sailors removes the fish and starts sorting them, while the other stows the nets in big chests.

"When we go out, we never know whether we’ll bring any fish back."
64 women to 4,736 men

The presence of women in the industry is rare in the extreme. In Brittany, the primary fishing region in France, there were 64 women in 2017. Five in middle-water fishing, with trips lasting from 10 to 15 days, seven in deep-sea fishing, where expeditions can last several months, 46 in small-scale fishing and six in coastal fishing. This is compared with a total of 4,736 men, according to a report by FranceAgriMer (the French Government’s agriculture and sea products agency), which has carried out one of the very few studies on the place of women in this trade. Katia Frangoudes, a researcher at the University of Western Brittany specialising in gender issues in the maritime sector, complains about the lack of interest politicians show in research on the women in the fishing industry. Because, of interest politicians show in research on the maritime sector, complains about the lack of interest politicians show in research on the women in the fishing industry. Katia Frangoudes, a researcher at the University of Western Brittany specialising in gender issues in the maritime sector, complains about the lack of interest politicians show in research on the women in the fishing industry.

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To get to her position, Anne Le Strat explains modestly that “it all happened quite naturally”. But her career has been punctuated by occasions when the doors were closed in her face because she was a woman. She had to have twice the determination. After a vocational baccalaureate diploma and some experience in fishing, the birth of her daughter in 2016 prompted her to seek a less burdensome job. Her husband, Didier, is part of the crew, and he is the one who helps her when the weather is not good. For eight years, they both went out to sea, accompanied by other sailors, for a fortnight at a time. At the time, he was a fisherman too, and Anne was a mechanic on his boat. Then she moved over to oyster farming, where working days are more conventional, even though you are bent double from dawn to dusk. This is where sexism at work reared its ugly head. “I was very highly qualified, but no one looked at my experience. It was as if I’d come straight out of maritime vocational school. I was 33, and it was very bad for my morale. When you belong to a minority, you’re judged twice as harshly. I wasn’t exactly bulky, and to them, with my small frame, I didn’t measure up.” In the end, it was the boss’s partner who persuaded him to take her on. “There’s no doubt that women have to make twice the effort to be accepted,” confirms Sylvie Roux, the Assistant National Secretary for fisheries at the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) union.

However, at the age of 38, Anne Le Strat now has her own boat. And when the fork lift truck driver has finally shifted her crates of pollack, sea bass, ling and tope to the auction market’s cold room, her husband Didier doesn’t miss an opportunity to remind her: “Everything okay, Madam Owner?” She smiles, then hurries over to the office to declare her catch. The port of Lorient is the biggest in France in terms of value, at 77 million euro in 2019 and providing more than 3,000 direct jobs. Every day, at the end of the afternoon, the netters (net fishing) and the liners (line fishing) load their catch. It is the turn of the trawlers (trawl fishing) from midnight to the start of sales at four o’clock in the morning. In the meantime, all fish are identified according to species, size, weight, origin and the name of the boat in a shed staffed by about 40 employees. Yellow and blue crates progress swiftly on a conveyor belt through the next room, where the sales take place, and the one after that, where consignments are allocated to fishmongers, restaurateurs, wholesale traders and foreign buyers. For the past 15 years or so, sales of consignments have been computerised: the criers no longer shout them out, and, as for the buyers, they use remote controls, often hidden behind an elbow or under the table. This is to curb the curiosity of neighbours — mostly men, but several women are also present in the room, where 550 consignments pass through every hour. The next stage is entirely handled by men, mostly temps, who sort the consignments and lug them about ready for delivery. Tiphaine looks after logistics in a team that controls the flow of hauliers heading off for sometimes distant fishmongers’ shops. She dropped off her CV one Friday, 17 years ago now. “It’s a world of lunatics!” she responds, with a hint of tongue-in-cheek amusement. “From midnight to six o’clock, it’s a mad rush. When I get home, I have a two-hour nap in the afternoon, and I sleep for four hours in the evening. Even when I’m on holiday, or at the weekend, I get up at five
least 20 years. Once I was sent home sick. I'd contracted sciatica and I had a slipped disc. But I didn't have an operation because people say the pain can be worse after the op. So I went to see an osteopath and that helped the pain. For them, 2020 has not offered the slightest hint of the "post-Covid world". Several employees were on short-time working. "But the work goes on, so actually we grafted even harder."

Family constraints led to Édith making harsh compromises so that she could go to work at twenty to six in the morning. Her husband, a labourer, used to leave even earlier, at three o'clock. "At first, without a childminder, I used to take my little one with me on foot at five o'clock in the morning. Then I took the other one to the day nursery. It was all a bit makeshift," Édith recalls. Sylvie Roux of the CFDT emphasises the point: "Women are mums too. Some jobs in fishing are difficult or dangerous. It isn't a choice you take lightly." So, faced with the difficulty of the job and the family compromises, what draws young people towards this activity? Even though the sector has difficulty in finding new recruits, there are 12 maritime vocational schools in France, one in Étel, 30 minutes from Lorient. It should be said that, for women, some battles have paid off. In this sphere, a particular year is anchored in the collective leaving. It all depends on the orders. Many of them have decades of experience, like Nathalie, who suffers from severe pain "in my muscles and my bones". Along with her, Édith is one of the most senior. She is 59, and for 39 years now she has been inserting the blade of her knife under the scales, gutting the fish and placing the product in the crates. If she is still going to be working in the afternoon, she has a one-hour lunch break. On the other hand, if there are fewer orders, and the filleters can leave before two o'clock in the afternoon, they only stop for 30 minutes at nine o'clock. No luncheon vouchers. Wages start at the SMIC. Édith earns around 1 700 euros. "What's more, I don't like fish," she admits, giggling, in the rest room. "It's a demanding job, for sure. Even though there are a few machines, my hands, my neck, my shoulders and my lower back hurt. I've been suffering like this for at least 20 years. Once I was sent home sick. I'd contracted sciatica and I had a slipped disc. But I didn't have an operation because people say the pain can be worse after the op. So I went to see an osteopath and that helped the pain." For them, 2020 has not offered the slightest hint of the "post-Covid world". Several employees were on short-time working. "But the work goes on, so actually we grafted even harder."

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memory: 1994, the historic combat that sparked everything off.

Longed-for freedom

In 1994, French people were suddenly confronted with a section of the population on their TVs that they had tended to forget: fishermen. There was a lot of tension in the air. Resources were growing rare between 1991 and 1992, customs barriers came down in 1993 and diesel fuel was going up in price. The atmosphere was so strained for the French fishing industry that a huge proportion of fish consumed was imported. French fishermen were no longer in a position of strength, and their production dropped markedly during this period. "All the ingredients were there for everything to be blown sky-high," recalls Sylvie Roux. She was one of the founders of the women's movement created in response to the strikes by their seafaring husbands, which led to the burning down of Brittany’s Parliament in Rennes. The women gave their support and started organising themselves. "The men set up their movement, and we set up our own. We realised we weren’t alone." In 1998, the European Union gave way to the demands and granted them a less-than-ideal status as "assisting spouses" to highlight all the shore-based work that went unrecognised. For the following 10 years, the tiny advances in the legislative texts grew increasingly out of step with the organisations being set up on a large scale among women, like Aktea, the first European network of women in fisheries and aquaculture.

It is clear that some young people now at the maritime school at Étel adhere to these "feminist" convictions, without actually saying as much. This is the case with Jeanne, 17, and Pierre, 18, both of whom have been elected to the Youth Regional Council and are members of the Equality Commission. Jeanne, speaking in the mending room where students learn to repair nets, is aware of this: "In this industry, as a woman, you know that you have to hold your own against the men." Even though her results in fishing were good, she has decided to go into the business side. Mature and determined, she wants to be the pilot of a yacht, to travel, to have her own boat and enjoy a certain degree of longed-for freedom. She is one of the 10 to 15 committed women, explains Yannick Perron, head teacher of the maritime school for the past three years. "For the time being, nothing much is moving," she acknowledges, "even though things are being done to show that everyone has his or her place in the maritime sector." Pierre, whose parents did not come from this background, is a case in point. On holiday as a little boy, he used to go fishing with the adults. He liked it. But he is under no illusions. "Between Brexit, Covid, the crisis... It’s not an occupation that inspires confidence. It’s better not to think about it," he tells himself. On his first fishing trip, he was so sea-sick that he lost five kilograms in five days. A lot of sailors are unwell when they are out fishing, so he is not ashamed. In fact, several students have given up on training, but Pierre is determined to keep hanging on. What he, like Jeanne, Édith or Anne Le Strat, is calling for is a bit of recognition. "It’s as though no one gives a hoot about fishing. We’re ignored in both Paris and Brussels," complains Anne, back at home after her day of hard labour. Giving her baby the bottle, she recalls her trips to the European Parliament with the fisheries committee. She wanted to see the people who, in politics, are all too ready to say they are the ones "steering the ship". ●
Flattened under the supermarket steamroller

Divided and disorganised as they confront the supremacy of the supermarkets, Romania’s small farmers could well face extinction. For years now, chain stores have been taking hold at the very core of the food markets, engulfing the activity of the small, independent fruit and vegetable producers. These small growers have had no other choice than to conform to the standards imposed by the large chains in the hope of selling their products. Those without the resources to adapt face the prospect of impoverishment or even extinction. In the meantime, the supermarkets are seeking to capitalise on an "authentic", local and organic farming image.

Laura-Maria Ilie and Florentin Cassonnet
Journalists

Like predators encircling their prey, various supermarket chains are closing in around the market in Obor. Whether it’s the French supermarkets of Auchan and Carrefour, or the Belgian retailer Mega Image, they have blatantly set up shop in the immediate vicinity of Romania’s largest food market, located to the east of the capital city, Bucharest.

Steluţa (57) casts her mind back to 2016, the year when Veranda Mall was built right next to Obor, where she has been selling her fruit and vegetables since 1990. The new shopping centre would become home to a Carrefour hypermarket covering 10 000 square metres and operating in direct competition with her. "Our sales have declined since then, and we have had to drop our prices," she reveals without showing the slightest bit of anger or resentment. "People would rather go over there because it’s warm," adds Elena (54), who runs a fruit and veg stall next to Steluţa. Both women have an overwhelming air of resigned inevitability about them.

It is certainly cold inside the market, even though the rolling shutters encasing the market area are down, preventing the damp and icy wind from blowing through the 4 000 metres-squared ground-level space which accommodates some 400 fruit and vegetable stalls like those run by Steluţa and Elena. We are standing in Obor Market’s new building; it was built in 2010 to take over the market’s activities from the old hall, which had more charm but was in a state of disrepair. The two upper floors are warmer and more comfortable, comprising around a hundred small market pitches for cheesemongers, butchers and other small artisan food producers, as well as space for a pharmacy and, for example, shops selling household products. By and large, this market complex does not have a great deal to envy in the neighbouring Veranda Mall or Carrefour. That said, everyone is cold here on the ground level. It may well preserve the fruit and vegetables, but it takes its toll on the men and women who sell them. It means that you have to keep moving.

Steluţa is on her feet for 12 hours a day, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., mainly standing still. She eats standing up and leaves her stall only to visit the toilet. "Our legs really ache," she complains. While her husband, son and daughter-in-law attend to their small hectare of land in Băleni, 80 kilometres from Bucharest, she takes care of selling the produce in Obor. It would be more difficult and less profitable to sell her fruit and vegetables in Băleni, given that many families out in the country — unlike the city dwellers — farm their own small plots of land. Not to mention the fact that prices in Bucharest are higher than out in the provinces.

She returns home only once a week, on a Saturday evening, and returns to Bucharest on the Tuesday morning. During the week, she rents a room in an apartment
near Obor which she shares with another seller from Băleni. "We can’t go back home every evening, because of the transport we’d need. We are better off paying the 20 lei [4 euros] and sleeping here," Steluța explains. After a hard day’s graft, the women cannot even look forward to returning home to their families. They don’t make much money. The summer months bring their advantages, with more produce and more customers, and although they are still on their feet 12 hours a day, at least they do not have the cold to deal with. Today, very few customers are coming past their stalls. To look at them, you would think they were some kind of endangered species, the small producer practising semi-subsistence farming, who does not make sufficient sales to invest, save or contribute towards his retirement and who will have to work until he dies, unless his children can afford to take care of him.

Accepting the hand you have been dealt

"We aren’t afraid of poverty," Cătălin begins. Listening to his story, it is easier to understand Elena and Steluța’s apparent approach of accepting the hand you have been dealt without fuss, keeping out of the politics and shying away from any fight. A member of the Roma community, this stout 62-year-old owns three and a half hectares of land in Covasna (250 kilometres from Bucharest) and has sold his potatoes, carrots, onions and corn for the past 22 years at the market in Drumul Taberei, a neighbourhhood located on the other (west) side of Bucharest. "God willing, we can produce 60 tonnes per hectare. When the weather is bad, we get only 20 tonnes. If the markets were to open only at the weekend, like in France or Britain, we would rear a few more animals, we wouldn’t starve to death. I was born poor, I will die poor." His farm work, which is more closely connected with the elements than with the state authorities (with whom he has an almost non-existent relationship), his faith in God (shared by the vast majority of Romanians), his food self-sufficiency, and being his own boss all give him a degree of independence. The help he receives from his six children, whether toiling in the fields in Covasna or sending a little money from abroad, as in the case of four of his children, supports a self-sufficient way of life of which he is proud and which seemingly conveys the message of their not needing anyone and managing on their own.

However, as the conversation progresses, it becomes clear that life has become harder over the years. "Ten years ago, I was selling five tonnes of potatoes a week. Since the supermarkets have shown up, I need two months to sell the same five tonnes," he explains. A Mega Image supermarket has also been built at Drumul Taberei market. And not just nearby; right in the middle. Cătălin also refers to how habits have changed. "Before, people used to stock up in large quantities. Now, they take three potatoes, a stick of celery and two carrots: just enough to make a soup. And young people don’t come to the market; it’s mainly the old who come." In the past, he would sell all his produce here, but that is no longer possible. To survive, he had to diversify, which meant making sales across the whole region and selling to wholesalers who would, in turn, sell at the markets in Brașov, albeit at a lower price than in Bucharest. But why not sell to the supermarkets? "You would need more land and storage facilities to be able to guarantee sufficient and constant supplies of produce each month." A further concern is that, like most small farmers, he has no protection: no unemployment or proper retirement provision, and he will be eligible for the minimum pension only (700 lei/140 euros).

"The smallest will disappear"

Back to Obor, where, standing just a few dozen metres away from Steluța and Elena, Mihai (47) and Roxana (45) are faring a little better. This couple from Vâleni, some 130 kilometres from Bucharest, purchased enough land to leave subsistence farming behind and expand their activity. They use their five hectares to produce between 150 and 200 tonnes of apples, pears, plums and potatoes per year. They have been selling their produce in Obor since 1995, but they also sell to a wholesaler at a lower price per kilo.

They are, to some degree, self-sufficient, as they have a cow, pigs and chickens for their own consumption in addition to their fruit and vegetables. However, they are much more critical of the system than the other people we have spoken to: "Since the supermarkets arrived, sales have plummeted, and producers are suffering. The smallest will disappear. The market is saturated with imported products, there’s no room anymore for local producers. The big chains are on a mission to eradicate us, one by one," Mihai speaks out. "The products coming in from overseas create unfair competition because we don’t benefit from any subsidies. For my five hectares, I’ve received 500 euros this year in subsidies from the APIA [Agricultural Payments and Intervention Agency]. What’s more, I’ve paid out 6 000 euros in tax to the state."

To resolve this issue of "unfair competition" from overseas, a law was passed in 2016 requiring at least 50 per cent of the stock on hypermarket shelves to be sourced locally. The AMCRC (Romania’s association of supermarkets and large chains) referred the matter immediately to the European Commission, arguing that the law was introducing unfair conditions, that the market should remain free and that it was wrong to stipulate that a particular quantity of products must come from a particular country. The European Union agreed, and the legislation has since been blocked, the Romanian Parliament not venturing to draft new legislation on this issue. "European regulations on food security have dealt a significant blow to traditional agricultural production practices in countries like Romania," explains anthropologist Monica Stroe. "Their transposition into national law has driven a large segment of small producers and semi-subsistence farmers out of the market completely."

This year, Mihai and Roxana are removing one of their plantations, which they have tended and harvested since 2001/2002, and turning it into a modern plantation, thereby enabling them to farm it using modern methods. "If you don’t mechanise, you end up with a shortfall in your workforce," Mihai explains. At a time when tens of thousands of Romanians are leaving each year for western Europe to do

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1. Semi-subsistence and subsistence farms are generally defined as small, family-run farms which meet the family’s own food requirements and supply to the market on a limited scale only.
farm work in the wealthier countries, there is a severe workforce shortage in the fields of Romania. Some sections of the work cannot be mechanised, but they somehow manage to find labour, although they do most of the work in the fields themselves, with the help of their son, who is currently studying agronomy. They are hoping he will carry on the family business. They work for eight months in the fields and four months at the market. Time is of the essence: the apples have to be sold by the spring because they cannot be in both places at once. Here, they too are on their feet for 12 hours a day. Mihai does not have a back problem; he has been working since the age of 14 and, he assures us, "my body has adapted", but Roxana has a slipped disc. A few years back, she wanted them to stop farming and do something else for a living. They argued about it. "We’d invested, we couldn’t just stop," Mihai explains. "We’d bought land, tools, machinery, a warehouse, 40 per cent with our own money, 60 per cent with European funds. Right now, we are getting back what we paid in, and our profit will be reinvested. You have to expand to be able to handle foreign competition. Otherwise, your business will disappear."

**The necessity of self-reliance**

Mihai and Roxana feel that they have been abandoned. "The system doesn’t help us. At the local elections [in September 2020], the candidates pledged to provide an anti-hail station. However, once they were elected, they did nothing. The authorities won’t get involved; in fact, they even derail our efforts. Sometimes you get the feeling that they are seeking to destroy local small producers."

Is this laissez-faire attitude on the part of the authorities an expression of their institutional failure or of their undeclared strategy for modernising Romanian farming by increasing the speed with which the smallest and the weakest will disappear? To Mihai’s mind, small farmers’ concerns play second fiddle to the interests of governments, multinationals and supermarkets. Compared with the food industry giants, small farmers have a meagre financial presence on the market. Yet there are a great many of them: Romania is Europe’s most rural country, with 46 per cent of its 20 million inhabitants still living in the countryside. According to Eurostat, in 2018, some 23 per cent of Romanians were working in the agricultural sector, figures that far exceed the statistics for Bulgaria, Greece or Poland. This will be no surprise to the farmers, informal workers, day labourers and small-, medium- or large-scale farmers. The small-scale fruit and vegetable producers among them can be counted in their tens of thousands.

Many people of retirement age continue to work in very difficult conditions. Photo © Florentin Cassonnet
However, when asked about the trade unions that safeguard their rights, they struggle to give an answer. Elena does not even understand the concept of the trade union and it has to be explained to her. “There was an attempt to create an association to organise our workers formally 10 years ago, but it didn’t work because we couldn’t find a common denominator. So we all have to be self-reliant,” Andrei (36), a potato and cabbage farmer in the village of Lungulețu, concedes. “Producers have too many differences, we can’t all be categorised in the same way,” explains Ionut (24), another producer in Lungulețu. “We are treated differently depending, for instance, on the standard of our businesses, our wealth and the number of hectares we have. I farm seven hectares, but another farmer might have thirty hectares, another might have fifty, and another one just two hectares. Some of us are producers and intermediaries, whereas others are just producers. Some have six tractors, others have just one.”

This self-reliance is enhanced by another key feature of the trade, which is its poker game-like nature, and the thrill that induces. “There are some bumper years when you can make lots of money, and you develop a taste for it,” Ionut explains. “You put money in, and you don’t know how much profit you’ll make. You can win five or six times your stake, or you can lose the lot, like at the poker table. Then, you go from town to town with your lorry load of produce. You call traders to find out the prices locally and you go wherever the prices are the highest. You can sell your produce in three hours, two days or a week. There is no security, it’s a lottery. You just have to keep going with your fingers crossed.”

A struggle to organise

Ştefan Nicolae confesses that there is a particular individualistic mindset among small producers inasmuch as they think they can get by on their own. However, the president of AGROSTAR, Romania’s National Federation of Farmers’ Trade Unions, believes structural issues in particular to be behind the lack of any organisation to protect the rights of these farmers. “A trade union organisation needs a proper budget, and therefore monthly membership payments, which is a complicated matter when you are dealing with small producers and their low incomes. Of course, without financial support, you cannot develop an organisation that will endure in the long term, with a president and experts to resolve economic, social or legal problems, and which offers professional services to its members.” Organisations have been set up and they have worked for a short while in response to specific grievances — but then they go into “hibernation”.

Nonetheless, the trade is crying out to be formally organised, primarily because working conditions are problematic. “The majority of small producers use toxic substances while ignorant of their correct usage and their own safety.” By a certain age, many of them have fallen ill. “They need an occasional medical check-up as well as health and safety inspections because they also work with all manner of new farming equipment without always knowing how to use it properly.” This leads to accidents.

Moreover, there is the supermarkets’ monopoly to consider. “We are in an uneven battle against economic giants. Sadly, we don’t have the capacity to fight them as we don’t produce enough to meet demand all year round, which is why produce is imported from overseas, and we are not formally organised.” As far as Ştefan Nicolae is concerned, “the supermarkets have become the divine power”. They lay down all the conditions and decide from whom they will buy. “You have to sell at a very poor price through intermediaries or go to the market where you spend 12 hours a day in the cold to sell your goods. But we are the ones to blame, the producers, because we didn’t see that we have to be organised first if we are to beat this monopoly and acquire bargaining power.”

Marketing cynicism?

While small farmers are losing a little more ground each year to the major supermarket chains, these chains are stepping up their initiatives to include the fruit and vegetables grown by the local small producers in their product ranges. For example, Mega Image has launched its "Gusturi Românești" label,
practice, a large proportion of small farmers cannot fulfill the conditions — based on European regulations — imposed on local producers by the supermarket chains.

And yet this is still the objective, regarded as the be-all and end-all for the small producer. Those who can will thus need to adapt to the supermarkets’ requirements. “Production will go from strength to strength. We have many fertilisers, all manner of technology to assist us, but it is becoming increasingly costly to invest, with fewer and fewer opportunities for making a profit if your business is not a critical size,” Andrei predicts. His strategy is to take out leases on other land in addition to the six hectares he owns in order to boost his production, in the hope of selling to Mega Image’s “Gusturi Românești” product line.

Ionuț likewise wishes to invest in order to bring his business up to the required standard and sell to the supermarkets without having to go through an intermediary. “I’ve seen how business is done, how it works, how you transport, how you prepare. I have the land; all I need now is a warehouse and a contract.” And what if he is dealt a losing hand in this new game of poker? He smiles and, ever the optimist, remarks: “We can live our lives rich or poor, it doesn’t matter.”

Carrefour is working with Cooperativa Agricolă and Creștem România BIO, and Lidl and Kaufland have also begun promoting local small producers on their shelves.

Have they finally woken up to the fact that their aggressive strategy towards the traditional markets has damaged the already impoverished social fabric, or are they merely adopting a new “greenwashing” marketing strategy, seeking to capitalise on an “authentic”, local and organic image of farming? "Today, in the wake of the many health-related scandals that have erupted in Europe, consumers are increasingly concerned with ensuring the traceability of products and short supply chains,” anthropologist Monica Stroe comments. "Relying on small-scale farming imagery, the food industry — in essence a multinational, faceless industry — is striving to create an image for itself with which everyone can identify and which is both locally rooted and trustworthy.”

However, Mihai explains: “it is very hard for producers like us to get our produce into the supermarkets”. With his five hectares, he is, in fact, in a better position than the likes of Steluța, Elena and Cătălin. "We have to separate the produce, wash it, wrap it in a special, costly wrapping and transport it… If they find two or three apples with a slight blemish in one load, they send the whole shipment back. We also have to complete loads of paperwork and satisfy a number of control measures to be granted approval. And don’t forget that, as most of us don’t have the means to supply the same quantity of produce throughout the year, we have to go through an intermediary.” In practice, a large proportion of small farmers cannot fulfill the conditions — based on European regulations — imposed on local producers by the supermarket chains.

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Relying on small-scale farming imagery, the food industry is striving to create an image for itself with which everyone can identify.
On the quays with the fishing community

San Benedetto del Tronto is the second biggest port on the Adriatic and one of the largest in Italy. The dangers of the sea characterise its present and its past. The town is still haunted by the sinking of the *Rodi*, an offshore fishing boat, 50 years ago, and the seamen it took to their deaths. Today, deep-sea fisherman Pietro Ricci continues to brave the sea for his work, a dangerous job that has put his life at risk several times.

*Angelo Ferracuti*
Writer

![Pietro Ricci in his fishing boat.](Photo: © Angelo Ferracuti)
It is cold today, and the sea is rough. No boats are putting out to sea: they are all moored up in the harbour of San Benedetto del Tronto in the south of Le Marche. The seamen are tinkering about below deck, busying themselves with small maintenance jobs or cleaning, while others are emptying buckets of water or painstakingly overhauling the engine. The air is icy, the sky dark and threatening, and outside the harbour bar, the Café Europa, the few customers sipping their take-away coffees are bundled up in their worn jackets and woollen hats. A group of cheerful, chatty mechanics appear, emerging from the repair workshops in their overalls, with masks covering their faces.

As soon as he arrives, local fisherman Pietro Ricci invites me to go with him to the area of the harbour where the boats are berthed. We walk along the quay and soon reach the spot where he has moored his little 15-metre fishing boat, the Rapepè. That was the nickname of his great-grandfather, also a fisherman and the forefather of a family of seafarers. Pietro, with his black hair and ruddy face, dressed in a big, dark jacket, talks very fast. We clamber onto his boat: to the stern, I see a rolled-up fishing net, to the side is the toilet, and at the front, in the bow, is the small cabin where Pietro and his brother Gabriele live while they are out at sea, where they rest and take their meals — a little refuge. "We've got everything here," he says, showing me a tiny but functional space that houses a small table with seating and, further in, a minuscule kitchenette with a stove and a microwave, storage compartments for provisions, and to the side the essential radiator to keep out the cold during the long winters. Pietro usually goes out to sea four times a week, from midnight to the following afternoon, and he resents the rules that currently limit fishing trips at the weekend, which, by the same token, mean that he has to compensate by working even when the weather conditions are very bad.

Journey into the unknown

There are 28 million fisheries workers worldwide, 24,000 of whom lose their lives each year because they operate in one of the most dangerous human activities that exists. Pietro confirms that the work is difficult and demanding: "We're working in very unstable conditions, right out at sea — the most serious dangers are bad weather and leaks in the boat, even though we're always doing maintenance work on the hull; we're working on fishing boats that are more than 40 years old, and, in the past few years, there has been precious little funding to renew the fleet," he laments. "But young people who want to want to work in fishing should have proper resources to work with, like in the rest of Europe, with up-to-date, technologically advanced, safe vessels." He tells me that each time he goes out to sea in his boat, it is a journey into the unknown. "Will I make it home this time?" he wonders, as the Rapepè leaves the harbour in the dead of night at the start of its long voyage, taking him far from his town and family.

Twice he has found himself in very critical situations when he and his brother could not get back to port. He experienced moments of panic and truly believed that he was not going to make it. "We were about three miles from the coast, with me on deck and my brother Gabriele in the bow, telling me where the waves were coming from, with a 100-kilometre-per-hour wind blowing against us and a storm that suddenly descended on us: it had been forecast for the afternoon, but it started raging from the early hours of the morning," he says. "It's something you can never really forecast. That was seven years ago. We were battling against three elements: the wind, the rain and the sea," he adds, to bring home to me what that titanic struggle to prevent the boat from sinking had involved. "After struggling for almost two hours against the waves and the wind, our hearts pounding with fear, worn out with fatigue and anxiety, we managed to get to the coast. And, during that time, to keep myself from panicking, I had been binge-smoking — 20 cigarettes, one after another, almost without realising." In the days that followed, Pietro resolved to give it all up and never to go to sea again, to change his life and choose a shore-based trade. But the call of the sea was stronger. He chose to grit his teeth and carry on. Although, since that day, whenever the weather forecast is bad, he tries to hurry back to the harbour before the storm breaks. "That event marked me for life," he admits. He has lost many friends too, who have died doing the same work as he does. He tells me about a fishing boat that was recently caught up in a storm at Giulianova: the seaman was at the mouth of the harbour when he died. "You're almost home, and then you die, just like that."

Commemorative plaques

Pietro explains that this kind of accident happens because harbours are increasingly unsafe. There is no dredging going on any more; the nearer you are to the coast, the shallower the water is; generally, it is not very deep. More vividly, Pietro evokes "the waves that start to break then, the danger of foam when the wave breaks and it becomes hard to steer the vessel." To leave the port, the big fishing boats take up position in the harbour basin; they run the engine at full throttle to get to the mouth of the harbour where the sandbank lies, and they navigate to the side of it — that's what happens every time, whether they are sailing in or out, he explains. "We're required to ensure safety on board, but the port infrastructure doesn't provide us with an essential safety feature, and that's why small fishing boats are at risk of capsizing."

On the wall that runs along the quay, I see the commemorative plaques that remind Pietro every day of the risk that his working life poses. These plaques refer to tragedies at sea, such as that of the trawler Pinguino, which sank during the night of Saturday 19 February 1966 off Cap Blanc in Mauritania, causing 13 deaths; or the most dramatic case, that of the Rodi, 50 years ago; or the most recent, that of the Rita

Of the 28 million fisheries workers worldwide, 24,000 lose their lives each year.
"We want our dead"

Between 24 and 25 December, people thought that there might still be survivors on the vessel, who might have escaped the danger by staying inside with the hatches sealed, and the worried families waited by the docks. But after a meeting at the Rotonda on 27 December, the situation erupted. Shouting "We want our dead!", many of the townspeople processed through the town. The contemporary black-and-white photos show a compact crowd on the station platforms, looking serious and severe, the rails blocked with logs, the shops and cinemas closed, the Adriatic Highway cut off, and barricades in the streets, like those the student movement had erected in many Italian towns at the time. The relationship between young people and fishermen, the "proletariat of the sea", had been forged: they all came together at the Café Glacial.

Nowadays, the boats no longer go out to fish in those distant seas, but work on board is still very demanding, even in Italy’s ninth largest fishing port, one of the most strategic and productive on the Adriatic. "You work in the cold in winter and the heat in summer, you eat when you aren’t hungry and you sleep when you’re not sleepy," says Pietro as we carry on walking through the market. We are a few steps away from the building that houses the Museum of Seafaring Civilisations of Le Marche, where the relics of that distant past, the period Pietro calls "the Atlantic era", are gathered. "If you feel sleepy while you’re on duty, you have to fight the fatigue, you have to stay awake." There is a higher incidence of hearing loss among mariners, because of the continuous deafening noise of the engines, but joint diseases affecting the back, the knees and the shoulders, which are a typical consequence of the tasks carried out on board, are also observed. And then there are the numerous cases of dermatitis from prolonged exposure to airborne and biological agents.

But it is also a job for free individuals, and that is why Pietro will never leave it: "You’re living in the middle of the sea, alone or with your fellow workers, you’re living among the beauty of nature. Even now, I feel moved by the sunrise or when I see dolphins — that gives me the strength to go on." He quotes a few verses of a poem by Beatrice Piacentini, known as Bice, a poet who wrote in the local dialect at the start of the 20th century. "I feel this poem deep inside me, it’s as though it was written specially for a fisherman," he says forcefully. It is about the seafarer’s trade: a treacherous trade, there’s no job more hateful, if

The last voyage of the Rodi

In the collective memory of San Benedetto del Tronto, 23 December 1970 is a dark day: that of the biggest shipwreck in local maritime history, which happened close to the port. On that day, the offshore fishing boat Rodi was returning from the port of Venice, where its hull had been repaired. The boat was caught up in a storm, with double waves beating against the sides of the vessel which, after taking on water and battling ferociously against the raging sea, ultimately sank off the coast of Grottamare. The 500-tonne vessel was salvaged after the wreck. It had capsized, taking to their deaths the nine fishermen and the technician who were on board: Agostino Di Felice, Domenico Miarelli, Silvano Palaschetti (who was only 16 years old), Giovanni Liberati, Ivo Mengoni, Marcello Ciarrocchi, Francesco Pignati, Antonio Alessandrinri, Alteo Palestini and Giovanni Palumbo, who would have turned 18 on the day after the tragedy.

The men on board the Rodi were seamen who sailed their fishing boats to remote areas of the sea, and who had been hired at the traditional recruitment spot, the seaside promenade between the roundabout (the Rotonda) and the nearby Florian cinema. They were net repairers, seamen, fishing captains, deck officers, engineer officers, greasers and deckhands, or were responsible for fish processing. They had all been lured by the opportunity to make money quickly in a difficult period of unemployment and job crises.

In those days, people used to venture out to sea with nothing more than a ship’s compass and a short-range radio, which often lost its signal in the ether; incapable of communicating with the mainland, they would wander the seas trying to reach Las Palmas, the Strait of Gibraltar or Morocco. Like in the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad and Jack London, these boats were seen as the closest people could get to the spirit of the sea, as an adventure, sometimes to indulge their deaths the nine fishermen and the technician who were on board: Agostino Di Felice, Domenico Miarelli, Silvano Palaschetti (who was only 16 years old), Giovanni Liberati, Ivo Mengoni, Marcello Ciarrocchi, Francesco Pignati, Antonio Alessandrinri, Alteo Palestini and Giovanni Palumbo, who would have turned 18 on the day after the tragedy.

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Fishermen have to cover all the trades, from electrician to refrigeration engineer.
you’re born into it, you suffer... but you can’t bring yourself to leave it. “It’s true, because if you’ve thrown yourself into this activity, and you’ve been doing it for years and years, this work captivates you so that you can’t leave it: you are part of the sea, part of nature.” Three years ago, when he had to scrap his old fishing boat, he had decided to retire, but in the end he couldn’t break away. “The pull of the job was so strong,” he says, “that I bought another boat and I’m still doing it.”

These days, there are no more Atlantic fishing boats like those at the time of the Rodi: currently, the seamen of San Benedetto fish four days a week just three miles offshore. Only a few of them fish in deeper water, heading to the international waters off Croatia, where you can also fish for prawns, Norway lobsters, cod and so on. Pietro, for his part, works in coastal fishing: “I fish for sole, mullet, cod, cuttlefish, squid and king prawn.” The Adriatic is a particularly hazardous sea: it is not very deep, so it has shorter, higher waves, which suddenly increase in size and move very violently. Pietro never used to take a good luck charm with him when he went out to sea; the most he will admit to is not wearing a life jacket, like many fishermen, out of superstition. But now his young daughter, Carol, has given him one: “Nemo — it’s a little plastic fish, and these days I always take it with me,” he says, pleased that he possesses this little talisman.

"You’re almost home, and then you die, just like that."
With a global pandemic still raging, delivering food is a dangerous job. But in a context of high unemployment and little social protection, many platform couriers in the UK and across the globe face an impossible choice between penury and infection.

Bianca Luna Fabris
ETUI and PhD candidate, University of Edinburgh

Who pays the price for your takeaway?

An Uber Eats courier rides through the deserted streets of the Scottish capital Edinburgh during the first lockdown of 2020.

Photo: © Belga
Adam is one of Britain’s 4.7 million gig workers. He’s been cycling around the London borough of Hoxton since early 2019. Delivery work used to be his side hustle — extra cash to supplement his job as a caseworker for a leading British NGO (non-governmental organisation). All of this changed, however, when the Covid-19 pandemic cost him his job, along with 1.72 million other Britons. Now, with riding as his only source of income, he spends his days delivering food down eerily empty streets.

Like many other riders Adam is angry and frustrated. The work is exhausting and the pay poor; benefits are as nonexistent as opportunities for advancement or escape. “With two children to feed, what other option did I have? It’s become practically impossible to find any other job.”

Millions of other delivery workers are in the same situation: over-qualified, under-paid, financially precarious, and with little or no access to social protection. Uber Eats, Deliveroo and other similar delivery platforms have been credited for creating innovative business models that offer workers “choice and flexibility” (Pasquale 2016). Their marketing highlights the perks of “being your own boss” while simultaneously earning “great money” (Gregory 2020). Such a strategy purposefully conceals the risky aspects of the work, instead offering a glamourised image of hip, young males effortlessly cycling through the urban environment. But for most riders, delivery work is a dangerous poverty trap from which it is difficult to escape.

Depending on the area in which they ride, the pay is on average between 8 to 13 pounds per hour, not far off the British national minimum wage of 8.72 (Müller 2021). Due to their employment status, riders have until recently been excluded from the protective wing of the Health and Safety at Work Act as they were not classified as workers but as “independent contractors”. The exclusion of riders from occupational health and safety legislation has placed them at serious risk, as road accidents are overwhelmingly common. “It’s not a matter of if it will happen but when,” reports an Edinburgh-based courier. In case of injury, “on-demand” workers have no sick pay and at best receive only minimal support from the platforms; they also have little to no access to state social protection. Worse still, riders can be laid off without warning at the whim of an opaque algorithm and thus live in a state of permanent uncertainty (Bérastégui 2021).

Even prior to the pandemic, taken together these factors created an environment where it is impossible for a full-time delivery worker to earn an income that guarantees a decent standard of living, let alone to save to any meaningful extent. And because banks refuse to extend loans on the basis of such temporary, variable employment, buying a home or even a car are impossible, distant dreams. Riders are therefore forced to live “on hold” until a more stable form of employment that guarantees a secure source of income becomes available.

Riding through Covid-19

Riders have reported extreme difficulties in making it through the pandemic. A report from the Oxford-based Fairwork Foundation shows that gig workers have seen their incomes shrink by two thirds on average, leaving many without the ability to meet necessary expenses despite their willingness to work. They have no control over the decrease: their hours are fixed by an algorithm. Furthermore, the number of riders has more than doubled since the start of the pandemic, as stay-at-home rules have increased demand for online grocery orders and restaurant takeaways, while at the same time many formerly employed people have lost their jobs and turned to this form of work. This surfeit of available riders has resulted in slashed hours for those already trapped in total reliance on delivery work as a source of income.

Through its effects on the food delivery industry, the pandemic has deepened the fracture lines of inequality. Not just between delivery couriers and those who are covered by a government-provided safety net, but also in terms of nationality and race, as migrant and minority ethnic riders form a core part of the food delivery workforce.

Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed much more than the number of riders and the hours they’re able to work. It has also significantly increased the risks workers are exposed to, forcing many to face an impossible choice between penury and infection.

There has been widespread reporting on the difficulty riders face in adhering to physical distancing guidelines. By its very nature, delivery work requires a high degree of human contact: exchanging food, waiting shoulder to shoulder with other riders for food to be prepared, talking to and standing near restaurant workers, and sharing space with supermarket workers and shoppers.

Most platforms have rolled out policies intended to help curb its spread, such as contact-free and cashless delivery services. But many of these policies seem to be aimed at protecting the customers more than the riders — workers must still collect the food by waiting in crowded pickup zones. To give another example, Uber Eats has responded to the pandemic with a policy that ostensibly requires sick workers to stay home. It provides couriers with 30 pounds per day plus an extra of up to 100 pounds weekly for a period of up to 15 days of illness. Although this may sound generous, when basing it on incomes that have shrunk by two thirds on average.
on a standard eight-hour working day, the lump sum does not even cover two thirds of what a worker would earn in that same timespan on national minimum wage. And of course, the course of a typical Covid-19 infection can be far longer than 15 days, with many sufferers needing up to eight weeks to recover.

Other platforms are facing similar problems and additional complications. Deliveroo couriers in the UK have noted that despite the platform’s rollout of financial support policies, many of them have been unable to request such benefits. Some platforms, for example, require a medical sick note, and although this may have become progressively easier, in the first few months of the pandemic it was near impossible to get tested for Covid-19.

And of course, the more hours a rider works, the greater their exposure and risk of contracting the virus and spreading it through their communities. Due to the inherent precariousness of such a form of work, some had to continue to ride even though they suspected being ill. “It was irresponsible, but I had literally no other option. I knew I was sick with Covid, but I couldn’t afford to stay home,” says a young rider from Crawley (in the southern county of West Sussex).

Collective action

But with the worsening of working conditions, last year also saw an increase in collective action. Workers around the world have mobilised in response to the dangerous conditions they face in providing essential services during a global pandemic, especially when they are protected by neither their de facto employers nor their governments. In Britain, workers have even engaged in lengthy legal battles, relating in particular to the contractual status of gig workers.

One highlight has been the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB). Thanks in part to a major public crowd-funding initiative, the union has won a long-standing battle with the government. IWGB barristers argued that the UK government had failed in its obligation to transpose EU health and safety directives into UK law. In the EU, health and safety legislation is extended to all individuals classified as workers, including gig workers. The courts agreed with the IWGB’s analysis, finding that workers in the “gig economy” have been denied rights they are due under EU health and safety directives. All workers now have the right both to refuse unsafe work and to be provided with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

Although the recent ruling marks a landmark case for the protection of gig workers, riders are still having to put their lives at risk for a takeout. The hyper-flexible, on-demand work arrangements force riders to live hand to mouth, unable to makes plans for the future, leaving thousands of couriers vulnerable to both Covid-19 and an unpredictable loss of income.●

The work is exhausting and the pay poor.

“\"I knew I was sick with Covid, but I couldn’t afford to stay home.\"”

FURTHER READING

Bérastégui P. (2021) Exposure to psychosocial risk factors in the gig economy, Report 2021.01, Brussels, ETUI.


Difference à la carte

In Europe, being disabled remains one of the main barriers to employment. Job offers made to disabled people are often limited to placements in specialised or charity-type institutions. In the past few years, the catering sector has gradually become more understanding of the idea of difference, hiring disabled staff to work front of house and in the kitchens. A recipe that works for staff, employers and customers too.

Louise Pluyaud
Journalist

Unemployment a major issue

“What I like in the restaurant business is the contact you have with the customers,” beams Marin, before confiding that “the hardest thing is resisting the desserts because I do love my grub”. Trainee waiter Marin is the son of Nathalie and Christophe Gerrier, the founders of En 10 Saveurs, which opened in March 2019. They had previously set up a first disability-inclusive business called Handirect 25 years ago, hiring people with disabilities to do clerical work. “We were aware that unemployment among disabled people is twice as high as in the population as a whole (18 per cent compared with 9 per cent),” explains Nathalie. In France, being disabled remains the prime reason for appeals to the Defender of Rights, whose job it is to counter discrimination. The employment rate for disabled people is still only just 3.9 per cent in the private sector, according to French Labour Ministry statistics for 2020, as against 2.7 per cent 10 years ago. In the public sector, it is 5.5 per cent. That figure remains below the compulsory quota of 6 per cent of jobs (for businesses with a staff of more than 20), even though the quota has been a statutory requirement since 1987.

“When Marin came into our lives, it really made us re-think the challenges of disability, both professionally and personally,” explains Nathalie Gerrier. The business pair realised that the jobs on offer through Handirect, requiring IT skills, were in reality far too technical and not necessarily suited to people with learning difficulties. So the couple decided to broaden the range of jobs available to disabled people and turned to the catering trade. To develop their new plan, they looked at a number of initiatives such as the Locanda dei Girasoli pizzeria, operating in Rome since 2000 with waiters who have Down’s syndrome or autism. According to the pizzeria’s boss Enzo Rimicci,

All is quiet this morning in the restaurant En 10 Saveurs in Levallois-Perret, northern France. Marcus Legré is helping Marin Gerrier, an apprentice with Down’s syndrome, to package biscuits baked on the premises. "Normally there are more of us, with a chef and two young kitchen hands, Noah and Maxime, who are autistic, and three other workers working front of house who are disabled too," says Marcus. In the 10 years he has worked in catering, it is the first time this manager finds himself in charge of a team of persons with disabilities. "Of course, you have to be more patient teaching them, but it's a first job for all these youngsters, and they are conscientious and keen." Until the Covid-19 crisis hit, the restaurant was never empty. To make things easier, customers came straight to the counter, and Marin served them from there. En 10 Saveurs has successfully adapted to the pandemic situation, offering individuals and businesses a "corporate social responsibility lunch box", containing a range of "home-made" products and artisanal and local foods, and this has been well received by customers.

Special report HesaMag 23 : Spring 2021

Breaking down prejudice

For an exchange of good practice, Nathalie and Christophe are also able to draw on “Les Brigades Extraordinaires”, a group that the restaurant En 10 Saveurs is a member of. “It’s a group of disability-inclusive restaurants — eight in France and one in Belgium — which mostly employ staff with learning difficulties,” explains Flore Lelièvre, an interior designer by training. Her restaurant Le Reflet, which opened in Nantes in 2016, was the first in France to take on people with Down’s syndrome. “I wanted to create a place which would provide not only jobs but an interface between people with Down’s and the rest of society,” she adds. Special arrangements were needed, of course: colour-coded markers on the tables to help the staff, easy-grip plates, a rest room and appropriate work hours (20 hours a week on average). Adapting the premises and equipment cost 400 000 euros, which were raised from investors and donors.

Antoine Beslot has been a waiter at the Le Reflet restaurant, on the permanent payroll, from the very beginning. Popular with customers for his jokey manner, what he likes best about this job is “working somewhere normal”, as he puts it, smiling. Antoine previously had sheltered employment in an ESAT (a support centre helping disabled people into work).

“All our staff have become more independent. Nowadays, they take the bus or tram on their own. Not only have they developed their skills, but their self-confidence has grown too,” says Flore Lelièvre, with evident delight. The restaurant is rated fifth in Nantes on Trip Advisor, and two of its patrons, Marie and Katie Bouësse, come not just “because it’s good, but to support a venture that makes sense”. Its success has not only inspired other disability-inclusive restaurants like Café Joyeux in Rennes, which subsequently opened branches in Paris too, but also convinced other restaurateurs to embrace difference. Christophe Bourrioux, manager of the Résinier au Barp (Gironde), is one of those restaurateurs who took the plunge and hired a young man with Down’s syndrome, Yvan, as a waiter. “Our job is a tough one, very much so, and the language is sometimes a bit strong. Since Yvan has been with us we’ve all toned it down a bit, cleaned up our act, and we try much harder to be nice.” To help him integrate into the team, Yvan has a mentor, Anne Heynderycx, a specialist educator from the Down’s syndrome association Trisomie 21 Aquitaine. She welcomes Yvan’s inclusion, but regrets that it is “difficult to find more partners willing to make the same leap of faith”.

Productive and worthwhile

Rachel Bouvard heads the corporate social responsibility department at GNI-SYNHORCAT (the national group of independent restaurateurs and national caterers’ union). She concedes that some of its 13 000 members think “disability is not compatible with their physically very demanding work”. However, 80 per cent of disabilities are not visible. Edouard de Broglie, President of the Ethik Investment Group, points out that “people often think of a disabled person as someone in a wheelchair or carrying a white stick.” But he insists: “Even then, disability doesn’t mean under-performance. Far from it.” De Broglie is also founder of the Dans le Noir? restaurant chain: the idea is that you dine in total darkness, assisted and waited on by blind people. “We don’t make a point of the fact that we employ blind people,” he says. "Most of our customers come for an out-of-the-ordinary sensory experience — gastronomic — which turns into a human experience too as they realise for themselves what it means to be different.” “Outside,” says Mohand Touat, a visually impaired waiter, “I need you to help me across the street, but here in the restaurant it’s you who needs me. It’s not about making people realise how it feels to be blind, that would be silly and it’s not at all the aim here.”

Dans le Noir? isn’t a charitable group but a commercial operation. “We run at a 12 per cent profit, top of the range for restaurants,” says De Broglie. Back in the day, banks wouldn’t lend him money for his start-up. “I was told there was no basic economic model. So I created it myself using my own money,” he recalls. His first Dans le Noir? restaurant was in Paris in 2004, and there are now branches in nine cities in France and abroad (including in London, Madrid, Barcelona and St Petersburg). The teams in Nice and Casablanca were trained by Mohand Touat. This restaurant gave him his first job at the age of 42. “My Cap Em ploi counsellor told me about it. I wasn’t particularly interested in catering, but I had nothing else. My training as a switchboard operator and in IT never brought me any work,” the waiter explains. He applied and went for a first trial.

“What we look for when recruiting are certain skills: an easy manner, which is more important than technical knowledge or perfect mobility,” says Camille Leveillé, the Dans le Noir? head of development for France. Mohand Touat is now on the permanent payroll, earning the minimum wage. “I wake up in the morning with a purpose, workmates, a social life and job security,” he says. Previously, he got by on allowances from the MDPH, the departmental support centre for disabled people which recognises you as having a disability. But, according to Mohand, “In order to get financial help, you constantly had to be filling in forms. If there’s one document missing from your file, you’re at the mercy of the administration. It’s not as easy as people might think.” Sophie Chuzel, State Secretary to the Prime Minister with responsibility for people with disabilities, explained in a 2020 interview"2, 3.

Excerpt from Restaurants extraordinaires: Travailler avec un handicap mental, c’est possible! [Unusual restaurants: learning difficulties don’t mean you can’t work!] published by the Association Trinôme 44, Presse de l’EHESP, 2019.

2. “Quand les enjeux du handicap avancent c’est toute la société qui progresse” [Progress on disability issues means progress for the whole of society], interview in Le Un, December 2020.
that to obtain the AAH (the adult disability allowance) of 902.70 euros a month maximum, "people had to provide a certificate every three years confirming their status: 'I still have Down’s syndrome, am blind, am a double amputee.' As of January 2019, we have got rid of that bit of red tape."

"I wanted to create a place which would provide not only jobs but an interface."

Training is vital

"Research shows that disabled people integrate into the world of work more easily when they have received 'sandwich course' training," says Stéphane Marion, co-chair of the CSR committee on disability of the Syndicat des Indépendants, an employers’ association. Flore Lelièvre recently opened a new restaurant in Paris with a team of Down’s youngsters who were already trained: "The difference in practice between them and the Nantes team, who had no experience, was plain to see!" Le Reflet is a partner of the Paris catering school. Since 2016, the school has had a bridging class which trains 15 students a year between the ages of 16 and 26.

But training does not necessarily guarantee you a job. Véronique Deslandes reports, "One youngster gave up on the restaurant sector because, despite being keen, he couldn't find a job. He’s now working as a security guard. Another student was experiencing problems in her personal life and reacted disproportionally to her employer. She got fired." So, to guarantee secure career paths, there must be a line of continuity. "This is starting to happen, but it has to continue right up to the level of employers" — which could call for mentored apprenticeships. In this way, explains Franck Gallée, regional head of LADAPT (the association for the social and professional integration of disabled people), "the apprentice can do his training in optimal conditions, thanks to an employment counsellor who acts as a link between him, the training centre and the employer". However, as Rachel Bouvard of GNI-SYNHORCAT comments, "Employers don’t yet avail themselves of this mechanism automatically, and not all of them know about it."

Doing things better

In 2019, according to the latest GNI figures, the rate of direct employment for disabled people in the catering sector (hotels, cafés and restaurants) was 3.29 per cent. "That is more than in 2000 when it was 2.9 per cent," says Rachel Bouvard. "But we can do better." The GNI’s disabilities committee has plans for a brochure listing support entities and subsidies, to be sent to employers. "Because the will to act is there," says Stéphane Marion. As manager of a restaurant in Nantes which employs two disabled staff, he nevertheless depletes the red tape surrounding subsidies. "We often have our noses to the grindstone," he says. "We mustn’t break the employment laws, but we do need to make the administrative burden lighter and simpler."

In Bouvard’s opinion, "Priority must also be given to making future managers aware of the need to include disabled staff in their future teams." In this way, inclusion becomes a matter of course. Especially as, says Edouard de Broglie, disabled people are "a solution to the fast turnover of labour in restaurants". De Broglie is an employer with a team of staff who are loyal because their needs are always listened to — as is Arthur Devillers. This 30-year-old deaf entrepreneur has, since 2018, been boss of a vegan fast food outlet which employs four staff, all with the same disability. Located in the heart of Paris, Furaha (which means joy in Swahili) seeks to familiarise its customers with sign language. "To order at the counter, customers can point at the board where there are pictures of the dishes on offer", the young man explains. "A hand-held buzzer alerts them when their meal is ready. People get used to it easily. When things aren’t clear, I communicate by writing on a notepad. Sometimes I mime." He has plans for franchises throughout France and hopes to inspire other disabled people to open their own restaurants, despite the repercussions of the Covid-19 crisis on a sector under severe pressure.

"We realise that taking on disabled people won’t be a priority for restaurant owners who are already struggling to survive," concedes Hugues Defoy of Agefiph, an organisation which manages funding for the integration of disabled people. "We shall do all we can to make sure that the most vulnerable people aren’t the first to suffer, and that all the work of the past few years doesn’t grind to a halt." ●
The bitter taste of Chilean fruit sold in Europe

Patrizio Tonelli
Assistant professor at the School of Public Health, University of Chile, and researcher at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO Chile)

Aided both by its location and the policies of successive governments over 30 years, Chile has become one of the main exporters of fruit to Europe. It’s a very lucrative business, above all because so many seasonal female workers are employed in insecure working conditions that give them serious health problems including musculoskeletal pain and agrochemical poisoning. The testimony of four women brings to the fore the hidden harm that the Chilean fruit industry does to women workers’ health.
Europe is the third largest destination for Chilean fruit, behind the United States and China, and the chief importers are the Netherlands (30 per cent), the UK (20 per cent), Germany (12 per cent) and Russia (11 per cent).

But what’s on the other side of the coin? Who are the workers who harvest and prepare the fruit that lands on our tables in Europe? How do they work? And what effects does this work have on their health?

Piece rates and health at work

María Rivera, now President of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras Eventuales de la Agroexportación y del Mar (the national union of temporary women workers in the agri-food export and seaweed harvesting sectors), picked table grapes and packed fruit for 35 years in Chile’s northern Atacama region. María used to begin the work season in September by preparing the vines; she would pick the grapes between December and March, then tend other fruit for export such as oranges and lemons.

Some 800 kilometres further south, in the O’Higgins region, Ingrid Rivera begins work in November when the cherries, dubbed “red gold”, are harvested. She began working in the orchards at age 15 and now works in packing. She packs plums and peaches, followed by apples and pears in February, and finally citrus fruits, avocados, kiwis and nuts.

María and Ingrid are seasonal workers: their jobs are tied to the pace at which the various crops grow and ripen, and this is why they are employed on fixed-term contracts lasting one season that then either expire or are renewed the following season. They are a highly feminised workforce in the sector. The companies claim that fruit preparation requires the fine motor skills and “gentleness” attributed to women, while the women regard the seasonal nature of the work as an opportunity for gaining economic autonomy. Women currently account for close to one third of staff involved in fruit production, rising to one half of the workforce in spring and summer (Valdés and Godoy, 2016).

Statistics show that the autonomy they gain is fragile and typically involves working conditions that accentuate their subordinate status. For example, in 2009, 24.2 per cent of women and 19.7 per cent of men earned less than the legal wage, while 23 per cent of seasonal workers, whether male or female, worked more than the legal maximum of 45 hours a week. In 2011, 50 per cent of men and 39 per cent of women employed by subcontractors had no employment contract (Valdés, 2015).

The insecurity that permeates the entire work cycle for workers in the fruit export business was tangible in the interviews they gave, and evident in the informal nature of their connection to the companies, the deregulation of employment contracts, the lack of social protection, the low wages and the long working hours.

Sub-contractors now account for almost all contracts in the sector.

Over the past 30 years, government policy has aimed to make Chile a food power by steering agribusiness towards exports. Indeed, Chile has become the world’s leading exporter of grapes, cranberries, cherries and plums, and fruit production is a major sector of the Chilean economy. The area of agricultural land given over to fruit extends from north to south for almost 2,000 kilometres, between the Atacama and Los Lagos regions. Each year, the sector produces close to 5 million tonnes of fruit, of which 2.6 million tonnes are exported as fresh fruit, bringing close to 3.3 billion euros into the country.

1. https://www.prochile.gob.cl/landing/sectores-productivos
3. https://www.asoex.cl/component/content/article/25-noticias/768-avance-temporada-de-exportaciones-de-frutas-de-chile-mas-de-2-millones-de-toneladas-de-frutas-frescas-se-han-exportado-al-mundo.html

1. Fruit workers in Sagrado Corazón affiliated with the union.
2. © Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras Eventuales de la agroexportación y del Mar

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extent that they now account for almost all contracts in the sector and are identifiable by the arbitrary and abusive treatment they mete out: "In rural areas, the preference is for subcontractors who take workers’ incomes. The workers don’t have contracts, so they don’t pay social security contributions, and that means they aren’t covered by social protection," explains Ingrid Rivera.

Once in the workplace, workers come face to face with a complex process of long task chains, from plant preparation to harvesting to fruit packing.

"We begin the season preparing the vines in September with leaf-thinning and suckering, then we reduce the load on the plant through green harvesting, choose the best shoots and thin the plants out (...). Then we have to make a light well, remove leaves so that the light can reach the soil and warm it so that the light can reach the soil and warm it to make the fruit grow more quickly," Maria tells us, meticulously describing the various tasks that must be performed before table grapes can be harvested. Meanwhile, Ingrid takes us to the hangars where the fruit is packed. The interview takes place at the height of the cherry season, and Ingrid is busy with packing. Once the cherry cartons are ready, there’s a whole list of things to do to prepare the fruits for export: “There’s grading, packing, weighing and sealing, and after that the cherry cartons are packed on pallets. Next they’re loaded onto lorries and leave for the port.”

The complex system runs on working arrangements based on piece work so that the company can achieve the best productivity/profit ratio. "The harvesters pick as much as they can because they’re paid by the carton. The owners don’t set a limit, they just keep giving orders: Hurry up! Work faster! Pick harder! And the fruit has to keep on coming and coming and coming because that’s how they earn their money," she says.

The system has worked perfectly for years owing to a mixture of authoritarianism on the part of the business and the pressure that the women workers would place themselves under. The need to make money for the months when they aren’t earning often forces the workers to make sacrifices. Through painful necessity, task after endless task, with no breaks and no respite, the women overburden their bodies, leading to what Chilean researcher Ximena Valdés has termed "naturalised bodily attrition" (Valdés, 2016).

"Natural attrition exhausts the body’s resources, and it eventually ceases to function. I’m 51, and I feel like I’m already fit for the scrapheap: I have pains in my wrists, fingers, the joints in my fingers and hands, and in my shoulders," Ingrid tells us. Musculo-skeletal issues are not the only problems she is experiencing: the pressure of work has a significant impact on her mental health. "As I speak, women are dying of heart attacks. Some are developing mental illness, suffering psychologically from the pressure not to lose a scrap of work," adds Alicia Muñoz, the national officer for female employees at the Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas (National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women, ANAMURI).

In addition to the high pace of work and the ensuing exhaustion, there are the long working days. As wages are dependent on productivity, the hours that workers put in are far greater than is allowed by law so that they can earn better wages. In this connection, packing is where the most serious problems arise because the days often stretch late into the night and the overtime is not accounted for because all the fruit harvested that day must be packed.

This makes the double working day even more of a problem for women because Chilean society also expects them to take care of their families, their homes and their children after school.

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4. The Chilean Labour Code provides for a working week of 45 hours for private sector workers, whether male or female.
5. The “pre-harvest interval” (PHI) is the amount of time that must elapse between the application of the pesticide and harvesting. The “re-entry period” is the amount of time that must elapse before people go into the treated area without protective equipment.

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Pesticides cause women to give birth to malformed children.

*1 Woman working in the “tripaje” process.
Photo: © Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras Eventuales de la agroexportación y del Mar
Use of pesticides and consequences for health

"We can see the effects of pesticides on our children, but nobody talks about it, it stays hidden. But women are giving birth to children who are malformed or have bone problems," Ingrid explains. The health problems experienced by the women and men working in the fruit sector following the use of chemicals on crops are chilling to learn about.

The growth in agricultural exports over recent decades has led to increased imports and usage of pesticides that are highly toxic to human health. The information available shows that the quantities of agricultural chemicals imported rose from 5,577 tonnes in 1984 to 32,545 tonnes in 2008 (Valdés, 2016). According to Patricia Grau, a nurse and lecturer at the University of Chile, the use of agrochemical products in the country is closely linked to the economic interests of export businesses and major international chemicals conglomerates, and this prevents more aggressive preventive measures from being taken. "Epidemiological and health monitoring programmes have almost no effect and little coverage. In other words, although protocols are in place to monitor the person applying the pesticide, what purpose do they serve? The person applying the pesticide is the one they focus the most attention on — and that’s the person who has the most protection," she explains. As a result, information for agricultural workers on pre-harvest intervals, re-entry times or on the products used is full of holes or even entirely absent.

“They would spray the products on the ground while we were working there. The trees were wet all over, but we had to work all the same. All these things have consequences,” Ingrid adds. These sorts of products can cause acute poisoning; short-term exposure and rapid absorption can cause nausea, a slow heart rate or dermatitis. The Red Nacional de Vigilancia Epidemiológica en Plaguicidas (National Network for the Epidemiological Surveillance of Pesticides, REVEP) recorded 140 instances of acute pesticide poisoning in total between January and March 2018, higher than the expected average figure for that time of the year.

Despite evidence of the consequences of acute poisoning, "the major pesticide-related topics of the moment are the chronic, carcinogenic effects,” says Patricia Grau, adding: "And another worry is the effect on children’s health.” Chronic poisoning is the result of repeated exposure over an extended period of time that allows the product to accumulate in the body. For agricultural workers and the people living close to the crops, this can have serious consequences such as cancer or genetic mutations. However, there is scant epidemiological research into this matter because the employers do not want to know about it, and so the problems stay under the radar.

Beacon of hope: collective action

"The bosses are always telling the women workers that there’s no need for them to sign up, that there’s no need for trade unions here, that problems are resolved on a one-to-one basis," Alicia Muñoz says. Alicia has been a union leader of women agricultural workers for a long time. In 1998, she was involved in establishing ANAMURI, an organisation that has significantly helped to shed light on the working conditions and the health of women working in the export agribusiness. ANAMURI’s most important initiative was the establishment, between 2009 and 2018, of ethical tribunals, annual gatherings of experts and civil society representatives to conduct research and publicly expose cases of pesticide poisoning and other workplace violence (Valdés et al., 2017).

In September 2019, ANAMURI developed further by setting up the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras Eventuales de la Agroexportación y del Mar, which provides seasonal female workers with better legal support to assert their rights, conduct collective bargaining and refer matters to the labour inspectorate.

In an environment of workers’ fear, regulatory weakness and limited power of labour inspectorates, this autonomous organisation plays a key role in changing practices. Initiatives such as these set the stage for the fight for decent working and living conditions.

"I’m 51, and I have pains in my wrists, fingers, joints and shoulders."
Since the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Europe in March 2020, tens of millions of people doing jobs incompatible with working from home have been making sure society keeps running. Although the media and the public have shown their support for healthcare staff, workers in other sectors have also been putting in their share of labour completely away from public view. Some of Belgium's "invisible" workers tell *HesaMag* their stories.

Covid-19
Their stories, our story

*Denis Grégoire*
Trade union official
Interviews carried out between June 2020 and February 2021
"We couldn't support elderly people when their families weren't there"
Carol, a cleaner in a nursing and care home

With a lump in her throat, Carol takes a deep breath, and then bursts out: "We were there every single day, whatever we felt like, however frightened or anxious we were. We were doing it for our residents. The ones who were spared never stopped asking us, 'What is going on?' They kept saying to us, 'We're at war.' They could see the hearses going by. The ones who were most depressed just stayed in bed all day. You could see them fading away before your eyes."

The establishment where Carol works was hit full on by the first wave of the virus, despite the isolation measures the management adopted at a very early stage.

"The staff were tested as early as 16 March 2020. Out of 70 workers, only one test came back positive. The following week, it was carnage," she remembers, with tears in her eyes. In all, 26 elderly people died in the home and five staff members were taken to hospital.

When it comes down to it, dying in a nursing home, or in hospital, is not all that unusual. The people who work in those institutions are used to it. But with Covid-19, death appeared in its cruelest, most dehumanising guise. Not being able to be with the elderly people and support them in their dying days, even though they were the only ones who could do it because the patients' families no longer could, is something that will haunt the workers in that sector for a long time to come.

"In normal circumstances, the undertakers clean up the people who pass away. With this disease, you couldn't touch them any more, or even wash them. Their bodies were rushed away as quickly as possible," she confides.

Carol, who is also a union representative, puts the blame on the public authorities, whom she accuses of leaving retirement homes to cope with the crisis by themselves. She is still indignant that the emergency services refused to take some residents to hospital. "I was very upset by what happened to one of our female residents. She was a relatively young person with a disability, who had no family left any more. Although we kept insisting she should be taken to hospital, their answer was, 'Her brain's had it anyway, there's no point putting her in hospital.' And that same evening, we were to be given 10 respirators. I really have the feeling that everything was done to make sure our residents wouldn't go and take up space in hospitals."

"We're doing our best to make sure that workers' health takes priority over commercial interests"
Francesco, supermarket worker

For 20 years, Francesco has been working for a major Belgian retailer employing around 20 000 workers. "Since this disease broke out, proactivity on the management side has, for once, taken second place to the needs of the workers. Panic spread like wildfire, and the staff just had to deal with it," Francesco, a cash manager, tells us.

"My telephone started ringing non-stop. Sometimes it would be a member of staff who had diabetes, other times a workmate living with her elderly mum. The only advice I could give them was to tell them to go and see their doctor. At the end of March, the whole chain was facing an enormous absentee rate. What management did then was call in temporaries and students," the delegate of the Belgian socialist trade union the FGTB told us.

Tension mounted still higher when the media reported at the beginning of April that a worker in a Brussels supermarket belonging to the chain had died. A heated argument soon broke out in the media over a report that the worker had been forbidden to wear a mask for commercial reasons.

"When the health crisis first started, some colleagues did actually complain that a manager had asked them to take their masks off ‘so as not to frighten the customers,'" the delegate of the Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work (CPPT) recalls. "I told management it was not acceptable, and I put a post up conspicuously on my Facebook page saying I one hundred per cent supported workers who wore masks. You have to remember that the authorities at the time were saying things that tended to downplay the usefulness of masks, saying that all you needed to do was wash your hands and practise social distancing," the representative adds.

"Senior management finally agreed that we could wear our cloth masks, until surgical masks were delivered." Now he still has to fight to get the company to comply strictly with the rules limiting the number of customers per square metre in the stores.

"Between the two waves, in the early summer, we really felt the pressure on the unions to agree to the number of trollies in our supermarkets being increased."

Francesco does point to one positive outcome of the current crisis, though: "I've seen a degree of solidarity re-emerging between management and the workers."

With Covid-19, death appeared in its cruelest, most dehumanising guise.
The people who write the safety rules don’t know what our work involves

Sabrina, live-in caregiver

"I’ve had huge numbers of calls from workmates in tears, sometimes right up to midnight. One I especially remember was a colleague whose son had been taken to hospital with pneumothorax. She was screaming over the telephone, she was so terrified of catching an infection when she went to work and passing the disease on to him," says Sabrina, who has been working as a live-in caregiver (home help) for the last 16 years.

As there was no sign of any reaction from her employer, this trade union representative called for an emergency meeting of the CPPT. "I’d put together a note based on the questions my colleagues had asked me over the phone," she explains, pulling four handwritten sheets of paper from her document folder.

Sabrina also offered to supply female workers with homemade masks. "To begin with, there wasn’t much reaction from management to my offer, and then, as they were just as much at a loss as we were, they eventually agreed to it."

"I’m hopeless at sewing, but two other workmates are very handy at it. They sewed the masks, I did the finishing, and I ran up and down collecting material or elastic from private people who’d contacted me through a Facebook group which I’d set up." All in all, Sabrina and her two workmates were to produce and deliver no fewer than 150 masks during their spare time.

As in many businesses, the first few weeks of the crisis saw a great many cases of people somehow muddling through. When members of staff were away, the gaps had to be filled, and people had to devise their own strategies to prevent the disease from spreading. "We were getting orders from our supervisory authorities saying things like ‘You must always keep a distance of at least 1.5 metres between you and the person you’re caring for.’ All I can say is the people who write these safety rules don’t know what our work involves. How are you supposed to practise social distancing when you have to feed someone who can’t feed themself any longer or when you have to wash them and clean them up?" Sabina tells us.

"We don’t only go out to help the elderly, we also work with young people who’ve been diagnosed with schizophrenia or paranoia. Sometimes when I’ve arrived with my mask on, they’ve been scared and had anxiety attacks. Some of them, unfortunately, even had to be taken to a mental hospital, they were so disturbed by the situation," she adds.

The wellness professions aren’t being given the recognition they deserve

Christian, a steelworker and masseur

What can working in the steel industry and having massage skills possibly have in common with each other? On the face of it, nothing — these two worlds seem so far apart. Yet that is a gap that Christian, an iron and steelworker and, wait for it, masseur, has managed to bridge in a quite unusual way. Every morning, he turns up for work at a factory in La Louvière which, among other things, produces steel coils for the car-making industry. In the evening, he swaps his blue work overalls for more casual dress, picks up his Tibetan bowls and goes to visit his clients.

"The steel manufacturer I work for has gone through several restructurings one after the other over the past two decades. This has meant that, as the internal reorganisations have been carried out, I’ve held a number of less and less skilled jobs, from being a civil engineering mechanic to being a cleaner. In the end, my passion took over from my main job, and I decided to become a masseur as a side job," adds Christian, now in his fifties.

His double working life means he has been able to look at the health crisis from an unusual angle. "As a paid worker and trade union activist, I defend the idea that strict measures have to be imposed to minimise the risks. My wife is a nurse, so I’m in a good position to see the tragic effects the epidemic is having. But I can also see things from the point of view of tens of thousands of self-employed workers in the wellness sector who’ve been robbed of the chance to work for several months now, even though they’ve done everything they can to tighten up the hygiene standards they were already used to strictly complying with in any case," he confides to us.
"I also feel that the professions which promote well-being aren’t being given the recognition they deserve. I’m not just thinking of the people working in those professions, I also mean the people on the receiving end. One of my clients is a lady of 70 who lives on her own and only sees her daughter once a fortnight, because her daughter works in the healthcare sector, so she cuts down on the number of visits she makes for fear of contaminating her mother. Our senior citizens are suddenly completely cut off from the rest of the community and can no longer have those little moments of relaxation and friendly companionship that a visit to the hairdresser or a massage session can bring them."

"We just soldiered on as per usual"
Cécile, a worker in the food-packaging industry

At 56, Cécile feels more and more as if her body is giving up on her. Over these past few months, the mental stress caused by her fear of possibly being infected at her workplace has obviously not done anything to calm the many ailments she suffers from every day. Physical pain has been part of this worker’s life since 1984, when she found herself disabled at the age of 20 after a road accident.

Despite her disability, Cécile has been working for 15 years or so in a company in the food-packaging industry which supplies chain stores with containers for cheese, sausages or sweets. The repetitive work this involves and which she does for 38 hours a week is bound to hasten the onset of a range of musculoskeletal complaints.

Since the health crisis started, she has been setting out to work every day with a knot in her stomach because, on top of her musculoskeletal afflictions, she also suffers from allergies and bouts of chronic bronchitis. "At the beginning of April, there were rumours going round that two workers had tested positive for Covid-19. I was expecting them to take my temperature before I went into the building, but no arrangement at all of that kind had been set up. We had to put on masks and use hand sanitiser, but we usually had to do that anyway. So, in the end, we just soldiered on as per usual," she reports.

Her company is regarded as being an essential business. "Even though we are linked to the food industry, I don’t see how our products, which are mainly used for celebrations, family barbecues and so on, were so essential when the whole country was in lockdown," she says.

"If I didn’t have my family, I’d have to beg for my food"
Mohammed, an undocumented worker

Mohammed, 46, is one of the 150 000 undocumented workers living in Belgium. Now with the public health crisis, they have become slightly more invisible than they were before.

Even so, Mohammed thinks he is luckier than other illegal workers. "I can rely on my sister and her family, who’ve been living in Belgium for a long time. I’ve seen other people waiting for butcher’s shops and bakeries to close so they can get a bit of what hasn’t been sold during the day. If I didn’t have my family and some friends, I would be reduced to begging for my food like them," he says.

Since he came to Belgium eight years ago, he has been earning a little money working for private individuals or small businesses. He can never be sure of getting paid, as he found once again at the beginning of 2020 when he did some gardening jobs at a client’s house. "That hurt me because she and I had built up a relationship of trust. She was very happy with my work. We’d agreed on a price, 10 euros an hour. Her brother-in-law told her that was too much for undeclared work and I never saw a single euro for all the work I’d done."

He also works as a labourer in businesses, but it always ends up being more or less the same story. "We agree on a price, but in the end I get 60 euros at most for a working day of at least 10 hours, with the constant fear of having a serious accident," he adds.

With the public health crisis, the scanty earnings from that work have dried up. He has heard about action being taken to regularise the status of undocumented workers in Spain and Italy, and hopes Belgium will join the trend.

FURTHER READING
What do we know about the employment conditions of construction workers in the Middle Ages? What were their rights and their duties? What form of collective organisation did they have? Jean-Michel Mathonière, an expert on compagnonnages (journeymen societies) and a member of the French Construction History Society (Association Francophone d'Histoire de la Construction), shares the research findings of his book *3 minutes pour comprendre les métiers, traditions et symboles des bâtisseurs de cathédrales* (Understanding the trades, traditions and symbols of the cathedral builders in 3 minutes), published by *Courrier du Livre* in 2020.

What are your sources when researching how work on medieval construction sites was organised?

A carpenter works with wood, a stonemason with stone and a historian with historical records. It is especially necessary to stick to the records because, when it comes to builders in the Middle Ages, a great deal of imagination is involved. We have written sources like town and abbey chronicles, where the abbot or a patron gives a detailed description of this or that worksite, including, for example, the dimensions of the building, and even the number of stonemasons working on it. Records of the building costs, if preserved, are very helpful too, particularly where the building still stands, because they indicate its size and scale. Accounts by bishops and local political dignitaries are also informative, even if they are always inflated by a desire to show moral grandeur. Take for example the story of one bishop who describes the fervour of devout local residents who voluntarily transported stones to build a cathedral. How much credence can we attach to this? I prefer to rely on stained-glass windows, miniatures and sculptures which show real-life work situations and trades. Some parts of them may not be to scale or are allegorical, but the depiction of tools and postures is generally realistic.

How long did it take to build a cathedral in the Middle Ages?

It varied a lot and depended above all on money. They built fast when they had to. For example, the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, which was a royal palace chapel, was built in five years. The ramparts of Aigues-Mortes in the Gard department of France, built for defence, were completed in less than 30 years. But building work could stop and start again years later when more money became available, as was the case with the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. That might mean that a first team left and a new one came in. Because usually,
How many people were employed on a construction site?

On average, the construction site of a large church would have between 50 and 100 skilled craftsmen working on it. For the most part, these were stonemasons and carpenters, but also blacksmiths whose job was to look after the tools and iron parts used to reinforce buildings. And then there were all the transportation trades: carters, farriers, wainwrights, etc. There were also unskilled labourers and volunteers, who were promised a share in paradise — remission of their sins.

What hours did they work?

Working hours were the same everywhere: in almost every case, the hours of daylight, so from sunrise to sunset. This could be quite long, depending on the season, so there were rest breaks. At about 9 or 10 a.m., craftsmen took a 30-minute mid-morning break, and the master was well advised to provide a jug of wine! Then, from about 1–2 p.m., the workers stopped for a couple of hours for lunch and a nap. At the end of the afternoon, they downed tools again to drink a canon (a small glass of wine). There were a lot of religious holidays — no work, but no pay either.

What kind of accidents happened on these big construction sites?

We know there were skin diseases, and burns from the lime the masons handled. The master provided craftsmen with gloves to protect their hands against such burns. On some stained-glass windows and miniatures, masons are shown working bare-handed. The heaviest loads were handled and moved using ox carts, teams of horses and lifting devices. But the rest were carried by people. So there were crippled backs and squashed toes. The Abbey of Saint-Gilles du Gard has a sculpture, on the base of a column, showing a craftsman with his foot trapped under the base. There is also an accident report dated 1476, from the building site of the cathedral in Langres. The writer says that large loads were brought down from height using lowering devices, but that small ones were thrown down, clear of the foot of the building. One day, a mason tossed down a stone that was...
"Falling from scaffolding was the number one cause of accidents in the absence of guard rails, lifelines or a safety harness."

Perhaps heavier than the rest, and it landed close to the building, killing a woman passer-by. The mason was cleared of all blame.

Generally speaking, though, there are few reports of building site accidents prior to the appearance of ex-voto offerings in the 19th century. Many of these small tablets honouring a deceased person commemorate masons who had fallen from the scaffolding. This was the number one cause of accidents in the absence of guard rails, lifelines or a safety harness. One little movement, made too suddenly, was all it took...

And, back then, it was better to be killed outright, because there wasn't much by way of hospital care and there was no social security. An accident at work left you crippled for life or, in the case of men of modest means, it was worker solidarity, to provide workers with mutual assistance during their travels, had to be given food and drink; if possible, perhaps heavier than the rest, and it landed close to the building, killing a woman passer-by. The mason was cleared of all blame.

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In fact, over and above the customs, legends, rites and skills, and the differences in trades and historical or geographical origins, the element shared above all by journeymen is a mindset and values whereby the need to practise a trade — "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread", as the Bible decrees — becomes a route to personal and spiritual fulfilment. "Work and honour" was the motto of the travelling journeyman stonemasons of Avignon. And this quest by the individual to achieve perfection by transmuting the materials under his hand is probably the very essence of the journeyman tradition.

Is it fair to say that these journeyman societies laid the foundations of employment law?

The earliest beginnings of employment law for stoncutters and masons under the Germanic Holy Roman Empire can be found in the 1459 Statutes of Ratisbon (present-day Regensburg). The lodge masters had met and drawn up a set of rules additional to existing local corporation rules and setting out the relations between masters and journeymen ("fellows"), along with good professional practice. Rules for apprentices and fellows on their "Tour de Germany" were set out in an annex.

The original purpose of journeyman societies was not occupational training but fraternal solidarity.

One article of the Statutes of Ratisbon says, for example, that the new master of a construction site had to pay fellows the same wage they had received previously. For his part, the newly arrived fellow had to promise to abide by all the corporation rules. Anyone who refused to do so or broke the rules would not thereafter be employed by any contractor who learned of the fact. If a qualified fellow, seeking advancement and having served for long enough in the trade in question, presented himself at a given construction site, he could be accepted. Or again, if a complaint was made to the master, he was required not to rule on it by himself but to consult two other nearby masters along with fellows working on the site. They examined the matter together and then referred it to the fraternity as a whole.

A number of articles deal with the death of the craftsman or master and the team’s obligation to replace them and complete the work — paying the same wages as before. Masters and fellows also undertook not to disclose the secrets of their trade — notably plans and designs — to persons not part of the fraternity.

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The construction of the Temple of Jerusalem under the reign of King Solomon is depicted in the Middle Ages as if it were a contemporary gothic cathedral. Miniature by Jean Fouquet, third quarter of the 15th century. Crédit Photo: © BnF.
Launch of multilingual thesaurus on occupational health and safety

The European Union information agency for occupational safety and health (EU-OSHA) has recently launched a multilingual OSH thesaurus. This tool consists of a list of 2 000 OSH-related terms, including synonyms, antonyms, definitions and some references.

The thesaurus has been integrated into the European Union Terminology Database (IATE), a project launched in 1999 to provide a web-based infrastructure for all EU terminology resources and to enhance the availability and standardisation of the information. The IATE has been used in the EU institutions and agencies since 2004 for the collection, dissemination and management of EU-specific terminology.

Available in all 25 EU languages, the thesaurus has been developed within the multilingualism framework – a cornerstone of EU-OSHA’s work to make European workplaces safer, healthier and more productive. Multilingualism is a vital element of inclusive communication in the European Union and for any pan-European organisation. Making the information, analysis and tools available in multiple languages means that organisations can reach more people and spread their messages as widely as possible.

Pay discrimination rife according to IndustriAll survey

An IndustriAll analysis of wages in the manufacturing sector, published in January, found that women are being paid significantly less than men for jobs requiring similar skills. Comparing job requirements in the household appliances and car manufacturing sectors, IndustriAll concluded that they involve similar responsibilities, physical effort, education levels and safety hazards. Yet there was a 20% pay gap in Germany and a whopping 32% in Romania in favour of the largely male-dominated car manufacturing industry. The example demonstrates how deep-seated gender bias in how we value different kinds of work continues to be the root cause of low pay for millions of women.

This has been clearer than ever during the Covid-19 crisis, with essential workers like cleaners, carers, nurses and cashiers being amongst the lowest-paid occupations.

In addition to working in undervalued occupations, women typically hold lower-level positions and work fewer hours due to unpaid care responsibilities. Overall, women across the EU earn at least 14.1% less than men per hour, and the majority of Member States also lack efficient pay transparency measures. The European Commission’s long-awaited proposal on an EU Pay Transparency Directive, published in March, is a step in the right direction but has some significant limitations, for example not containing specific provisions to promote collective bargaining on equal pay.

Extension of “anxiety” compensation model

In February 2021, a French court of appeal in Douai acknowledged that the exposure of 726 former miners from Lorraine to carcinogenic and toxic substances caused “anxiety”, a judgement which gives each of them access to financial compensation of 10 000 euros. A notion existing in France since 2010, “préjudice d’anxiété” (mental distress, or “anxiety”) was initially limited to asbestos workers. Defined as being “in a situation of permanent anxiety when faced with the risk of having an asbestos-related disease diagnosed”, it allows for an employer to be found liable for failing to take the necessary measures to protect their workers’ physical and mental health.

In France, the conditions for applying préjudice d’anxiété have been progressively expanded thanks to an evolution in case law in favour of a wider interpretation of this notion. The decision of the Douai Court of Appeal followed a Court of Cassation judgement handed down on 11 September 2019, which extends the scope of application beyond exposure to asbestos to all “harmful and toxic substances” engendering a high risk of developing a serious pathology.

Although the conditions may change from one jurisdiction to the next, employer liability is common to all EU Member States under the OSH “Framework Directive”, which they are required to transpose into national law. The Douai judgement could be the start of a reassessment in other EU countries of the scope of this obligation.
Court case over workers’ right to stop work during pandemic

On 11 and 17 May 2020, more than 1 000 workers of the Brussels public transport provider STIB exercised their right to stop work for safety reasons, judging their work situation to be endangering their health in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. However, the STIB management did not recognise the exercise of this right, deeming that all these workers were sufficiently protected and that there was no serious and imminent danger. However, according to Sophie Remouchamps, the lawyer representing the workers, “the perception of the danger by the worker is subjective.”

The case raises a number of fundamental questions regarding health and safety at work. One is the question of whether exposure to SARS-CoV-2 can be considered a “serious and imminent danger” — which determines whether the exercise of the right to stop work is justifiable. Enshrined in European and international law, the right applies to all European workers. Although transposed into Belgian law via Article I.2-26 of the Act on Well-being at Work, its terms of application are controversial, especially as no court has yet handed down any ruling on this issue. The consequences of this court case will enable the scope of this right to be clarified not only in Belgium, but also in those Member States where it has been neglected in the past.

Poor employment conditions expose care homes to Covid-19

Unsafe working environments, precarious employment conditions and staff shortages have played a crucial role in the spread of Covid-19 in elderly care in Sweden, posing a severe threat to both the care home workers and the elderly residents. According to a survey by the Swedish trade union Kommunal — with responses from safety and workplace representatives from 50% of the country’s elderly care homes — staff have experienced helplessness and frustration because their working conditions have not enabled them to provide the care they wish to.

In 54% of highly infected care homes, staff were working without the right personal protective equipment (PPE), and almost a third of the survey respondents suspected that staff had become infected during working hours. In one home where several residents had Covid-19, the employer had provided the staff with face masks made of vacuum cleaner bags. Kommunal’s Chief Safety Officer blew the whistle, and with the support of the LO-TCO legal office, the case was brought to an administrative court, which ruled that the workers were entitled to proper FFP2 face masks.

Staff shortages in the elderly care sector have long been evident, and many homes have a high proportion of fixed-term employees, who often lack the financial security to say no to work. The survey shows that care homes with a higher spread of infection had a larger proportion of hourly waged staff.
Women and lead exposure: a long history

Laurent Vogel

The toxic effects of lead have been known since ancient times. But it was from the second half of the 19th century onwards, with the widespread use of white lead, a pigment used in paint, that battles began to be waged for a ban on the metal. At this point, biological limit values for occupational exposure, based on measuring the concentration of lead in the blood, did not yet exist.

A century later, in the 1980s, these limit values gave rise to bitter controversies in the United States and Canada, as they were set too high to protect the health of people exposed to lead. Rather than lowering them to a level compatible with human health, employers adopted one of two positions: either excluding women of childbearing age from work that exposed them to lead, or requiring their "informed consent" to exposure. Feminist trade unionists argued that neither of these approaches was acceptable. The first, in effect, excluded women in general from this kind of work, given that the age of the women workers broadly coincided with the stage of life when they might bear children. The second failed to take on board that voluntary consent is skewed by the compelling need to earn a living. These "foetal protection" policies adopted by employers could have extreme consequences: in Milwaukee, Gloyce Qualls, a worker at Johnson Controls, the largest manufacturer of car batteries, actually had her Fallopian tubes tied so she would not be barred from carrying out the work she wanted to do. Once these kinds of stories came to light, they shocked American public opinion.

At around the same time, similar discussions were taking place in Europe. The European Union (at the time called the European Economic Community) was set to adopt a biological limit value for occupational exposure to lead. Some Member States were advocating different values for men and women. In the end, it was decided to apply the same value across the board — one that was in fact harmful to both sexes: 750 µg/l. Adopted in 1982, under pressure from the British and German governments, this value was supposed to be just a provisional compromise. Upon its adoption by the Council of European Ministers, it was announced that it would be revised within five years. We still have it today.

In recent times, a parallel discussion about reproductive risks at work has been going on in the European Union. On 25 March 2021, as part of the review of the Carcinogens Directive, the European Parliament approved an amendment. If this gets through, all substances toxic for reproduction will fall within the scope of the Carcinogens Directive, which requires the highest level of occupational health and safety measures.

The European Commission, however, is opposed to this amendment. As a concession, it has undertaken to review the limit value that was "provisionally" set in 1982. This procedure requires the matter to be referred to the Risk Assessment Committee of the European Chemicals Agency, which published its opinion in June 2020. It proposes setting the biological limit value at 150 µg/l, which would be subject to a warning in the Directive stating that the "exposure of fertile women to lead should be avoided or minimised in the workplace because the BLV (biological limit value) does not protect offspring of women of childbearing age".

However, this warning does not place any legal obligation on employers. We would thus be reverting to the American dilemma of 40 years ago: women either being barred from certain types of work or having to give their "informed consent" to a risk.

Yet while the political terms have hardly changed, the clarity of scientific data has improved. They demonstrate that the limit value of 150 µg/l does not eliminate risks for either women or men. This is shown by a summary of the literature, published in the United States in 2012 by the National Toxicology Program (NTP), an official agency of the US Department of Health. Reproductive health problems for women are found to occur at a level lower than 50 µg/l, while, upwards of 100 µg/l, reduced fertility may be seen in men. As regards the other toxic effects of lead, there are risks of hypertension at 100 µg/l. There are also some, although limited, data on decreases in cognitive abilities.

There should not have to be a choice between equality and occupational health. The path forward could be different: setting limit values that provide genuine protection to both men and women and ceasing to regard childbearing as an anomaly that warrants exclusion from work. What is needed is for workplaces to meet the same public health requirements as other locations. To achieve this objective, risks for reproduction need to be regarded as a serious cause for concern, as with cancer. They should be regulated in the same way in the workplace as they already are when it comes to consumer protection. With this holistic approach, decades would not be spent dealing with a single substance when there are hundreds of agents that are toxic for reproduction in workplaces, each requiring regulation.

1. NTP monograph on health effects of low-level lead, June 2012.
and safety and resilience on the other. In an easy-to-read style, he takes us back, first to the source of the pandemic, which in all likelihood began in autumn 2019 in the Chinese megacity of Wuhan, the "city that literally fed on the destruction of the ecosystems and biodiversity that surrounded it and developed parasitically rather than symbiotically until it sparked a crisis in the human/animal species barrier by obliterating habitats and then commoditising bats and pangolins", in a process that symbolises the way in which our "modern" economy functions today.

An economist by training, Laurent does not spare his own discipline from attack. Throughout the book, he criticises economists for defying the laws of physics in encouraging us to ignore climate change and thus destroy biodiversity, and for borrowing jargon that belongs to other disciplines such as medicine or finance to defend an approach based chiefly on achieving growth in GDP at any cost.

Addressing this "devastating web of falsehoods", Laurent proposes that we should start over again, using two, more relevant, indicators to reconstruct the post-Covid-19 world: life expectancy and full health (to be interpreted as a kind of solidarity in matters of health between human beings who are aware of the vital importance of their environment). In order to update our social market economy, which since 1944 has aimed to promote full employment in a bipolar world (market economics versus communism's planned economics), "full health" provides a yardstick for combatting the unipolar global ecological uncertainty that makes our societies vulnerable to all kinds of viruses. Worthy of note is the author's concept of a "socio-ecological feedback loop" linking inequalities to ecological crises, and demonstrating that risk exposure does not affect all people the same way, depending on their status as small or powerful players.

In other words, he suggests "building a socio-ecological state that prioritises full health, not growth". The new state would rely chiefly on three functions (similar to those proposed by the economist Richard Musgrave) – allocation, distribution and stabilisation – in a four-scenario world: South Korean or Chinese bio-techno power with continuous digital surveillance; American or Brazilian ecological neoliberalism with its weak environmental regulations; European-style superficial economic naturalism with its fiscal and social competition; and finally African and Asian natural regulations where exposure to environmental risk is high. Unfortunately, all four scenarios are likely to appear negative to a reader searching desperately for a positive way out of the crisis. And it is at this point that the author sets out his solution, which is based on positive indicators.

In expectation of an ecological update to our national and supranational welfare state system, the author draws up a balance sheet on the gradual progress made in the socio-ecological transitions under way in our cities. Why give priority to urban areas? Because they "are where most people now live (75-80 per cent of the population in North America and Europe) and, although they occupy only 5 per cent of the planet's surface, they account for 66 per cent of energy consumption and 75 per cent of CO2 emissions". He sets out four specific major pillars that underpin urban socio-ecological transition and, as an example to follow, draws up a fairly positive ecological balance sheet of the measures taken by the city of Paris.

By contrast, on the need for reconstruction in Europe, he is fairly critical of EU governance, despite the announcement of the "Green Deal", which is not only silent on indicators for measuring "sustainable and inclusive growth" but also says nothing on whether it is compatible in any respect with the current Growth and Stability Pact, the European Semester or the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The European Union is "very clearly inadequate with regard to intention and method", and is given a fail grade by the professor, who calls on it to take note of the reports produced by the European Environment Agency as well as the European Trade Union Confederation, which "has now made the challenge posed by such a transition the focus of its debates and actions".

"I think (...) that, by isolating us from one another against our will, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that isolation is inherently alien to us. (...) The relentless seclusion would perhaps surprisingly appear to have taught us that freedom is other people. Community is important for our wellbeing," wrote Éloi Laurent, probably while in lockdown. What were you doing on Tuesday 7 April 2020?
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