ETUI publications

Social protection for atypical workers during the pandemic. Measures, policy debates and trade union involvement in eight member states
Slavina Spasova, Dalila Chailani, Sebastiano Sabato, Bart Vanhercke

The platform economy in Europe. Results from the second ETUI Internet and Platform Work Survey
Agnieszka Piasna, Wouter Zwysen, Jan Drahokoupil

Pensions and the green transition: policy and political issues at stake
David Natali, Michele Raitano, Giulia Valenti

A case for an EU directive addressing work-related psychological risks: an eastern European perspective
Kateryna Yarmolynch-Kröck
ETUI, Policy Brief 2022.05, 9 p.

Gender inequality in performance-related pay: a gap in the EU equal pay agenda
Kalina Arabadjieva, Wouter Zwysen
ETUI, Policy Brief 2022.03, 8 p.

Psychosocial risks in Europe. National examples as inspiration for a future directive
Aude Cefaliello
ETUI, Policy Brief 2021.16, 7 p.

Heatwaves as an occupational hazard. The impact of heat and heatwaves on workers’ health, safety and wellbeing and on social inequalities
Claudia Narocki
ETUI, Report 2021.06, 72 p. Also available in Spanish

ETUI-ETUC hybrid conference 'A blueprint for equality'
22-24 June 2022, Brussels

Inequality is not an accident of history but the product of a series of ideological choices about the way our economies and societies generate and allocate resources and opportunities. The 2022 ETUI-ETUC joint conference will seek to trigger a process of reflection and debate on what actions should be taken in order to redress the growing inequalities in our society. It will aim to move the discourse surrounding inequality beyond the important task of mapping out, measuring, and ascertaining the many facets and precise nature of this multidimensional problem, and to embark on the more normative quest of imagining and defining a more equal society.

Confirmed speakers include Thomas Piketty (Professor at EHESS and at the Paris School of Economics, and Co-director, World Inequality Lab & World Inequality Database), Kate Raworth (creator of the ‘doughnut of social and planetary boundaries’, and co-founder of Doughnut Economics Action Lab), Ivalo Kalfin (Executive Director, Eurofound), Sandra Fredman (Professor of the Laws of the British Commonwealth and the USA, Oxford University), Nabil Ahmed (Head of Executive Strategy and Communications, Oxfam International), Isabelle Ferreras (Professor at the Department of Political and Social Sciences and at the School of Economics, UCLouvain) and Luca Visentini (General Secretary, European Trade Union Confederation).

-- The programme is being updated regularly, please check the conference website www.etui.org.
-- Participation will be possible both onsite and online. Register here: etui.org/ZN4
-- Interpretation in different languages will be available for the plenary sessions and some of the panels (information will follow).
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You can find all articles in both French and English, as well as some in their original language, on our website: [www.etui.org](http://www.etui.org)

— Angelo Ferracuti’s article in Italian
— Pien Heuts’s article in Dutch

Cover photo: Ambre Vandenbulke works at the Port of Antwerp as a straddle-carrier operator. Photo: © Martine Zunini
Some long-awaited progress on reproductive health risks at work

Tony Musu
ETUI

From now on, the same prevention rules will apply in all Member States to carcinogenic, mutagenic and reprotoxic substances (CMRs).

Since the EU Directive on the prevention of carcinogenic and mutagenic risks at work (Directive 2004/37/EC) was adopted in 1990, trade unions have repeatedly pointed the finger at a blatant inconsistency surrounding this legislative text: namely, substances toxic to reproduction are excluded from its scope and covered by the more lenient rules of the Chemical Agents Directive (Directive 98/24/EC). However, such substances, which can cause infertility, miscarriages and even foetal malformations, evidently have the same capacity as carcinogenic and mutagenic substances to cause serious and irreversible harm to the health of people exposed to them.

To their credit, some Member States' recognised this anomaly, and, when the text was transposed into their national law, they logically extended the scope of the Directive to substances toxic to reproduction. In the fourth revision of the ‘CMR Directive’ in December 2021, as a result of amendments supported by an overwhelming majority in the European Parliament, this inconsistency was at last corrected. From now on, the same prevention rules will apply in all Member States to carcinogenic, mutagenic and reprotoxic substances (CMRs).

One of the key arguments for the co-legislators was reportedly the alignment of Community directives on health and safety at work with the REACH Regulation and rules on pesticides, biocides, cosmetics, etc. In this body of European legislation, which lays down the rules on the use of chemicals and the placing of them on the market, CMR substances are always regulated uniformly.

According to estimates by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), more than two million workers in the EU are exposed to substances that are toxic to reproduction, such as aprotic solvents (paint and textile manufacture), lead (batteries) or bisphenols (plastics), to mention

1. Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Finland, France and Sweden.
2. See etui.org/ZSG.
but a few documented cases. Cytostatics (a substance that slows or stops the growth of cells) are also found in dangerous drugs that are used to treat cancer patients. Healthcare staff, predominantly women, are exposed to these substances throughout their entire life cycle, especially during their preparation and administration to patients, the laundering of soiled linen, and the treatment and disposal of waste.

Another step forward in the prevention of reproductive risks at work that was taken in the fourth revision of the Directive is that the text now explicitly covers dangerous drugs containing CMRs, and employers have an obligation to provide specific training to workers using them. What is more, the European Commission has to develop guidelines on the safe use of these drugs by no later than the end of 2022.

Indirectly, the extension of the Directive’s scope to reprotoxic substances will also offer better protection against occupational risks of exposure to endocrine disruptors, since many of these, such as Bisphenol A, used in checkout receipts, or some phthalates, used as plasticisers, are also reprotoxic. This category of dangerous substances is specifically covered by the REACH Regulation and rules on pesticides and biocides, but not yet by occupational health legislation.

With the transfer of reprotoxic substances from one directive to another, the limit values for occupational exposure that were established for reprotoxics under the Chemical Agents Directive are now dealt with under the new CMR Directive, with the bonus that their status has moved from indicative to mandatory. Moreover, in its new Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027, the European Commission has announced that the existing limit values for lead and its compounds will be revised in 2022. The level of protection of some 150 000 workers exposed to these reprotoxic substances in the EU should, therefore, soon be strengthened.

The progress made in the past few years in European rules for the prevention of CMR risks has to be welcomed. Since 2017, we have seen four successive revisions of the Carcinogens Directive, the extension of its scope and the adoption or updating of mandatory limit values for occupational exposure to 27 (groups of) carcinogenic substances and 12 (groups of) reprotoxic substances.

At a time when nationalism and Euroscepticism are gaining ground in all the Member States, these legislative advances are a very clear example of the good that the European Union can do for its workers, its businesses, and its citizens in general.
Europe

Seven common misconceptions about digital labour platforms

Mehmet Koksal
ETUI

Very few people work via the internet, so is it unnecessary to legislate in this area? Do platforms create stable employment for people on an insecure income? Can platform working earn you a high income? Do bicycle couriers account for the greatest share of internet activity? Are unemployed people more likely to supplement their income via these platforms? Are digital workers mainly low-skilled people? Does working via the platforms of the new economy without a set timetable give people more freedom? If you answered ‘yes’ to any of these questions, you need to read on...

Adhaa, a refugee in France from North Africa, works non-stop for a meal delivery platform. He dreams of having enough money to bring his wife, Sanaa, and his son, Hamza, to join him in Paris to offer them a better future. ‘Paris is beautiful, you’ll love it!’ he says enthusiastically, while his wife urgently asks him to send money to cover their basic needs. Adhaa would love to send her money faster, but his boss, Mr. Marcos, only paid his wages that morning and this week he has kept back 50% in commission. ‘What a thief this Marcos is, he does nothing, and he’s making as much as you!’ complains Sanaa. Her husband, Adhaa, is only too aware of the problem, but he has no choice: he has to go on doing speedy deliveries if he wants to bring his family to join him one day.

In mid-conversation, his work app pings him to say that he can earn a 40-euro bonus now if he manages to make 15 bicycle deliveries in less than three hours. Quick, quick... that’s enough chatting, there isn’t a second to lose if he’s going to pocket this bonus, even if this means putting his health and safety at risk. Adhaa is so tired that he starts hallucinating en route, but he refuses to take a break for fear of losing this bonus. Mind you, if an accident happens while he is working, he has no one to blame but himself, as there is no official employer and he has no social protection.

This particular tale is fictional, taken from the short film À tout prix (At all costs) by young French director Gauthier Monnet, which was presented at the 12th Nikon Film Festival in 2022.1 However, it is typical of the conditions of this kind of platform work; you only need to observe the constant daily toing and froing of working bike riders in the European urban environment to grasp the extent and the uncontrollable rise of this new two-click economy, hosted in an app installed on a mobile phone. You might think that this kind of work is only done by students living on an insecure income and looking for extra earnings to meet a passing need. But the reality is very different from the image peddled by the systematic propaganda of the digital labour platforms.

Before going any further, we need to agree on terminology. What does ‘digital labour platform’ mean? According to Fairwork2 researchers, it is ‘a company that uses digital resources to mediate value-creating interactions between consumers and individual service-providing workers’. But it is worth noting that digital platforms like Airbnb or Vinted, where goods are exchanged, sold or rented out between

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1. See https://festivalnikon.fr/video/2021/402
2. Fairwork is an action research project which defines and measures decent working standards in the gig economy (https://fair.work).
individuals, are not included within this definition. The discussion revolves rather around labour platforms like Bolt, Deliveroo, Glovo, Uber or Uber Eats, where the work is required to be done in a particular location (e.g. delivering food from a restaurant to an apartment or driving a person from one part of town to another), and also other kinds of online labour platforms, like Amazon Mechanical Turk, where the work can, in theory, be performed from anywhere via the internet (e.g. online image classification).

An estimated 47.5 million internet workers in the EU

Can it be said these days that few people are actually engaged in internet work? This is one of the first arguments used by people who want to stick to the status quo, claiming that there is no need to legislate on an issue that involves so few individuals.

For the first time in Europe – in a new survey published by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), involving 14 countries and covering 84% of the working age population – researchers have provided a precise, quantified answer at European level. The researchers behind the Internet Platform Work Survey estimate the number of ‘internet workers’ (understood in a wide sense) within the EU to be at 47.5 million (17% of the working age population). However, these researchers draw a distinction between, on the one hand, internet workers — namely people who provide services, sell products (except for second-hand goods) or rent out accommodation through digital online platforms, apps or websites — and, on the other hand, platform workers in the strict sense of the term, estimated at 12 million people, including also 3 million workers for whom labour platforms account for a ‘significant part’ of their working lives. These platform workers form a subset of internet workers as a whole.

Another estimate, this time from the European Commission, records more than 28 million people in the EU working via digital labour platforms. By 2025, their number is expected to reach 43 million. The large majority of these people are wrongly working as self-employed people or independent entrepreneurs. The Commission takes as a basis a report3 which identifies 516 active and 74 inactive digital labour platforms in the EU27 and explains that, ‘between 2016 and 2020, revenues from the platform economy grew almost fivefold from an estimated 3 billion euros to circa 14 billion euros,’ which clearly indicates the vast size of the market.


In France, Deliveroo was found guilty of misclassifying employees as self-employed people. Photo: © Martine Zunini
Deliveroo had engaged in the manipulation and abuse of employment regulations with a view to orchestrating a ‘systemic concealment’ of jobs of delivery personnel, who should have been employees, not self-employed people. The sole aim of this fraud was to cut the cost of employing meal delivery riders, and it was irrelevant whether some of them were ‘happy’ with this status or ‘felt free’, as the French judge stressed with reference to Deliveroo’s arguments to justify using the status of micro-entrepreneur. The platform had continually stated that it merely put customers, restaurant owners and delivery riders ‘in contact’ and rejected the existence of any hierarchical relationship.

For their part, 116 bicycle or scooter workers who were claiming damages were called to testify about their experiences of working for Deliveroo: lured by promises of ‘freedom’ and ‘flexibility’, they had soon come face to face with the reality of pressure, monitoring, the ‘war’ to secure the best slots, and reprimands from Deliveroo. A systematic literature review has already shown that these new workers of the internet era, who have no status, have been subject to three kinds of pressure in performing their work: physical and social isolation, algorithmic management arising from constant digital surveillance, and the transient nature of the work itself.

On 9 December 2021, in response to all these issues, the European Commission took the initiative of presenting a proposal for a directive on improving working conditions in platform work. This proposal is currently under scrutiny by the European Parliament and the Council, which will agree on their respective positions, and then the official negotiations will start. It is up to the co-legislators to decide on the schedule for the next stages, but the Commission is hoping that this important proposal will be adopted quickly and is ready to lend its support during this process. Under the Commission’s proposal, once it is adopted, the Member States will have two years in practice to transpose the directive into national law,’ explained a Commission spokesperson we interviewed. ‘On the same day, the Commission also published draft Guidelines on the application of EU competition law to collective agreements regarding the working conditions of solo self-employed people seeking to improve their working conditions. This text was opened up to public consultation until 24 February 2022. The aim is for the final guidelines to be adopted in the course of the year,’ added the spokesperson.

The proposal for a directive essentially aims to clarify the professional status of workers, using a list of five verification criteria to determine whether the platform is an employer and make the use of algorithms by digital labour platforms more transparent.

Naturally, the companies affected by the future European Directive have not remained idle in the face of the initiatives to improve regulation in this sector. Uber promptly came out with a very negative reaction, insisting that the Commission’s proposal was likely to have the effect of ‘putting thousands of jobs at risk, crippling small businesses in the wake of the pandemic and damaging vital services that consumers across Europe rely on’.

At the strategic level, these platforms have given rise to two new pressure groups aiming to influence European decision-makers in order to defend their interests and their business models. One lobby is closely involved in (food) delivery. It is called ‘Delivery Platforms Europe’ and has six influential members: Uber Eats (United States), Deliveroo (United Kingdom), Bolt (Estonia), Delivery Hero (Germany), Glovo (Spain) and Wolt (Finland). This group met before December 2021 to influence the Commission initiative on the rights of platform workers even before it was published. After the proposal was communicated, the lobbying campaign aimed at Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and national governments appeared to continue, seeking to do away with the most problematic issues, such as changing workers’ status. These delivery platforms can also draw on earlier efforts made by another pressure group called ‘Instant Delivery Platforms Coalition’, consisting of four large companies based within the EU, namely Delivery Hero, Bolt, Glovo and Wolt. This latter group had gained some publicity with the launch of a ‘European Purpose Project’ aiming ‘to reconcile the potential and the opportunities offered by this new economic model with the European values underlying our companies’ – in short, they want to establish a non-binding code of conduct for the sector as a way of dampening down the criticisms levelled against them.

Opposite them, at European level, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has already clocked up nearly 200 lawsuits to date in various countries (France, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and elsewhere) with the result that platform workers are regularly reclassified by the courts as employees. These often long and costly proceedings arise from...
the fact that the platforms had succeeded in imposing a presumption that people signing up to work with them were self-employed or independent entrepreneurs. If adopted, the proposal for a directive aims to reverse the burden of proof to the benefit of the weaker party in the relationship, in other words the workers; in a recent resolution adopted by its Executive Committee, the ETUC welcomed the fact that the Commission’s proposal for a directive included its main demand, ‘the setting up of a rebuttable presumption of employment relationship for workers in digital labour platforms, which is carried out by a large variation of different occupations. Two exceptions are relatively highly-skilled and carry out widely their type of work, are more likely to be related to e-commerce and online rental. To determine whether platforms help to create stable jobs, the researchers dissected the results of the survey and concluded that, ‘Despite this wide reach, most people who used platforms do so only sporadically, and move in and out of this labour rather quickly. Thus, among the respondents in 14 EU countries, if almost 30% declared having ever tried to earn money by finding work or connecting with clients through online platforms, apps or websites, 12.4% had already stopped at least a year before the survey.’ While the workforce clearly lacks stability, is it possible at least to count on high earnings to explain the appeal of these platforms? The authors of the IPWS explain that, ‘For the vast majority of workers (85%), platform work provides less than half of their annual income, and often much less. In detail, a platform worker earns a mean of 250 euros per month. Only a small group of platform workers rely almost completely on their platform work for their earnings: 7.5% of remote professional workers, 7% of on-location workers and 11% of transport workers and remote professional work, and slightly over 8 euros per hour for delivery work.’

Can this level of remuneration be justified by the low skills of the people working for these platforms? ‘Platform and internet work is carried out by a large variety of workers, with generally little match between the offline job and online work. Almost all platform workers, regardless of their type of work, are more likely to be relatively highly-skilled and carry out widely different occupations. Two exceptions are transport workers and remote professional workers – where we see more of an extension of the offline work into the online labour market,’ say the IPWS researchers on the basis of their field investigations. Are these platforms targeted at groups of workers who are inactive on the labour market? ‘The unemployed and the inactive – whether due to care responsibilities or otherwise – are not more likely to do any type of internet work than those in employment. This indicates that there is not a large proportion of non-working people earning extra money through apps or digital platforms,’ the study concludes.

No stability, no high pay, no social protection, no recognition of qualifications, not even a feeling of freedom to organise your work – what can draw these atypical workers to sign up to work for these platforms?

The picture that emerges of a platform worker in 2022 looks very much like a highly qualified male immigrant who, in addition to his insecure work, is trying to top up his income by working between 5 and 10 hours a week to earn additional income of 15 to 200 euros a month and who, even so, has an income below the local minimum wage. The only thing that can explain this work strategy is that despair, discrimination and emergency situations of all kinds can be a valid reason to take up poorly paid work to provide for one’s basic needs and hold out for a better future for one’s family.

FURTHER READING


Degryse C. (2017) Shaping the world of work in the digital economy, Foresight Briefs, 1, ETUI.

Workers on the route

Special report coordinated by Aude Cefaliello, Mehmet Koksal and Bethany Staunton
From the consumer goods transported by ship or lorry and the meals delivered to us directly by bike, through to the trains and buses we take every day to get to work and the flights we book to go on holiday, it’s clear that transport workers are absolutely essential to our everyday lives.

Livia Spera, Acting General Secretary of the European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF), introduces us to this special report with an exclusive interview in which she explains the environmental and social challenges that the sector is facing. Further on, Romanian drivers express their frustration with working conditions, which, together with the growing labour shortages in this profession, provides yet another argument for combating the over-exploitation of eastern European workers. As you can read in the report, labour shortages are in fact afflicting the whole of Europe, with no fewer than 400,000 vacancies on the market for lorry drivers. Wage cuts, appalling conditions and constant separation from their families are no way to attract the younger generations to take up driving jobs.

After just about giving their all at sea, Dutch dockers, for their part, dream of a healthy retirement, which seems increasingly impossible. And in the air, low-cost airlines may have resumed business, but workers’ rights simply can’t get off the ground, while French female workers are campaigning against night work and exposure to cancer risks. Such stories call the meaning of work into question if it seriously affects workers’ health. Finally, in the United Kingdom, new rail reforms are in the offing to right the wrongs of privatisation – could this challenge the long tradition of liberalisation policy in the sector?

Take your seat for this exclusive journey through the day-to-day reality of transport workers across Europe.
Livia Spera

Transport costs have a knock-on effect on everything

The European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF), which represents more than 5 million transport workers from more than 200 transport unions and 40 European countries, is a pan-European trade union organisation which embraces transport trade unions from the European Union, the European Economic Area and central and eastern European countries. Livia Spera has been the acting general secretary since 2019. Having studied sociology at both the University of Milan and the University of Warwick, the Italian trade unionist joined the ETF in 2005 to work on matters concerning dockers and fisheries. She specialises in European policy matters relating to transport and kindly granted us this interview in order to provide an in-depth analysis of the issues facing the transport industry.

Interview by Mehmet Koksal

ETUI

Let’s launch straight into the most pressing and arguably the trickiest issue. Climate change was the topic on everyone’s lips during COP26, and the European Union is very insistent on the need for a ‘modal shift’ (i.e. changing the most commonly used mode of transport) for the purposes of greening the transport industry. It will be impossible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions without this shift given that the transport industry is apparently responsible for 30% to 40% of global warming. What is your approach to tackling this issue?

Livia Spera — Put simply, the modal shift means favouring certain modes of transport, for example rail, at the expense of others, most notably road and aviation. So, in a transport federation that represents the various different modes of transport, you can imagine that these discussions have been extremely difficult. Our affiliated trade unions have now made progress, and we can no longer afford to overlook the climate issue given how pressing it is. Prior to 2008, the usual response you would hear was that climate change was not our core business and that such matters should be left up to environmental organisations. I’m exaggerating a little, but, on the whole, we did struggle to get the trade unions on board and heighten their awareness of the issue.

You must have experienced the same thing in relation to other matters?

Yes, we encountered the same attitude when it came to discussing digitalisation and task automation for organising work in the transport industry. An organisation might adopt a strategy of not discussing an issue so as to pretend that the issue doesn’t exist, since its members don’t want to hear about it for various reasons. You have to bear in mind that trade unionists won’t make themselves popular by bringing up these climate emergencies – it’s seen by many as risky or dangerous. What’s more, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is often wrongly accused of being an environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO), so you have to choose your words wisely.

How did you manage to turn the situation around?

First of all, our work here is not yet done. We’re continuing to raise awareness, but it is very clear that, in recent years, the involvement of grassroots movements and a significant proportion of young people in the climate emergency has opened a lot of people’s eyes. Our members have actively contributed to the cause and taken part in demonstrations. We have got involved...
and have encouraged other groups to get involved as well. This mobilisation proved that it was possible to bring thousands of people out into the streets at a time when trade unions were finding it harder and harder to build momentum. In my opinion, this mobilisation opened our eyes, and many trade unions realised that they had to be part of the discussion and take ownership of the issue.

**Are everyone’s interests in it the same?**

Of course not. In the transport industry, rail and urban public transport trade unions have more to gain from the reforms than road transport and aviation trade unions. There is also another related issue which is more of a social issue. To give you an example, road transport is plagued by numerous social issues and precarious working conditions that are tantamount to modern slavery. Workers have their hierarchy of needs and have to prioritise their basic needs such as food, shelter and warmth. If they are constrained to thinking first and foremost about these urgent matters, they won’t really be able to think about anything else. In practical terms, I can tell you that, first of all, there was an internal shift within the ETF whereby the organisation decided to encourage the different sectors to talk to each other by creating three departments tasked with coordinating our activities and ensuring a more consistent approach. Our federation is quite special because it even includes trade unions composed exclusively of merchant navy officers, a trade union consisting solely of pilots, another consisting only of cabin crew members, and so on, so we have to take the opinions of trade unions from a wide variety of different and specific sectors into account. For us, it is clear that there is a very strong connection between the climate transition and an improvement in social conditions. I know that the European Commission has been talking about a modal shift towards rail transport for decades.

**Do you believe in this shift towards rail transport?**

We do believe in it but, above all, we believe in the principle that all modes of transport are necessary. We are not an NGO like Stay Grounded which is calling for a radical, sweeping ban on aviation. They can afford to promote a populist message which consists of saying that we need to put a complete stop to all aviation and ban the use of lorries. However, in reality, we know that this is impossible because we will still need aeroplanes and all modes of transport. Just think about the need for transportation to remote areas and islands. Aviation is an essential sector. Currently, 2.5 million people work in the aviation ecosystem across Europe, so it is important to remember that this sector is responsible for creating a lot of jobs.

**Why are you so keen to emphasise the link between the green transition and the social dimension?**

Because, ultimately, transport costs have a knock-on effect on everything. If you want to promote rail transport, you need to build more tracks, and so you need to agree to public investment and, in particular, infrastructure costs. It costs a lot of money to create new rail infrastructure, and it takes years to complete the work involved and requires a lot of space. Although it is hardly given any media coverage, there is currently a lot of congestion affecting rail freight, and companies are up in arms about it.

**The European Union decided to liberalise this market so as to allow competition to play its role...**

Yes, but this policy mainly helped to destroy jobs and undermine working conditions by creating competitive dynamics that didn’t necessarily increase the volumes being transported. The figures show that the freight transport volume actually decreased once the industry had been privatised. If we truly want to make the shift towards rail transport, we need to develop a strong policy of support for the rail sector, including public passenger transport, and agree to invest public money in it. Unlike rail costs, which are high, road transport costs are extremely low because those who work on the roads are, generally speaking, very poorly paid. It is a job that no one wants to do, especially now following the pandemic, wages are very low, you have to travel long distances from home, and so on. This wasn’t the case 30 years ago when lorry drivers were very well paid. Danish lorry drivers used to travel to Italy every week with decent wage conditions, as this was considered fair compensation for the distances involved. These days, lorry drivers are asked to go as far as the Philippines and Kazakhstan. Did you know that it is currently estimated that there is a shortage of several hundreds of thousands of drivers? Admittedly, the European Union hasn’t had the same issue with heavy goods vehicle drivers as the United Kingdom, as there is greater elasticity in the labour market given that there are 27 Member States. Do you see how, if we continue to allow it to be cheaper to transport goods and people via road than rail, then the modal shift towards rail transport will never happen? In any case, given that demand for transport will increase, we believe that there is room for all modes. However, there is most certainly a need for a shift in favour of social and environmental sustainability.

**So, does road transport need to be made more expensive?**

Yes, road transport evidently needs to be made more expensive by including wage costs in overall transport costs. We constantly talk about the internalisation of external costs from an environmental point of view. We need to internalise labour costs and not just focus on ramping up controls or collective bargaining.
But doesn’t this run the risk of upsetting consumers?

No, not necessarily. We’re talking about only a very slight shift in the balance by internalising these costs. To give you a specific example, we’d be talking about increasing the delivery price for a smartphone by 3 euros. This wouldn’t put consumers off. Look at what is currently happening with large container ships between Asia and Europe. Transportation which, prior to the pandemic, would have cost 1 000 dollars is now priced at 10 000 dollars.

Why is that?

Because, during the pandemic, production capacity in Asia fell, consumption grew, congestion built up because Chinese ports were closed, factories were closed, containers were stuck in the US, and so on.

Are you saying that price hikes can be introduced when necessary?

Yes, precisely, and that’s also why we’re seeing the kind of inflation that we’re currently experiencing. But, if we just allow working conditions in the transport industry to worsen and workers to continue to be poorly paid, we will never be able to meet the modal shift challenge. The same goes for passenger transport. If you can buy a plane ticket from Brussels to Ibiza for 10 euros, you’re not necessarily going to spend the weekend in the Ardennes. Ultra-low-cost airlines are creating a market that doesn’t exist or that shouldn’t exist.

Yes, but this is an extreme and unusual example. The development of the aviation sector isn’t based on ultra-low-cost airlines with flights costing 10 euros.

That may not apply to the majority of flights, but examples like these are creating a race to the bottom across the entire sector, even amongst the major airlines. Take, for instance, the low-cost subsidiary airlines created by almost all the flag carriers such as Lufthansa and SAS which have started to employ people using precarious contracts based in countries other than that of the company’s registered office. It is worth pointing out that the majority of our members in the aviation sector work on the ground in ground handling or in baggage-handling companies where margins are extremely tight, which is also a result of the ultra-low-cost model.

Can’t we come up with innovative solutions to reduce the amount of pollution caused by these connections?

The margins in the sector are not conducive to investment in research and development. There needs to be support for public investment in innovation, but this needs to be conditional on respect for social rights, collective bargaining agreements, and so on. The same can be said of road haulage companies; there is a lot of subcontracting, wage costs are squeezed as far as possible, margins are tight and there is no appetite for research and innovation. The innovative spirit is, in fact, being driven by software developers who want to make a business out of it. This is not an initiative being driven from within the transport industry itself.

Everyone knows the owners of Amazon, Microsoft and Meta, but no one knows these owners of shipping lines, who are major capitalists.'
ETF Acting General Secretary Livia Spera at Central Station in Brussels. Photo: © Martine Zunini
On the subject of innovation, doesn't the development of algorithmic management concern you?

We are following this development through the work being conducted by the European Trade Union Confederation and the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) which believe that labour law needs to evolve in order to protect workers exposed to such risks. This goes hand in hand with discussions on legislation concerning limits on the use of artificial intelligence and the proposal for a directive on regulating labour platforms. For us, digitalisation in the lorry sector could be a good thing if it is managed properly, because it could help to professionalise the occupation. People are always talking about ‘professional drivers’. In the long term, we are not against the idea of having fewer jobs as long as the jobs come with better working conditions. To date, these workers have been very poorly treated in general, so it would be a good thing to see professionalisation with improved conditions, more training, and so on.

Could this be a solution in the future for all sectors, I mean fewer jobs but better conditions, a sort of ‘less-with-more’ approach?

Yes, potentially. Can we come back to the price issue, which is also related to the development of artificial intelligence and e-commerce? The president of Belgium’s Socialist Party, Paul Magnette, recently caused quite a stir in the media when he floated the idea of banning e-commerce only to then backtrack in light of people’s reactions. Our two Belgian trade union members SETCa and BTB reacted to this idea by saying that they were not against e-commerce as long as it is regulated. What is the situation these days? You make a purchase on Amazon or from other similar companies and you pay for the product which you receive free of charge in the post. If you don’t like what you ordered, you return it free of charge. This is a nightmare for workers, because this is a sector that offers very poor working conditions for work that is controlled by algorithms and overly subcontracted. Since Amazon is a massive company, it is in a strong negotiating position when it comes to concluding flat-rate agreements with hauliers. The companies rely heavily on individuals in false self-employment to deliver the parcels. The labour inspectorate recently conducted an investigation in Belgium and forced a delivery company to close down after its working conditions were found to be appalling; it was also exploiting workers without residence permits. We’re talking here about a new exploited working class. This way of doing business based on subcontracting also has an environmental cost because, of course, these vans are everywhere you look in our towns and cities. This situation is threatening local business and having an impact on urban public transport which can no longer offer users an efficient service. If vans block trams and buses every five minutes in order to deliver parcels, this has an impact on traffic, urban air quality and the smooth flow of urban public transport. Drivers cannot afford to spend time looking for somewhere to park, as the algorithm increases their stress levels, so they just park wherever they can in order to deliver as many parcels as quickly as possible.

What does the future look like in your eyes?

The future cannot simply be about increasing the number of scooters and electric cars. We absolutely must develop public transport infrastructures that are both affordable and efficient.

On the subject of scooters and bikes: regarding riders and couriers from Deliveroo, Uber Eats, etc., you take a particularly positive view of the approach adopted by the European Commission which has put forward a proposal for a directive on regulating digital labour platforms. You have stated that the European Commission is listening to the sector. Why are you so optimistic about this?

Because it will clarify the rules and set out very precise criteria in order to ensure that these workers are treated like other employees and not considered to be self-employed individuals. It will lead to social responsibilities for companies which, at the moment, don’t accept any and which benefit from the welfare state paid for by others and get away with not contributing themselves. We are very positive about the initiative, but we are also aware that the platforms are spending millions of euros on lobbying in order to block it. I think that it is a very important and even symbolic message from the European Commission which has decided to sit up and listen following our legal actions and media coverage of the issue. It also shows the trade union movement that, if we all pull in the same direction, we can get there. These days, discussions focus mainly on the catering industry and swift takeaway deliveries, but the truth is that this platform-based management system could, sooner or later, be applied just about anywhere, and we’re already seeing it in logistics.
'If decent connections with the airports are not guaranteed, the European sector won't be able to compete with the airlines from the Gulf states.'

Does that concern you?

Yes, it concerns us because e-commerce is experiencing constant growth, and this industry has a direct impact on the transport industry. But we're not just sitting back, because this is also where our members are unionising the most. If you look at Italy, for example, in the case of Amazon, the transport trade unions have managed to reach a historic agreement with regard to industrial relations and are currently negotiating an industry-wide agreement. This concerns around 50,000 workers in Italy, so it is huge for the country.

Let's turn our attention to the maritime sector which has been very important, particularly during the pandemic. What can you tell us about it?

It is a very important sector and one which likes to remain very discrete. In a way, shipping lines are the ultimate representation of capitalism. If I were to ask you if you knew the names of the owners of major shipping lines such as MSC or CMA CGM, you probably wouldn't be able to tell me. Everyone knows the owners of Amazon, Microsoft and Meta (Facebook), but no one knows these owners of shipping lines, who are major capitalists.

Perhaps because they're not as rich as Bezos?

I can tell you that they are extremely rich and that this is a sector that likes to remain hidden. The term 'sea blindless' is often used to describe the fact that they prefer zero visibility of their affairs. There are an estimated 1.5 million seafarers in the world working offshore, and there are a lot more workers involved if you include the other sectors that are essential to shipping. I would like to draw your attention to a major campaign that has been run by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) for nearly 70 years which aims to fight flags of convenience. A large proportion of vessels, although European property, are registered in countries with which the owners have no connection because the owners are not, for example, subject to national collective bargaining agreements for their workers. Our trade unions and the ITF rightly want to defend social rights by encouraging the adoption of collective bargaining agreements. Broadly speaking, unlike railway workers and urban public transport workers, seafarers have few opportunities to take industrial action to defend their rights. Any action on board a vessel can easily be interpreted as attempted mutiny.

I don't understand. Are there specific agreements between European shipping lines?

At European level, there is a specific piece of legislation called the Consortia Block Exemption Regulation (CBER) whereby the European Commission allows shipping lines to enter into agreements or consortia up until 2024 without infringing EU anti-trust rules. This exemption also encourages vertical integration of shipping lines in container terminals and has a considerable negative impact on the profitability of port services and on other sectors of industry. Alongside other organisations, we have been very vocal in opposing these exemption regimes. To tell you the truth, historically, shipping lines have always wielded a lot of influence over the European Commission. They have also been granted special tax arrangements, because shipping is an international sector that should be competitive. In order to keep these sectors in Europe, they are granted tax concessions, although this does not really have an impact on European employment. For example, they pay a tonnage tax on the grounds that their business operations are conducted offshore, so this means that they don't pay based on their turnover but based on the tonnage of the fleet.

It's quite unbelievable that such an exemption would be made these days.

Absolutely, but that's not even the worst of it. A few years ago, a study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed that, in certain countries, these companies can apply a tonnage tax even on their onshore operations and services. They use vertical integration by purchasing port infrastructures and holding participating interests in port terminals. As such, they can drive the port services market down by taking advantage of the existence of competition. Competition in this sector is fierce on account of excess capacity at the ports. The shipping lines therefore built larger vessels in order to transport more containers. Although the shipping lines benefited from very favourable taxation arrangements, they claimed that they could no longer cover the costs and obtained special authorisation to work together and provide joint services. Ultimately, they managed to obtain a lot of negotiating power in relation to the port authorities and terminals. This has implications in terms of the collective bargaining agreements that our dockers trade unions negotiate. Port labour pools were designed and created to prevent job insecurity, and so they should be seen as a very modern approach for companies that reportedly want to be socially responsible. Unfortunately, we are seeing companies attack workers' social protection systems. The situation becomes untenable when you consider that port cities such as Antwerp, Hamburg and Rotterdam have to deal with the pressure of large vessels, lorries driving around delivering parcels, and the health and safety of those working in the shipping sector which are being safeguarded less and less.

Special report

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Romanian drivers complain of exploitation

Florentin Cassonnet and Laura Maria-Ilie
Journalists
Diego Ravier
Photographer

The bulk of international road transport in the European Union (EU) is performed by hundreds of thousands of east European drivers, primarily Poles, Lithuanians and Romanians. The fact that they are cheaper than their colleagues from the west means that hauliers can operate at lower cost and with higher profits, but the drivers work in conditions that sometimes border on modern slavery. Under its 'Mobility Package', the European Commission is trying to change the rules of the game to put an end to social dumping and the systematic exploitation of drivers. The reform is a major test for the EU, which will have to prove itself to businesses, the Member States and European workers, while having already been accused of merely remedying the driver shortage in the west at the expense of the east.

It’s Monday evening. Constantin Troncota, age 36, has finished his day’s work. Nine hours of driving, six clients – four in the Netherlands, one in Belgium and the last one in Germany. If you include loading and unloading, it adds up to 12 hours of work. He has a shower at the service station, and makes something to eat next to his truck, a meal that he’ll share with three other Romanian drivers who’ve stopped at this German motorway rest area for the night. This evening, he’ll watch a film in his cab before going to bed on the bunk behind his seat. Then he’ll be back on the road tomorrow morning.

Constantin earns 3 000 euros a month, but he had a tough time getting it. It took five different German firms making arrangements to pay some of his wages on the side, or failing to honour his requests for leave by withholding his last wage packet, before he decided to resign. He went to court and was able to recover only some of his dues, less legal fees. ‘And I speak German, I’m educated and can stand up for myself. Just imagine what it’s like for people who don’t have the resources that I have. As far as I’m concerned, drivers are subject to continual abuses.’ He finally found an employer who abides by the law, but to earn his good wage he still has to work 12 hours of work per day, and 15 hours twice a week. ‘I don’t think it’s normal to work 15 hours, it can cause accidents,’ he says. For instance, fatigue causes a temporary dip in visual acuity, as he found out at a medical appointment at the end of a working day. Nonetheless, his employer presses him to make full use of all his working hours. There’s a driver shortage, and you have to extract full value from the available workforce.

There are several hundreds of thousands of east European drivers like Constantin who work under these difficult conditions. There’s a lack of lorry parks for their statutory breaks, and a lack of infrastructure (showers, toilet facilities, kitchens) to enable them to live a decent working life when they’re on the road for months on end without going home, among other factors. ‘This job is proof that modern slavery still exists and that there are abusive, unscrupulous bosses who will wear drivers down psychologically to the point that they’re an accident risk, making them time bombs,’ complains Claudiu, who prefers to remain anonymous. ‘No one will do anything for us,’ says Tiberiu. ‘We’ll fall by the wayside one after the other, and those of us who live long enough to draw our pensions will end up spending the lot on medical bills.’ Heart attacks, back problems, circulatory issues, diabetes, obesity to name but a few. The average life expectancy for Romanian lorry drivers is 60.
The other side of the social dumping coin

Why are Romanian drivers so prized by western businesses? Quite simply because they are cheaper. In order to take advantage of the opportunity they present, western transporter businesses have opened subsidiaries in Romania so that they can recruit drivers on Romanian labour contracts, which are often paid at the minimum wage (less than 400 euros per month), and the bulk of the remuneration is paid as a per diem, in other words a daily subsistence cost for living on the move, often by way of a cash payment in Romania. The advantage: low wage costs for the employer, as per diem are subject to tax only if above a rate of 87.5 euros/day. The drivers earn up to 2 500-3 000 euros per month, an attractive sum in Romania, to work central and western European routes.

The result is that the road transport sector is caught in a predicament at the heart of the European project that Brussels is struggling to resolve: social dumping, namely the practice whereby businesses in the west, as well as those in the east, take advantage of the differences across the EU in wages, taxes and social contributions. Shortly after 2004 and again after 2007, when Romania and 11 other central and eastern European countries joined the EU, many found these differences were to their advantage: businesses were able to lower their costs and increase their profits, while workers from the east were suddenly earning wages equivalent to several times the annual norm for their country of origin. But the other side of the coin soon surfaced: for businesses and workers in the west, it was unfair competition from the east; for workers in the east, it was exploitation at work without the benefits of the protections and terms extended to their western counterparts, all the while sacrificing their family life, their health and their retirement.

In order to put this problem right, in August 2020 the European Commission adopted a Mobility Package and allowed the Member States until 21 February 2022 to bring their legislation into line with the new measures. In addition to a ban on spending the weekly rest period in the vehicle cabin, the flagship measures include drivers returning to their place of residence.
Poor working conditions and labour shortages

‘People want different things,’ says Luciana Țintoșan, age 48, who holds two university degrees and has been a driver since 2015. ‘There are too few drivers who want to go home every four weeks. In my firm, you do three months on the road and a month at home, and that suits me fine.’ For her, ‘it should all be people-based’, even if their working conditions ‘will never be up to the right standard’. The issue? The dearth of drivers all over Europe is pushing businesses to exploit the existing workforce regardless of the law or working conditions. The sector is trapped in a vicious circle that is dragging everything to the bottom. The most resilient among them ultimately find a post that is broadly satisfying after several bad experiences. ‘I’m lucky at the moment: my boss is an ex driver, he understands us,’ says Luciana, who despite this is employed on the minimum wage by a Romanian subsidiary of a Dutch business. ‘The fact is, I felt exploited by the [Romanian] firm I used to work for. I had no holiday, during the breaks you had to load up or unload, the conditions were crucifying.’

When we raise the issue of exploitation, the drivers are torn, both irritated by the system but not wanting to be regarded as victims. Yes, there’s exploitation, but it’s also up to them to turn down bad contracts. ‘It’s hard to give up driving when you’re earning 2,500 euros a month,’ Luciana explains. ‘And there’s the love of it, you get attached to the truck. It’s like a drug. People in the street just see a metal box, but you have your own bit of luxury inside, and, believe you me, you get attached to it.’ By dint of spending most of their time in the cabin, it also becomes their home: they fill it with their energy, their hopes and their sorrows; they seal friendships at the roadside with others who share this way of life, imbued as it is with a degree of freedom and the scent of continuous adventure. ‘You cry, you have a moan, you drive on, you’re buffeted by the wind, rain, storms, you take your money, that gives you some hope, and on you go,’ Luciana says.

‘When you work three months straight, you go into a sort of trance, you stop feeling anything,’ explains Daniel Dănăcică, 51,

or employer’s operational centre every four weeks, returning lorries to their country of registration every eight weeks, and aligning posted workers’ wages with the local wages in the countries where they work. The aim is to introduce more equitable trading conditions for European transporters and to improve drivers’ working conditions.

However, on the ground, few Romanian drivers are fully in favour of the measures. In Constantin’s view, the measures were taken at European level with no input from the people in the job. For example, drivers must now manually enter on their tachograph the symbol for a country they have entered: a few days ago, Constantin crossed the Dutch border, the first parking place was two kilometres from the border, and he missed it, meaning his tachograph did not have the correct symbol, thus risking a fine of 220 euros. Yesterday, he saw on social media that a Romanian colleague driving in France had been fined 1,910 euros by the French authorities for not returning home after four weeks, prompting others to disclose fines that had recently been meted out to them. This illustrates the fact that drivers are at the sharp end of enforcement of the new measures.
Bankruptcy in the offing for east European transport firms?

This is the fear of the owners’ unions. ‘The Mobility Package threatens the survival of a good number of transport firms, many of them SMEs,’ says Roxana Ilie, a representative of the National Union of Road Hauliers from Romania (UNTRR). ‘The road transport sector is the chief exporter of services for Romania, worth more than five billion euros a year. It’s also one of the main employers, with 350,000 employees. Romania ranks third for cabotage in Europe after Poland and Lithuania.’

Adrian Dinu, age 41, is the owner of International Drinks Est Europe SRL. How has his SME been impacted by the Mobility Package? ‘There’s no way we can meet the new conditions. We don’t have the budget to withstand this, establish bases in Germany or the Netherlands. We’re going to have to close. What with drivers’ wages, the price of fuel and soaring insurance, we’d have to hike our prices by 50% to survive, and we can’t do that without losing our customers. Only large businesses will survive.’ Adrian is resigned to it and is making preparations to close his business, return the lorries he was leasing and look for another job. For him, the transport journey is over.

‘They want to kill off Romanian businesses to force us to move to Germany, France, Spain and do the work that their young people don’t want to do. We’re workers, that’s it,’ says Sorin Goea, age 29, who works in Adrian Dinu’s firm. He says that the average age of drivers in the west is 50 and that the young people don’t want to do a job where they have to live in a lorry, eat out of a mess tin, and shower in service stations. ‘Romanian businesses just can’t compete with what western businesses are offering: more money, sometimes housing for the whole family, and even a job for the wife, in an abattoir for example,’ says Sorin, who has seen packages along these lines for several years. The Mobility Package was designed to resolve the labour shortage issue in western Europe, but it’s likely to further exacerbate the already acute shortage in Romania.

Will the exodus from Romania grow? Sociologist Aurelian Muntean doesn’t believe it will, much, not in the long term at any rate. ‘When social protection and wages have risen in Romania, closing the gap...
‘It makes me feel sick to see so many people leaving Romania. We need drivers here too.’

with western Europe, people will have less reason to emigrate,’ he says. To his mind, the Mobility Package will force a rise in wages directly, because hauliers will have to comply with the new regulations, and indirectly, because the general labour shortage means they have to offer better wages in order to attract and retain drivers. But he notes the frustration of businesses at the top-down manner in which the reform has been imposed. It has generated resistance and led to demonstrations by Romanian hauliers, who demanded negotiations with the government, but ‘their impact was extremely low given that European rules take precedence over national law. That’s why businesses have already identified broadly legal mechanisms to get round some of the directives’ requirements.’

Romanian exodus and social dumping in Europe

Elena Frandeș gets bogged down in the economic factors. Drivers’ rights are what she steers by, and she defends them through her small Union of Transport Workers (SLT), an affiliate of the European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF). ‘Since Romania joined the EU, professional drivers have been hired on the minimum wage as if they were unskilled, and have been exploited throughout the rest of Europe. It’s legal slavery,’ she comments. ‘The owners are responsible: until they pay enough and offer good working conditions, there won’t be enough workers.’ Her view is that the regulatory framework should be ramped up to improve working conditions and attract what the sector needs: young people. The challenge is to make a vicious circle into a virtuous one, and it is in that light that this particular European policy will be judged.

The strength of her position is borne of her experience. Before founding her union in 2010, Elena Frandeș was the human resources manager of an Austrian transport business. ‘I saw all the unfairness. Many employers want to get rich quick and joke about losing staff. The drivers would say to me, “Elena, no one is looking out for us.” The firm had licences in Czechia and the Netherlands, and the Romanian drivers could see they weren’t treated in the same way as their colleagues, who had organised in a union. So we summoned up the courage and went for it.’ It went badly: the Austrian firm sent someone over to intimidate them, Elena Frandeș was physically assaulted and spent 11 days in hospital. ‘There were 750 employees at the time, some of them were sent to Czechia and the others were sacked. We went to court, the employer was arrested, his lorries immobilised and his transport licence withdrawn.’

Since then, she’s been leading a union attack on social dumping which has become inseparable from another phenomenon: the exodus. ‘The situation in Romania is critical. I have brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces who have left because they just couldn’t make ends meet here, and they are qualified people.’ Three million Romanians have left their country since 2007. ‘People go where life is better,’ Elena says. ‘I’m patriotic – I know it’s not fashionable any more, but it makes me feel sick to see so many people leaving Romania. We need drivers here too.’ •
Dutch port workers want to retire healthy

Given that port workers work shifts, under high pressure and in arduous working conditions, many of them are totally worn out before they reach pensionable age – and on average they die six years earlier. Port workers need to retire earlier if they are to enjoy a healthy old age. That’s the aim of the Dutch trade union FNV Havens.

It can’t go on like this, was the view of the FNV Havens union in 2019. As life expectancy has steadily increased, the age at which workers in the Netherlands receive a statutory old-age pension and a pension from their former employer(s) has steadily crept up too. In 2004, tax incentives to encourage people to retire early were scrapped. In the case of physically arduous occupations, where shift work places a heavy strain on workers’ health, age 67 is far too late, says Niek Stam, leader of the FNV Havens union. Research already showed back in 2017 that night work heightens the risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and shortens life expectancy. Port workers work round the clock in shifts, paying the price for the 24-hour economy.

The port sector has long been highly unionised, with unions successfully mobilising workers and actively working to secure arrangements that will allow them to retire early. In about 23 of the 62 collective agreements negotiated by FNV Havens, a percentage of earnings is set aside so that port workers can stop work three years early and still receive a decent income. The port workers’ union also wants the high taxes that port workers pay on their irregular hours of work to be placed in an early retirement fund. Likewise the pension contribution that employers have not had to pay in recent years. Finally, agreement needs to be reached with the national government, which does not pay a cent towards early retirement, to ensure that there is no punitive taxation here. According to Stam: ‘Between now and 2032, the port sector will be putting 83 million euros into this operation. Employers also realise, of course, that older port workers are often not making it to pensionable age, that they are forced to retire earlier, and that they (the employers) have to keep paying them during two years’ worth of sick leave. It is in the employers’ interest too that workers should reach pensionable age in a relatively good state of health. So most of them are happy to sign up to this arrangement. It is a ground-breaking initiative in the Netherlands and unique in Europe.’

Making things as easy as possible for seniors

In the collective agreements negotiated by FNV Havens for the Dutch seaports (Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Zeeland), the union has always held out for health and safety and sustainability of employment for older port workers. Thus ‘senior-appropriate arrangements’ (Senioren Fitregelingen) are negotiated in collective agreements, allowing older employees to begin working shorter hours for the same pay and with the same accumulated pension rights five years before they reach pensionable age. ‘We always try to make things as easy as possible for seniors,’ says Stam. ‘After all, they have often started work in the port at a young age. It can’t go on like this, was the view of the FNV Havens union in 2019. As life expectancy has steadily increased, the age at which workers in the Netherlands receive a statutory old-age pension and a pension from their former employer(s) has steadily crept up too. In 2004, tax incentives to encourage people to retire early were scrapped. In the case of physically arduous occupations, where shift work places a heavy strain on workers’ health, age 67 is far too late, says Niek Stam, leader of the FNV Havens union. Research already showed back in 2017 that night work heightens the risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and shortens life expectancy. Port workers work round the clock in shifts, paying the price for the 24-hour economy.

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In the collective agreements negotiated by FNV Havens for the Dutch seaports (Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Zeeland), the union has always held out for health and safety and sustainability of employment for older port workers. Thus ‘senior-appropriate arrangements’ (Senioren Fitregelingen) are negotiated in collective agreements, allowing older employees to begin working shorter hours for the same pay and with the same accumulated pension rights five years before they reach pensionable age. ‘We always try to make things as easy as possible for seniors,’ says Stam. ‘After all, they have often started work in the port at a young age. It can’t go on like this, was the view of the FNV Havens union in 2019. As life expectancy has steadily increased, the age at which workers in the Netherlands receive a statutory old-age pension and a pension from their former employer(s) has steadily crept up too. In 2004, tax incentives to encourage people to retire early were scrapped. In the case of physically arduous occupations, where shift work places a heavy strain on workers’ health, age 67 is far too late, says Niek Stam, leader of the FNV Havens union. Research already showed back in 2017 that night work heightens the risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and shortens life expectancy. Port workers work round the clock in shifts, paying the price for the 24-hour economy.

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**Bruce Heezen (31)**

- **Job:** all-round operative with EECV (trans-shipment company based in the Europoort area of Rotterdam)
- **Employed in the Port of Rotterdam for 34 years**

‘You mustn’t let the pressure of work get to you’

Bruce Heezen sees a lot of older port workers getting ill or completely worn out by the time they draw their pension. They all have shoulder, knee and back problems, he reckons. Heezen himself can retire when he reaches the age of 69 years and 3 months. ‘By then, I’d have had 53 years in the job,’ he says. ‘But I shan’t manage that in the coal and iron ore trans-shipment business.’

EECV is an iron ore trans-shipment company and the main supplier of the German steel giant Thyssen-Krupp.

Unlike other dry bulk companies, EECV does not supply coal-fired power stations. Heezen: ‘I love dry bulk trans-shipment. It’s varied work, from lifting the coal out of the hold with a grabber bucket, cleaning stairways, shovelling out the last few tonnes when the ship is almost empty, to everything that happens beyond the bulk towers. There the big heaps of coal and iron ore are transferred by flexible loaders on to barges that go to the Ruhrgebiet region in Germany.’

Working on the trans-shipment of coal is hard, according to Heezen. Not just physically, but also the fact that you work round the clock – it’s a killer. ‘Often in the night, I see workmates using their break just to get some sleep. And you don’t eat as healthily at night either: cakes and greasy stuff, to keep you awake. A lot of port workers are overweight and diabetic. I play a lot of sport, so I’m still fit. Though my knees and my back hurt all the time.’

Heezen is aware that accidents can happen. He has seen a lot of near accidents. He himself got trapped between two barges in 2017, as he was stepping across from one to the other. ‘Luckily I escaped with just an injured knee. I could have been completely crushed. You have to be so very careful. And you mustn’t let the pressure of work get to you.’

Heezen campaigns actively for the FNV Havens union. He thinks it’s important that port workers should be able to stop work earlier. He went on strike over the issue at the beginning of this year. ‘If you’ve given 40 or more years of your life to the company, you shouldn’t have to suffer as a result. Being able to enjoy your retirement is a right, surely?’

Bruce Heezen is an all-round operative with Matrans Marine Services Rotterdam and International Lashing Services (ILS) do all the lashing for the big container terminals. Lashing companies have to be compliant with the port regulations, which insist on qualified personnel. ‘It’s important for containers to be properly and professionally lashed so that they can’t move during rough weather,’ says lasher Johan van Kooten. Van Kooten has watched the job get harder and more dangerous over the years. Operating round the clock in five shifts causes lashers to drop out early, and turnover among younger workers is high. The pressure of work is also high: lashers operate in all weathers and boats are getting ever bigger. Containers have to be lashed or unlashed as fast as possible.

When van Kooten started out as a lasher, there wasn’t even a collective labour agreement. That came in 1991, after a three-week strike. ‘You used to lash and unlash containers in jeans and sneakers. A ship was then 13 metres wide, and the “boxes” were stacked three high. There were two of us to a crane. Now ships are 30 metres wide and containers are stacked 11 high. But, just like 30 years ago, there are still only two men to a crane. Together with FNV Havens, we are fighting for four men to a crane, two on either side of the deck. That is far safer.’

On the often gigantic container ships that carry about 20 to 24 000 containers, the number of steep steps which lashers have to use has also increased. The rungs inside cage ladders go all the way from one level to another. ‘We clip ourselves on to them for temporary protection against falls. The large number of steps you have to go up and down means that everyone has trouble with their knees. Because of the heavy lashing rods and rings used to secure and release containers, there’s also a lot of strain on your neck, shoulders, wrists and hands. Some 60% of all time lost to sickness is due to musculoskeletal issues.’ Van Kooten can’t understand why, in a container sector where there is so much money, lashing companies don’t charge more so that lashers’ safety can be improved and work teams made bigger. Only three years ago, a young lasher was killed in a fall.

The collective agreement with MMS does have measures to help older lashers. From age 55, they get extra days off; from age 57, they no longer have to do night shifts; and from age 60, they can give up lashing and do less strenuous tasks. And they can begin working shorter hours for the same pay and with the same accumulated pension rights five years before they reach pensionable age. A generic measure for the port, allowing earlier retirement, is under preparation. ‘It really is necessary, because the older you get, the more physical problems you get. You don’t sleep as well or as long, and it takes you longer to recover from night shifts. The 1.3 million shift workers in the Netherlands are today’s canaries in the coal mine.’

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**Johan van Kooten (56)**

- **Job:** lasher with Matrans Marine Services Rotterdam
- **Employed in the Port of Rotterdam for 34 years**

‘You used to lash and unlash containers in jeans and sneakers’

In the Port of Rotterdam, the work of lashing containers is done by two specialist lashing companies: Matrans Marine Service (MMS) and International Lashing Services (ILS) do all the lashing for the big container terminals. Lashing companies have to be compliant with the port regulations, which insist on qualified personnel. ‘It’s important for containers to be properly and professionally lashed so that they can’t move during rough weather,’ says lasher Johan van Kooten. Van Kooten has watched the job get harder and more dangerous over the years. Operating round the clock in five shifts causes lashers to drop out early, and turnover among younger workers is high. The pressure of work is also high: lashers operate in all weathers and boats are getting ever bigger. Containers have to be lashed or unlashed as fast as possible.

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Night work heightens the risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and shortens life expectancy.

Training is very important for improving safety in ports.

Night work heightens the risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and shortens life expectancy.

Port workers are not only at risk of premature burnout due to the arduous nature of their work and of damage to their health from shift work; the work is also dangerous. OSH legislation notwithstanding, every port worker has, at some point, experienced an accident or near-accident during his shift. A lasher falls from height, a workmate gets hit by a fork-lift truck. Cargo-related physical hazards may be a thing of the past, and more and more jobs in the port may be automated, but dangerous situations are a daily occurrence. ‘With older cargoes, accidents were far more likely, but port workers were far more safety-aware,’ says Stam. ‘And, in some sectors, you now have more lone working, for example the straddle carrier driver, who moves containers. If he corners too fast and tips over, there’s no one there to help.’

Stam, who is also vice chair of the dockers section of the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), thinks it is important in the European context, and ideally internationally too, that there should be good occupational safety and health standards in place for port workers. ‘Ships are getting ever bigger, the pressure of work is intensifying, port authorities want to move cargoes as cheaply and as fast as possible. Quality has to be the priority in port work. It is for this reason that we launched the lashing campaign, for example, where our ITF inspectors check ships to make sure that lashing work really is done by qualified dockers and not by less well-paid seafarers. It’s a good way of improving safety worldwide.’

In the 2020 Netherlands Working Conditions Survey, the transport and logistics sector featured amongst the country’s top 10 most dangerous occupational groups. FNV Havens has long been pushing for a register of occupational accidents – if necessary, in an anonymised all-port database. Port authorities have their own safety protocols and they refuse, citing the corporate interest, to share details of some occupational accidents. Furthermore, because the government’s labour inspectorate only registers absences after three days, there are no hard figures on accidents in Dutch seaports.
Safety certificate

In 2008, in an effort to improve safety and safety awareness among port workers and reduce the likelihood of accidents at work, FNV Havens set up the Safe Ports Foundation (Stichting Veilige Haven, SVH). The Foundation started from the safety surveys conducted earlier by the port trade union, in which port workers gave safety a poor rating of only six. Employers were also invited to sit on the board. An important means of improving safety is the basic and sector-specific training that is offered to port workers and that leads, since 2014, to the award of the Port Safety Certificate (Veiligheidscertificaat Havens, VCH). There are modules for the container sector, lashers, tank storage, the bulk sector and the roll-on, roll-off sector. The certificate is valid for five years. Nearly 50 port authorities have encouraged their employees to take up this training. FNV Havens thinks that all port workers should have a safety certificate.

Trade union leader Asmae Hajjari represents FNV Havens on the Foundation’s board. ‘Every accident is an accident too many,’ she says. ‘We want to see every port worker going home safe and sound at the end of the day. It’s in the interest of employer and union alike. That’s why, in the collective agreement, we negotiate a certain amount of money to fund training and guarantee the Foundation’s continued existence. By constantly improving the training and applying it in all potentially dangerous situations, port workers become more and more aware of their own safety and that of their workmates. And of the importance of safety protocols. Even when you’re tired or pressured at work. Port workers’ tasks are often extremely routine, and that’s when risks can be underestimated.’

― The right equipment can be a life or death issue when working at a port.

Photo: © Martine Zunini

Ton de Munck (61)

• Job: driver with ferry operator Stena Line Hook of Holland
• Employed in the Port of Rotterdam for 35 years

‘Things can so easily go wrong’

Before a ship sails, Ton de Munck drives 150 or so trailers on board, and workmates secure them with wooden chocks and chains. This lashing is hard work. And a lot of the truckers/self-drivers making the crossing to England drive their vehicles on board themselves. On arrival, the operation is carried out in reverse. In the 35 years de Munck has been working for Stena Line, not a lot has changed. ‘Apart from the pressure of work,’ he says. ‘The old guard has changed a bit in that a lot of the loads carried are mixed cargo. We used to have a lot more breaks and rest time between operations. There’s now 20 times more work; the ships are much bigger. There used to be six trailers on a boat, now it’s 160. And there are fewer workers doing the work. If you start at 1.30 p.m., you really won’t have time for a coffee between 5.30 and 10.30 p.m. But, de Munck adds, ‘you have to be on your toes the whole time. At peak times, you have to be super-alert. The smallest mistake can be fatal. Things can so easily go wrong.’

According to de Munck, Stena Line does tacitly take account of older port workers. They no longer have to secure trucks, and even if they no longer have to undo chains, no one complains. ‘The younger guys take care of all that,’ says de Munck, whose son also works for Stena. He has been a driver for 20 years. If it were up to him, de Munck reckons 62 is a good retirement age. ‘So many of the boys have had to have hernia operations. Port workers start work early and are worn out earlier. When they’re young, they enjoy hard physical work. Until they develop physical problems or start sleeping badly.’

De Munck, a trade union activist for FNV Havens, likes the fact that the port union in the Netherlands is leading the way on early retirement for workers in physically arduous jobs. ‘We started with a few sums on the back of a beer mat and are now cracking on until we get a result. Thanks to FNV Havens, early retirement for workers in physically arduous jobs is now well and truly on the agenda.’
The warmer seasons have arrived, Covid restrictions have loosened... Now seems the perfect moment for the odd weekend jaunt or two to a beautiful European city. At least that's what Europe's top airlines are banking on, and none more so than what are termed 'low-cost carriers' – those airlines that dominate the market when it comes to cheap, short, intra-European flights: EasyJet, Vueling, Wizz Air, and of course, Ryanair. CEO Michael O'Leary has been quoted as expecting a 'strong recovery'. But if we cast our minds back a few years, O'Leary and Ryanair were in the news for very different reasons: the company's very controversial working practices. In what Hans Elsen, secretary for the aviation sector at the Belgian Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (ACV), calls the 'great summer of 2018', Ryanair cabin crew and pilots in Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands and Germany went on strike in a coordinated transnational action. The issues were numerous, but the crux of the matter lay in the airline's insistence on hiring workers on Irish contracts, meaning that they were subject to Irish minimum wages and employment jurisdiction rather than those of the countries where they were based, which were often more favourable. By spring 2019, says Elsen, almost all of these countries had a collective labour agreement (CLA) in place for both pilots and cabin crew, applying the labour law of the worker's base country. It was an unprecedented victory in a notoriously anti-union company.

**From high hopes to a hard landing**

But what have been the long-term effects of these seismic changes in a company whose CEO once claimed 'hell would freeze over' before he would recognise unions? Has Ryanair transformed into a beacon of social dialogue? According to the ACV's Elsen, not so much. While some of the big things may have been won, Elsen says that they are now in constant struggles with the company over the finer legal details regarding employment rights, which can nevertheless have a big impact on a worker's life. 'What is systematic in Ryanair's behaviour is that they keep on saying that the internal regulations of Ryanair are above the law.' He gives one example: despite it being illegal under Belgian law to sanction a worker due to illness-related absence, Ryanair continues to call up workers for disciplinary hearings after 10 days of sick leave, to give them a 'warning'. 'So they accept it on paper that local law be implemented,' explains Elsen. 'But in fact, they don’t do it. They just check in every country, not if something is legal or illegal, but rather: “what is the sanction if we are not implementing that part of the law?”'

Cabin crew member and ACV representative Joao Simoes, who is based at Brussels Zaventem airport, confirms Elsen’s assessment of the post-2018 losses and gains. The biggest victory we got was better job protection. But nothing ever runs smoothly, and even less so with Ryanair. They always want to find a loophole. They want to talk the rules of the game, not play by them.’ Many issues are still to be resolved in the renegotiations of the current CLA for the
Belgium-based cabin crew, ranging from the setting of the minimum basic salary to the crew’s right to drinking water onboard: if a crew member runs out of water during a flight, the only option other than going thirsty is to buy a bottle from Ryanair, at a cost of three euros. Just taking a bottle ‘would result in a disciplinary hearing,’ says Simoes. ‘It would be considered stealing.’

The onset of the coronavirus crisis in early 2020 did not help matters. ‘It had a huge impact because suddenly there were no more flights,’ says Elsen. ‘We were in a weak position, because there were too many pilots, too many cabin crew. It was impossible to do [social] elections. I wouldn’t say they took back what they gave us in 2018, but they threatened pilots and cabin crew in every country with collective dismissal unless they accepted to give up 15-20% of their salary.’ While other companies did actually fire people, Elsen still believes Ryanair has acted in bad faith: ‘They sent out communications saying they would be the first to recover from the crisis, because they don’t have inter-continental flights, and that they were sitting on four billion euros, so they didn’t have a problem to survive.’ The salaries of aircrew staff were also covered by temporary unemployment payments from the state.

‘The say they want to help us, but they’re restoring pay to 2018 levels,’ says Ryanair pilot Sam, who is based in Belgium. ‘They’re displaying the same underhanded tactics they always have.’ Sam also has first-hand experience of the company’s tough sick leave policy, once getting called in to head office to be told that he needed ‘to take better care’ of himself, and that others were sick far less often. ‘That kind of attitude permeates throughout the entire company. Management are not there to help you. It’s about exercising control. It’s a fear culture. Pilots begin to believe that what they do is easy and only worth what they’re paid.’

The real cost of cutting costs

Ryanair was a pioneer of the low-cost air travel model in Europe back in the early 1990s, taking its cue from Southwest Airlines in the US, which in the 1970s was the first airline to establish extremely cheap ticket fares. Ryanair’s growth to become Europe’s largest airline was partly facilitated by the deregulation of the EU air services market; the adoption of the Third Aviation Liberalisation Package in 1992 removed any remaining commercial restrictions for European airlines operating in the EU, such as the setting of fares and access to intra-EU routes. But in a company whose survival depends on streamlining all operating and overhead costs to maintain its token low prices and stay on top in a competitive market, labour does not escape the squeeze.

Union organisations have been increasingly concerned over the past decades by the various employment practices and working conditions of low-cost carriers – not just in the companies themselves but, crucially, also regarding the impact they have on the entire sector. ‘We call it the “race to the bottom” effect,’ says Eoin Coates, head of aviation at the European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF). ‘What happens is that the unfair competition elements kick in. A good example is in Ireland, where [national carrier] Aer Lingus was forced to completely change its type of operation, its work contracts, everything, to try and reduce its costs to be competitive with Ryanair. And...’

1. Europe’s airlines are banking on a strong post-Covid recovery this summer.
   Photo: © Sadak Souici

1. The name has been changed due to the pilot’s wish to remain anonymous.
that happened everywhere. So rather than force the conditions in the likes of Ryanair up, we have seen airlines drag their conditions down to be more competitive.’

Aircrew staff already have a litany of health and safety issues to deal with in any airline: the fatigue that can be caused by a non-stop series of short-haul flights in one day, air quality in the cabin, the dangers of cosmic radiation, unruly or dissatisfied passengers, and the struggles of living away from home, often in shared accommodation (something that took on a particularly difficult dimension during Covid lockdowns if crew members were stuck in the country they were based in and unable to travel back to their home country). The particularly pernicious drive to cut costs in low-cost carriers only creates a more difficult working environment.

Once a cabin crew worker himself, Coates can confirm the traditional differences in conditions between the low-cost airlines and legacy carriers, and why it so important to level up rather than down. ‘I went from Ryanair to Aer Lingus. It was definitely a pay increase, but it was also just the approach and the culture of the company. That was the big thing that shocked me when I moved over. I went from a company where it was pressure, pressure, pressure on things like sales – particularly sales. That was a very challenging environment to work in. There was still some pressure in Aer Lingus, but nowhere near as much.’

Another difference: ‘Aer Lingus provided you with food and water, which Ryanair never did. And you could be working 12, 13 hours a day. That’s a completely standard legal working day in aviation in Europe. So to have your own food is pretty essential.’

Even greater struggles in eastern Europe

The 2018 strikes did make some major gains in western and southern Europe, but this did not extend across to central and eastern Europe. Mariusz Skrzypek, lead organiser at the Aviation Industry Employees Initiative in Poland describes the situation in the country: ‘In 2018, there was an attempt to set up a union in Ryanair, which had announced that it was moving all pilots and cabin crew to self-employment contracts. It was quite quick and spontaneous – over 300 joined. But then a lot of misinformation was spread by Ryanair managers, such as the idea that self-employed workers could not be members of a union, which was false.’ In the end, the majority accepted self-employment. ‘Within a few months, the union collapsed,’ says Skrzypek. Ryanair never met with the representatives.

However, while Ryanair has been particularly unyielding in eastern European countries, they may no longer hold the title of toughest employer in the industry. Enter Hungarian low-cost carrier Wizz Air, which first spread its wings in 2003. By 2019 it had grown to 200 million passengers, and is now bidding to be one of the leaders in the aviation sector’s recovery from the pandemic. And by all accounts, the management takes anti-union attitudes to another level. ‘They are extremely aggressive,’ says Mila Shamku, policy officer for aviation at the ETF. ‘Our affiliates tell us that they are even more aggressive than Ryanair was at the beginning of their development – it’s like the 19th century. It’s extra low cost, extra cheap, and their wages and labour standards are very low. And during these last two years of pandemic, they were the only ones doing huge investments – especially in the UK and Italy, on the cheap – because they are betting everything on the 2022 summer season.’ Just like O’Leary, CEO József Váradi is not shy about voicing his opinion of unions, declaring in an interview that Wizz Air can simply ‘close the base and move on’ if workers try to organise.

2. See the article by Théophile Simon in this issue, ‘Flying and cancer’.
In a 2021 survey of working conditions conducted amongst pilots, Wizz Air received a mere 2/100 in the ‘employee-labour relationship’ category.

Tackling the low-cost employment model

The deterioration of working conditions is not necessarily the result of, but has certainly been enabled by, the growth of atypical employment and complex recruitment procedures in the sector. Companies like Ryanair and Wizz Air have various methods for avoiding a direct employment relationship. For example, Ryanair hires workers through agencies Crewlink and Workforce – which it actually owns – who are then subcontracted to Ryanair, and only Ryanair. In some cases, workers are simply, and questionably, classed as ‘self-employed’. A 2019 study commissioned by the European Commission found that atypical employment practices ‘tend to be more prevalent amongst low-cost carriers’3. The same study noted that ‘cabin crew and pilots with an employment contract via an intermediary manning agency tend to be more dissatisfied with their working conditions than those directly employed by the air carrier’ – but also that those ‘working for low-cost carriers are in general more dissatisfied than those working for legacy carriers4, even if directly employed. Atypical employment and poor working conditions may therefore not always be directly linked, but the presence of both in low-cost airlines certainly appears to create a vicious cycle for workers.

As the ETF’s Eoin Coates explains, the proliferation of atypical employment arrangements across the sector is taking place in a very complex landscape, with companies, agencies and workers often all based in different European countries despite being linked in one chain of employment. ‘This is a growing problem in the aviation industry jurisdiction,’ he says. ‘We can have a Polish Wizz Air cabin crew member, based in Poland, flying for a Hungarian carrier, employed through a Dutch company, and paid by a company based in Switzerland.’ It’s a difficult situation to monitor for any union organisation. ‘The simple reason is mostly to avoid tax or reduce overhead costs’ – which can include pension, social security, holiday and maternity payments, to name a few. This can have serious consequenc-es, particularly in the pandemic. The ETF initially had to lobby the Polish government to ensure that self-employed workers in Ryanair and the country’s flag carrier LOT would be entitled to Covid-related temporary unemployment payments, which their employment status could have prevented them from accessing. COZZ organiser Mariusz Skrzypek explains that LOT is now increasing its number of self-employment contracts, setting a dangerous precedent. ‘LOT is a state-owned company, which simply means that the state is promoting self-employment in the aviation industry in Poland. Ryanair is now publicly saying: “We are just following the bigger model on the market, which is LOT”’. For Skrzypek, the solution is clear: ‘Nobody is representing these workers. We need to unionise the self-employed.’
Like many illnesses, cancer strikes without warning. ‘I was about to go off on holiday,’ recalls Sandrine Flouré, a flight attendant for a leading French airline. ‘I had a mammogram as part of my course of in vitro fertilisation, and breast cancer was found. It was life-changing.’ The next few months were a whirlwind of MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scans, biopsies, oncologist appointments and radiotherapy. ‘The treatment’s a killer… and I didn’t even have chemotherapy,’ says Sandrine, who is in her forties. Starting as a temp with Air Provence in the mid-1990s, this veteran of the skies has since worked for half a dozen French airlines. ‘I found out on the internet that flight attendants are especially prone to develop breast cancer. I had no idea that my job was highly likely to put my life in danger.’

Multiple risk factors

Is the job of a flight attendant hazardous? A number of scientific studies published in recent years would seem to suggest that it is. A study by the Harvard Medical School’s Faculty of Medicine,1 in particular, caused a stir in 2018. This covered several thousand American flight attendants of both sexes between 2007 and 2015, and revealed that cabin crew were predisposed to certain cancers (skin, uterus, stomach, breast, etc.). Cancers of the uterus or skin are four times more frequent than in the general population, and the risk of breast cancer is 51% higher. This last figure is especially worrying to flight attendants: breast cancers are the leading cause of female cancer deaths2 and, according to a 2016 study3 published in the prestigious scientific journal Nature, are almost 90% due to causes other than genetic factors.

In the case of cabin crew, most of the risk factors flagged up by the Harvard study are already familiar to the scientific community. Night work or exposure to ionising radiation (cosmic rays emitted by the sun that are stronger at higher altitudes), are identified as ‘probable’ and ‘known’ risks for breast cancer by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). Other factors, such as irregular working hours, crossing time zones, or cabin air quality, may also play a role. ‘We combine a number of major risk factors, both long- and medium-haul,’ confirms Arzelle Saighi, age 47, an Air France flight attendant diagnosed with breast cancer in 2015. ‘Short- and medium-haul flights don’t involve a significant time change, it’s true, but they are still stressful,’ says her colleague Émilie Le Gars, whose cancer necessitated a mastectomy. ‘We get up very early and sometimes do up to four take-offs a day, standing on our feet almost all the time and sometimes next to aircraft doors that are open in the depths of winter.’

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The body of evidence linking the occupation of cabin crew to an increased risk of breast cancer – due to the dangers of night work and ionising radiation – is steadily growing. Now that there is a chance of it gaining recognition as an occupational disease, more and more trade unions and associations are engaging with the issue.
Love of the job often wins out over the cancer, but the disease has severe consequences for all that. ‘My cancer meant that I couldn’t work for three years, making my financial situation precarious. My earnings more than halved,’ says Le Gars, who is a single mother to her son. Losing flight bonuses, an essential part of cabin crew earnings, is particularly painful. ‘You lose a lot of the elements of your salary; the illness is far from neutral in its financial effects,’ agrees Sandrine Flouré. ‘And that’s why I wanted to get my breast cancer recognised as an occupational illness.’ Once the toughest part of her treatment was over, she consulted the Fédération Nationale des Accidentés du Travail et des Handicapés (FNATH), a not-for-profit organisation supporting accident victims and persons with disabilities, and decided to put together a case to have her cancer recognised as an occupational illness by her health insurer. Sadly, her application was ultimately rejected. ‘The problem is that there are no causal links in the social security nomenclature between night work, ionising radiation and breast cancer,’ the flight attendant explains.

The battle for recognition

Getting a cancer recognised as work-related, especially if it is not listed in the occupational illness tables of the social security system (Sécu), is often something of an obstacle course. ‘If your illness is not in the Sécu tables, you have to prove permanent partial disability of at least 25% and direct causality between employment and illness,’ says Jean-Luc Rué, who sits for the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) on the occupational diseases

Sandrine Flouré, a flight attendant, was diagnosed with breast cancer.
Photo: © Sadak Souici
committee of the Guidance Council for Working Conditions (COCT), the consultative body in which representatives of workers and employers discuss, among other issues, whether changes are needed to the occupational illness tables. ‘In reality, it’s very hard to get an unlisted illness recognised, in either the state or private system,’ laments Lucien Privet, a Nancy doctor who has helped thousands of workers with their applications over the past 40 years. ‘Breast cancer is on the committee’s agenda, but it is hard to say exactly when talks with the employers will be completed, because we have other issues to consider too, and Covid-19 has slowed down our work a lot,’ explains Jean-Luc Rué, who is also coordinator of the CFDT’s breast cancer group. ‘Civil society is going to have to mobilise, because the more cases come to light, the more they’ll be talked about and the more action there will be by institutions as well.’

Action is precisely what Sylvie Pioli resolved to take. Diagnosed with breast cancer in 2014, this former night nurse based in the Bouches-du-Rhône founded an association called Cyclosein and she now cycles round metropolitan France alerting civil society and government authorities. ‘I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, and there’s nothing in my genes. No risk factors. So when I learned that night work is known to cause cancer and I’d never been told this, I was appalled. I told myself I couldn’t let that pass,’ she explains. She aims to be one of the first to get breast cancer recognised as an occupational illness, with backing from the CFDT Lorraine union, whose carers’ and nurses’ section has built up a measure of experience in this area. The prevalence of breast cancer in flight attendants may still be relatively unknown, but hospital staff, whose working conditions are in several respects similar to those of cabin crew, have been mobilised for a number of years now.

**Mobilisation of the trade unions**

‘Because of its history as a coal mining area, Lorraine has years of experience in recognising occupational illnesses,’ says François Dosso, a former CFDT miner who was part of the battle to get recognition of the occupational illnesses caused by asbestos. ‘Towards the end of the 2000s, several carers and nurses in the region reported that an increasing number of them were developing breast cancer and asked if there was a link between their occupation and cancer.’ The miners then pointed medical staff in Lorraine’s hospitals towards night work and ionising radiation, which had been suspected of probably causing cancer for several years. Then, in 2012, two studies, one French and the other British, assembled a body of evidence incriminating night work. The CFDT Grand-Est union called for general mobilisation. ‘We contacted the network at confederation level and recruited volunteers to put together a national team. We trained at the Labour Institute (IDT) in Strasbourg with breast cancer specialists, and then we compiled questionnaires for distribution as part of a survey,’ explains François Dosso. The aim of the survey was simple: to identify cases of breast cancer that were thought to be work-related and apply for them to be recognised by the health insurance funds. ‘It’s good to raise people’s awareness, but you have to submit applications for recognition if you really want things to move forward and be taken seriously by the Sécu. That’s what a survey has to try to do,’ says Lucien Privet, who helped identify occupational factors in the many cases involving nurses. This militant energy came to the attention of Monique Rabussier, an Air France employee working for the CFDT’s transport federation. ‘I trained in breast cancer with François Dosso’s team 10 or 50 years ago, but I didn’t manage to mobilise the union section of flight attendants working for Air France. The word cancer was totally taboo at the time,’ the union delegate recalls. ‘A few years later, I tried again, and this time it worked.’ Time had passed, and science and awareness had progressed. The national union of commercial cabin crew CFDT (UNPNC-CFDT), representing 17 000 payroll workers across all airlines, decided to send one of its members for training in

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*Every year, about 2.6 million new cases of cancer are recorded in Europe, and it kills 1.3 million of those affected.*

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*Photo: © Sadak Souici*
Breast cancers in men

Breast cancer is an almost exclusively female cancer, but there are also a large number of male airline cabin crew whose working conditions expose them to the risk of cancer. At Air France, the association called Les hommes de l’air (‘Men of the Air’) was formed in 2018 to provide a forum for discussion of this often forgotten issue. ‘A number of men with cancer came to see me, astonished by the fact that male cancers are ignored both in the public sphere and at work,’ explains Stéphane Noël, co-founder of the association. When male cancers affect reproductive capacity, they often become even more taboo than breast cancer in women, making it difficult to quantify the phenomenon. ‘It’s more that men keep quiet about it rather than society ignoring it, and that’s why we need medical research on breast cancer in men as well as women,’ argues Stéphane Noël.

Breast cancer is the main cause of death in women. Some 600,000 Frenchwomen are living with breast cancer, and 50,000 new cases are diagnosed every year.

Until such time as more flight attendants seek to get their breast cancers recognised as an occupational illness, aviation circles are focusing on prevention. ‘In tackling the problem of work-related cancers, we must bear in mind one fact: these cancers are entirely preventable,’ write Tony Musu and Laurent Vogel, who coordinated the production of a reference text on work-related cancers for the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI). ‘What really matters, initially, is detection,’ says Ornella Gaudin, who coordinates UNPNC-CFDT work on breast cancer. ‘That’s why our union is investing in pink October, the national awareness-raising campaign on this issue.’

A number of other cabin crew associations have enjoyed a high profile in recent years, chief among them being ‘Les hôtesses de l’air contre le cancer’ (‘Flight Attendants against Cancer’), headed by Jean-Claude Chau, a steward with Air France. ‘We began by selling calendars, and then we created ‘pink flights’ – raising funds by selling accessories to passengers. Air France doesn’t finance us, but is happy to work with us and let us conduct our campaign,’ he says. Some flight attendants are demanding more than self-examination and want occupational medicine to play a greater role. ‘They should inform us better about the risks, so
we can start having mammograms earlier than the usual age of 50,’ says one flight attendant with cancer. Air France may be happy for associations to mobilise against breast cancer, but others think that the national carrier does nowhere near enough. ‘Supporting associations butters no parsnips. Air France must be more accepting of its responsibilities,’ comments one trade union source very familiar with the airline. ‘The company should, for example, organise large-scale training in cancer detection.’ All the more of a challenge in that the airlines are not required to contribute because the health insurance funds do not recognise breast cancer as an occupational illness. ‘For the moment, it’s national solidarity that foots the bill. Recognition would enable the cost to be passed back to the airlines,’ says Jean-Luc Rué.

The example of Denmark

At European level, recognition of breast cancer as work-related is still at an early stage. No country has yet taken measures specifically for the aviation sector, but in 2009 Denmark adopted a law recognising the link between night work and breast cancer. Thus a woman who has done night work for 20 years and has no other risk factors can receive specific compensation. Nurses and flight attendants are the cohorts on which the science has focused most, but many other sectors are exposed to the same risk factors and might be addressed in future legislation. Other issues, such as air quality, remain research blind spots. ‘More work should be done on pollution by chemicals and aviation fuel vapours to limit exposure in aircraft or at airports,’ warns Susan Michaelis, a former airline pilot diagnosed with breast cancer two decades after being exposed to fuel vapours and now a researcher at the University of Stirling. In general, work-related cancer is seen by many specialists as an issue that is all too often forgotten, with recognised and compensated cases accounting for only 10% or so of occupational conditions. ‘Visibility of the link between work and cancer remains very poor. Benefit schemes for occupational illnesses pay out for only a very small number of cancers and their statistics lead to an underestimated and warped picture of the real situation,’ according to Tony Musu and Laurent Vogel. In the air as elsewhere, the battle for recognition is only just beginning.

In France, 15.4% of payroll employees do night work, and 9.3% of these are women (DARES survey, 2014).
British railway reforms promise an end to fragmentation

The failures of British railways since their privatisation in the 1990s have become increasingly evident: rising fares, delays and corporate collapses. Last year, the government announced reform plans to address the fragmentation of the franchise-based system and create a single body that is responsible for the railways of Great Britain. However, unions, campaigners and the majority of the public want to go even further, with mass support for public ownership, which is already happening in the devolved administrations of Wales and Scotland.

Fanny Malinen
Journalist

In May 2021, the UK government published the long-awaited Williams-Shapps Plan for railway reform. It seeks to address problems in the sector, which it says is ‘too complicated, too confusing for passengers, too expensive to run and improve, too difficult to lead, and too hard to reform.’ Railways in Britain were state-owned in the post-war period, but privatised in the 1990s by the then Conservative government, following a wave of privatisations in the 1980s. Robin Jenks, policy advisor at the Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association (TSSA), explains: ‘[The railway] was broken up into a number of different bits and mostly sold off. We have run a campaign consistently, for a number of years, for public ownership.’

According to a 2019 survey¹ by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) that surveyed 800 rail workers, 80% of rail workers believe nationalisation would lead to better industrial relations, and 89% of workers believe the privatised system should be replaced with a publicly owned and nationally integrated railway. As many as 94% think train companies are most motivated by making a profit instead of providing a service for passengers, and 80% think their company will try to increase profits at the expense of jobs and working conditions.

There is widespread public support for public ownership, too. In 2019, campaign group We Own It, which campaigns for utilities to be taken into public ownership, ran a survey that showed that a majority of the British public supported public ownership of the railways. Johnsbosco Nwogbo, lead campaigner from We Own It, explains: ‘The public has realised privatisation did not work. We were told it was going to cost less – it hasn’t. Rail fares have actually increased by 23% in real terms since privatisation. We were told private companies were going to invest and modernise the trains, and they haven’t done so. Every theory that was used to justify privatisation has just not materialised. And that is for a very simple reason – the private companies are incentivised to make profit and nothing else.’

Public ownership across the board would also create a more united sector in terms of workforce. Robin Jenks notes that public ownership would mean going back to national collective bargaining – ‘where-as now, we take issues with pay, conditions and so on largely within the individual companies. There are some caveats around pensions, health and safety. Whilst we have health and safety issues with individual companies, there are standards which are enforced, and guidance produced by several national bodies that companies are obliged to follow.’

‘Papering over the cracks’

Railways are now run by over 20 different, mainly private, companies. Some train operators are publicly owned because the government, as the operator of last resort, has taken over failing private companies. The franchise model effectively ended with the Covid pandemic, when the government announced in March 2020 that it would transfer all revenue and cost risk to the government, with train companies running services for a fee. The review that led to the Williams-Shapps Plan, however, was commissioned as early as 2018, after a

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badly coordinated timetable change across the network exposed the fragmented system’s lack of leadership and accountability. It caused service disruption that lasted for weeks in parts of England.

The government’s reform plan, called the ‘Williams-Shapps Plan’ after its authors Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps and independent chair Keith Williams, seeks to address this fragmentation. It promises to ‘bring the railways back together’ under a new public body, Great British Railways (GBR), that will ‘run and plan the rail network, own the infrastructure, and receive the fare revenue’. Franchises will be replaced by ‘passenger service contracts’: GBR will set timetables, fares and other aspects of the service, while train operators will provide the services. Under the previous model, every operator set their own timetables and fares and retained the revenue.

For workers, a change in ownership does not mean an immediate change in conditions — it is the ‘same job in a different uniform’ as Rae says. The UK has legislation to protect employees, called Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) regulations (TUPE). This applies when a business moves from one employer to another, as well as when a service contract ends and is given to a new contractor. Under the TUPE regulations, the new employer takes over employees’ contracts, including terms and conditions of employment, holiday entitlement and the start date of the employment period. Any collective agreements previously made and responsibility for violation of employees’ rights under the previous contract are transferred to the new employer.

According to a 2019 survey of 800 rail workers, 80% believe nationalisation would lead to better industrial relations.

However, unions say the reforms do not go far enough. When the Williams-Shapps Plan was launched, the general secretary of TSSA, Manuel Cortes, said it was only ‘papering over the cracks’. Nadine Rae, organising director at TSSA, says: ‘I don’t think anyone, certainly from the trade union movement, expected a complete removal of privatisation, despite our hopes. But we did expect there to be some addressing of the key failures of the system and how that was not actually delivering competition, adequate investment or better services for passengers at all.’

Uncertain consequences for health and safety

Britain’s railways are among the safest in Europe for both workers and passengers, and the Williams-Shapps plan involves no immediate change to safety and standards across the sector. According to the Office for Rail and Road (ORR), the main regulator responsible for health and safety, rates of work-related ill health in rail workers are broadly comparable with those in construction workers, 2-5% and 3-5% respectively. However, sickness absence in rail is more than double the all-industry rates. The most prevalent causes of ill health are hand-arm vibration syndrome, mental health problems, and musculoskeletal disorders.

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Some opportunities, some caveats

Nadine Rae finds positives in the way the Williams-Shapps Plan emphasises training, skills and diversity. She explains that the unions expect the railways to change. ‘We will be embracing new technology. In particular, some of the technological changes will make the railways safer. What we think is most important is just transition, so that workers who need to shift their skillsets have the opportunity to do so.’

TSSA is running a campaign called ‘Future of Rail’ to encourage employers to plan for the future, including in terms of skills and technological change. Rae emphasises that new technology does not only mean jobs disappearing — there will also be a demand for different types of jobs. This means that the industry will need to attract a more diverse workforce to ensure that every type of skillset, insight and lived experience is there for reshaping the railways.

The union is involved with the National Skills Academy for Rail, which is working with the government to monitor and address skills gaps. They also advocate for creating opportunities through apprenticeships, and ensuring that workers have opportunities for career progression.

‘No longer do people want to be stuck in the same job forever,’ Rae says. A TSSA survey in 2015 showed that 37% of members had not received any training to advance their career.

However, the government’s plans include 3.5 million pounds of savings by 2024. ‘That takes anything that is possibly good from the

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There is widespread support for public ownership of Britain’s railways amongst both the workers and the public.

Shapps-Williams report and puts it all into question. How can you deliver meaningful change when you decimate the amount of staff that are in the network?’ Rae asks. ‘Let’s face it, if you provide a public service, it costs money.’ She points out that for every pound invested in railways, there are 2.5 pounds generated into the wider economy.5

Wales and Scotland are going public

In the UK, some policy areas are devolved, including transport. In Northern Ireland, railways are publicly owned and physically connected to those in the Republic of Ireland, hence the planned railway reforms only apply to Great Britain.

Wales brought railways into public ownership in February 2021, and Scotland will do the same in April 2022. Welsh rail services are now operated by Transport for Wales. The move was triggered by the significant reduction in passenger numbers during the Covid pandemic, and the Welsh government intends it to ensure long-term financial stability.

Gemma Southgate manages digital communications with passengers for Transport for Wales. She joined the railways seven years ago. ‘This is my career. I don’t see that I would work anywhere else. With the redundancies in England, I don’t think that others would feel the same,’ she says. ‘I feel that positivity and energy that comes with the new trains, with trying to make things more sustainable to benefit the people of Wales. I do feel that it is a network for the people of Wales, not for private investors.’

Wales has been hit hard by deindustrialisation. Southgate is excited that Transport for Wales and the Welsh government have put an emphasis on investment and the creation of high-skilled jobs, including a new train factory in Newport, where she is from, that will assemble new trains and receive a share of the 800 million pounds invested in new trains. ‘It is great to see that investment in Wales, to see that there are high-skilled jobs in places like Newport that are losing jobs in traditional sectors,’ she says.

Railway workers in Wales received a 1% pay rise last year despite the pandemic, and will this year receive a rise of 3.3% in line with the previous year’s retail price index (RPI). In England, there has been a pay freeze since the start of the pandemic. Southgate says: ‘I have union colleagues in England, their booking offices are being closed, timetables are being scaled back. That is just not the case in Wales.’

5. https://eandt.theiet.org/content/articles/2021/09/latest-figures-show-the-uk-rail-sector-was-booming-before-pandemic-losses/

The most prevalent causes of ill health are hand-arm vibration syndrome, mental health problems, and musculoskeletal disorders.
Hélöise Lanne deftly turns the steering wheel of her lorry, a 19-tonne HGV that is 12 metres long and 4.3 meters high, which this slender 22-year-old drives effortlessly along the roads around Reims, in north-east France. From the passenger seat, Vincent Gourdon, a trainer and former lorry driver, assesses his pupil’s driving: ‘Hélöise has made rapid progress during her four months of training. I have no doubt that she’ll get her HGV licence in a few days.’ This future truck driver intends to carry on her grandfather’s haulage company. ‘I’m the only one in our family who has a passion for lorries,’ she says. Mélanie Moreno, a 46 year-old former childminder, also raised eyebrows when she decided to become an HGV driver, ‘a job my mates thought was just for men’. This try-anything woman with tattooed arms achieved her aim in late 2021. ‘The Covid-19 pandemic was a wake-up call for me to realise my childhood dream of driving lorries. Pôle Emploi, the government employment agency, then introduced me to RAS Intérém, a recruitment agency in Reims offering HGV training exclusively for women via its Agir au Féminin (Women’s Action) programme.

‘Rather than positive discrimination, this approach highlights the fact that women are perfectly capable of driving HGVs,’ says Amel Touag, RAS Intérém’s training development manager. According to a report by the OPTL (Observatory of Prospective Trends in Transport and Logistics Trades and Qualifications), women drivers represented a mere 5% of the 210 000 French HGV drivers available to transport goods in 2020. Driving an HGV used to have physical implications, but now automatic gearboxes and intelligent speed governors have made it ‘more comfortable and accessible to women and people with disabilities’, says Loïc Charbonnier, chairman and managing director of AFTRAL, a transport and logistics training body. In October 2020, this French training organisation went into partnership with AGEFIPHI, (Fund for the Professional Integration of Disabled People) to improve the accessibility of its services. ‘It’s important to diversify the public we’re able to serve, since demand from our clients is rising,’ Charbonnier adds.

A Europe-wide shortfall

According to the Fédération Nationale des Transports Routiers (FNTR, the National Road Transport Federation), haulage companies in France need an additional 40 000 to 50 000 HGV drivers. ‘This shortfall has reached a critical threshold, but the problem didn’t arise overnight,’ says Isabelle Maître, the FNTR’s permanent delegate in Brussels. According to a survey published in August 2021 by the market research company Transport Intelligence, Europe had a shortage of over 400 000 drivers: 55 000 in Germany, 15 000 in Spain and Italy, 8 000 in Austria and 5 000 in Belgium. Poland is the most seriously affected country, with over 120 000 vacancies, followed by the United Kingdom (60 000 to 76 000 drivers sought). The UK in particular suffered the departure of 30 000 European drivers (mostly Poles, Romanians or Bulgarians) due to the pandemic in 2020. The consequences were shortages in supermarkets and petrol stations. In response, the British government deployed 200 soldiers in late 2021 to ensure fuel deliveries. Sky News reported that consideration was also given
to the issuing of 5,000 temporary work visas to relieve supply chains, a decision that seemed to conflict with the strengthening of post-Brexit immigration rules.

Migrants, like women, represent a new source of recruits. ‘Since 2015, we’ve had regular waves of migration in Europe. By training migrants, we’ll allow people who are interested in transport and logistics to take part. This is a win-win situation,’ says Isabelle Maître. In Belgium, the IFAPME (Walloon Institute for Work-Linked Training, the Self-Employed and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) and the Jost Transport Company have brought in some 10 migrants from Syria, Iraq and Somalia since 2018 to train as HGV drivers, though not everything is as clear cut as this. ‘When I arrived in Germany, haulage companies didn’t accept my licence. I had to lay out 2,000 euros to take my HGV test again and get equivalence. And then there’s the language barrier. You have to be really motivated,’ says Veselin Trakilovic, a Bosnian lorry driver who is 45 years old - the average age of European HGV drivers.

The sector is, in fact, facing the problem of an ageing workforce throughout Europe. ‘The job no longer attracts the younger generations,’ complains Jean-Marc Rivera, general delegate of the Organisation des Transporteurs Routiers Européens (OTRE), a hauliers’ association. The reason: a negative image of HGV, ‘which public opinion blames for all ills: lorries are accident-prone, they block up the roads and they pollute,’ Mr. Rivera adds. The sector is pursuing energy transition, and abandoning diesel in favour of natural gas. However, according to a study published in late 2021 by the NGO Transport et Environnement, these would-be ‘green’ lorries emit 13.4% more greenhouse gases than diesel models. Éric Bernard, manager of a French road haulage company, focuses on the ‘high technological level’ of new HGVs to attract young people, ‘a great many of whom mistakenly see transport as a road to nowhere’. Set up in 2019, Le Monde du Transport Réuni association that he runs seeks to foster entrepreneurship by increasing communication activities in colleges and schools and on social networks.

‘Migrants, like women, represent a new source of recruits.’

The main concern of this profession is an hourly rate that recognises neither professional qualifications nor the experience of age.’

Poor working conditions and low wages

Once they have been recruited, efforts must be made to ensure that new HGV drivers are retained. The difficult working conditions ‘discourage more than one’, observes Karl Zener, a former lorry driver from Belgium. Out of the six trainees this HGV instructor was responsible for in the previous year, only three are now drivers. Of course, these transport foot soldiers drive big beautiful trucks, but behind the scenes: ‘You face hours of driving. At night, the service areas are often full so you have to park up on the road. You sleep in the back of the lorry, your bedding dries on your vehicle’s radiator grill. This can go on for months, without seeing your family,’ says Veselin Trakilovic, who now only drives in his own country and sleeps at home every night. ‘Drivers also feel insecure,’ adds Christophe Denizot, General Secretary of the French Federation SUD-Solidaires des Transports Routiers. ‘Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine provoked higher fuel costs, thefts have increased at service areas, with a risk of violence.’

Conversely, what has not increased are wages. ‘As long as they remain low, bosses will be unable to improve the image of HGV drivers,’ says Cristina Tilling, policy officer for the European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF), the EU trade union for the sector. In France, the eight coefficients that make up the wage scale defined by the National Collective Agreement on Road Transport fall between 10.57 and 11.01 euros per hour. The Guaranteed Minimum Wage (the SMIC) currently stands at 10.57 euros per hour. ‘The main concern of this profession is an hourly rate that recognises neither professional qualifications nor the experience of age,’ complains Christophe Denizot. Like many of their European counterparts, French lorry drivers count on bonuses, night work or travel allowances to increase their basic wages. ‘A driver can earn up to 3,000 euros gross, but only by working over 220 hours a month,’ this trade unionist points out.

In response to the shortage, haulage companies have to loosen their purse strings. This is the case in the United Kingdom. According to the British recruitment site Adzuna, between March 2020 and March 2021, the average annual wage of a lorry driver rose from 30,000 to 37,000 UK pounds (35,000 to 43,000 euros). In Austria in the same year, HGV drivers’ unions negotiated a 3.5% increase in pay. In February 2022, French wage earners obtained a 5% increase in wages, with an additional 1% on 1 May 2022. Another victory in January 2022, this time by the Spanish, prohibited drivers from helping to load and unload their vehicles. ‘After nine hours on the road, it was not acceptable for our professional drivers to have to load 20 tonnes of fruit and vegetables, for example, on safety grounds, and also because it’s not part of their skill set,’ the vice-chair of the Spanish International Road Transport Association, Ramon Valdivia, declared to the media. Particularly since these operations ‘are rarely paid for by the bosses, who include them in their employees’ rest hours. If drivers refuse to comply, they are threatened with losing a shift or a bonus,’ complains Cristina Tilling.
**Strengthening European regulations**

In December 2021, following a motorway check in Belgium, the dramatic situation of a Ukrainian driver was put under the spotlight. Employed by a Polish subcontractor of the German international transport giant Hegelmann, Mykola had been living in his truck on lorry parks for 17 weeks with barely anything to eat. Forced into begging, the 45-year-old worker had apparently received no wages in four months. ‘There are thousands of drivers on the roads like this one, whom we helped. This is truly a case of human trafficking and therefore modern slavery,’ complained Roberto Parrillo, chairman of the ETF’s road transport section, to Radio-Télévision Belge Francophone (RTBF).

To improve truck drivers’ working conditions, in August 2020 the European Parliament adopted the Mobility Package, an essential reform of the sector. This came into force in stages, though international hauliers are already required to return to their homes every four weeks. As for the 45-hour weekly rest period to which they are entitled, ‘this must be spent away from the vehicle, in accommodation chargeable to the employer’, explains ETF’s Cristina Tilling. The reform also allows HGV drivers to benefit from fairer remuneration, which is defined from now on according to the rules of the state in which they work (and no longer according to the country in which the company is domiciled). ‘If a driver employed by a Romanian transport company is seconded for a substantial period to work locally in Belgium, they will be paid on the basis of the remuneration applicable in Belgium,’ says Isabelle de Maegt, from the Belgian Federation of Road Haulage Operators.

‘We don’t want less, but more still from Europe,’ insists the FNTR’s Isabelle Maître. ‘This is because road transport is a cross-border industry, since the rules are the same for everyone.’ The adoption of the Package nevertheless brought tensions to the surface: ‘The negotiations were extremely protracted (over two and a half years), but particularly so afterwards,’ says Karima Delli, MEP and chair of the European Parliament’s Transport and Tourism Committee. ‘The divisions were essentially geographical: on one side were supporters of the harmonisation of the rules and of protectionism (western European side), while on the other were supporters of social and fiscal dumping (central and eastern European side).’ In March 2021, seven countries, including Poland, Romania and Malta, had already brought an appeal before the European Union Court of Justice seeking to annul the Mobility Package. At issue were new rules which, according to east European hauliers, represented an additional cost. They also fear a loss of market share in western Europe because of the new cabotage regulations, which have been seen as a problem for several years. The Mobility Package reduces to three the...
number of journeys authorised per vehicle entering foreign territory. Four days of absence must then be respected. Against all expectations, Belgium, which had no hesitation in supporting the Mobility Package, joined the complaint on cabotage issues in April 2021. The rule would have an adverse effect on Belgian hauliers, which specialise in cabotage in France.

‘The application and control of these rules is the duty of the hauliers, but also of each Member State. The fact remains that the political will and the measures put in place continue to be inadequate,’ regrets Cristina Tilling. Bringing together 450 affiliates, including national hauliers’ trade unions, the European Transport Workers’ Federation therefore looks forward to the arrival in 2023 of new ‘smart tachographs’. These ‘black boxes’, which are mandatory for newly registered HGVs, will make it possible to geolocate vehicles and to transmit several pieces of data to the control authorities automatically. This will ensure that European road transport fraud is tackled more effectively, and that workers’ health and safety are improved at the same time by regulating working hours and meal times.

An occupation at the heart of our lives

‘When we present the reform of the Mobility Package to them, drivers tell us that it’s too good to be true,’ says Cristina Tilling. ‘They doubt that their situation can improve.’ ‘We’re the fifth wheel, the one that’s most used but shown least consideration,’ complains Christophe Denizot. At the height of lockdown in 2020, the health crisis repeatedly demonstrated this: ‘While they were awaited like the Messiah to restock the supermarkets in record time and deliver masks and medicines to hospitals, drivers were treated as if they were plague-ridden,’ complains Éric Bernard, chairman of the Le Monde du Transport Réuni recruitment platform. ‘Certain rest areas and establishments wouldn’t let us use the toilets,’ says Quentin Bonnefoy, a 23-year-old French lorry driver who points out that, without them, ‘France, along with other countries, would be much less attractive. Society doesn’t realise that virtually all goods are transported by lorry, except for air, which, like us, is invisible.’

The duel is also increasingly being fought with the giants of online ordering such as Amazon, which, by offering discount transport costs if not free delivery, ‘devalue the professionalism of men and women who can fulfil delivery orders and instructions for an open sandwich submitted at 6 p.m., for example, to be delivered the following morning at 10 a.m.,’ says Éric Bernard. To respond to consumer requirements and ever-increasing demands, driverless lorries were recently introduced in the United States, which has also been affected by a recent shortage of lorry drivers. Might Europe be interested in this solution? ‘We’re very far from having sufficient technology,’ says the OTRE’s Jean-Marc Rivera. In particular, these driving wheels produced by a world that wants everything immediately ‘do not currently have the Europe-wide benefit of acceptability either by the profession or by opinion. That would also require huge data centres that consume too much energy,’ states a Green MEP. ‘We’re not against innovation, but it’s time to learn lessons from the pandemic and from the multiple crises we’re facing in our consumption patterns.’ Meanwhile, back in Reims, learner driver Héloïse Lanne continues her route, hands firmly on the wheel of her HGV, contemplating more promising horizons.

‘Society doesn’t realise that virtually all goods are transported by lorry, except for air, which, like us, is invisible.’
Safety at work: a trojan horse for new monitoring technologies?

For many businesses today, improving the working environment increasingly means the implementation of surveillance systems – monitoring even the way workers smile. Under the pretext of health and safety at work, some companies have implemented remote and mobile body-temperature or pupil-dilation sensing systems combined with artificial intelligent software. But are these new technologies really necessary to improve workers’ health and safety?

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In Stanley Kubrick’s masterful film 2001: A Space Odyssey, the supercomputer HAL 9000 (heuristically programmed algorithmic computer) uses artificial intelligence to detect emotion and suffering, and controls all of a spaceship’s systems including its crew. The new labour monitoring practices we are seeing emerge today – with the stated aim of improving the working environment – appear just as outlandish. Take the example of Canon’s Beijing office, which has installed smart cameras that prevent any action from being performed (such as scheduling a meeting, accessing certain rooms, etc.) unless they detect a smile. In Europe, some companies are offering their employees the chance to participate in business-related trials which involve supplying them with glasses that establish emotion indicators. One example is the Shore app, developed by the Fraunhofer Institute for Integrated Circuits IIS (Germany) and used in Google’s ‘smart glasses’.

These practices have also intruded in the transport sector. Digital platforms have changed things so profoundly that new groups of workers are emerging; for app drivers, for example, invoicing is handled chiefly through an electronic hiring platform (e.g. Uber or Cabify). Meanwhile, companies like Amazon have started monitoring drivers for (un)safe driving. Recently, the online retail giant announced that its delivery fleet will be equipped with smart cameras, claiming that the move would ‘improve the safety’ of its drivers. These cameras (already in place in half of Amazon’s total US fleet) automatically record ‘events’, including slips by the delivery driver. Each time an event is recorded, the camera sends the company images so it can assess the worker. Not only does the camera register and notify events, a metallic voice also scolds the driver (‘driver distracted!’) on each occasion. If a camera registers more than five events for every 100 trips, drivers can automatically lose the bonus that many of them depend on.

These new practices are a far cry from previous uses of monitoring mechanisms like cameras, GPS and combined artificial intelligence systems for improving plant safety and security (such as theft or fire) or improving the quality of business processes and activity. Workers’ safety and health can indeed sometimes be an incentive for workplace monitoring. The European OSH Framework Directive (89/391/EEC) requires businesses to ensure safety, implying an ongoing effort to improve levels of worker protection. However, where the prevention of risks at work is concerned, there are many situations where it is not possible for businesses to monitor or supervise activity on the ground by direct means. The limits of the employers’ ambitions to monitor everything are set either by collective agreements or by law.

‘Businesses have installed cameras that allow access only to employees who smile.’

Addressing AI in collective agreements: a mixed picture

By engaging with the challenges of new technologies at work, workers can be a driving force in guaranteeing their safe implementation and usage – particularly with the adoption of collective agreements. In the transport sector, for instance, the use of GPS tracking systems is widespread. Sometimes, allegedly to protect workers’ safety and health, some employers use the data collected through these systems for disciplinary purposes, posing a challenge for collective agreements to deal with.

One example is the agreement negotiated between Enercon Windenergy Spain and its employees (EWS), which reads as follows: ‘The undertaking has a GPS tracking system in all EWS vocational vehicles made available to workers. The undertaking aims to ensure its fleet is organised more efficiently with better coordination of technical teams and workers’ safety and health. The aim of installing these devices is not to monitor workers’ usual behaviour or activity. However, in accordance with legal principles, the information supplied by the GPS system may be used in the application of the undertaking’s disciplinary regime, resulting in minor, serious or very serious misconduct, having regard to the behaviour in question as verified by the data obtained from the GPS system.’

Guaranteeing that businesses will not use AI technologies for disciplinary means, even if the initial use was on the grounds of safety at work, is clearly no easy task. Another issue concerns the right to disconnect, which is a measure that enhances safety and health. However, it is particularly striking that the collective agreement in Madrid’s passenger transport sector classifies a one-off decline in normal performance as serious misconduct, whose definition includes the driver spending insufficient time on the platform.

One area that collective agreements could tackle is the combined use of different invasive technologies. For example, technology makes it possible for businesses to use video surveillance to observe the facial expressions of workers in automated fashion and detect deviations from preset patterns of movement. This would be an unlawful disrespect of workers’ rights and freedoms. Processing may also involve drawing up profiles and, potentially, automated decision-making. Accordingly, collective bargaining could provide that video surveillance cannot be used in combination with other technologies, such as facial recognition, because the resultant monitoring would be disproportionate under European and national recommendations.

Protection against abusive monitoring of workers

Workers could experience serious damage to their health or lose their identity as human beings as a consequence of the demands of a faster work rate that has been pre-set by smart machines. As David Graeber explains in his 2018 book Bullshit Jobs: A Theory, technology has been regularly used to ensure that we work harder, not better – leading to potential health and safety threats. The use of workers’ data to incentivise or penalise them could give rise to occupational insecurity and stress. Here, an innovative approach to strengthening employment guarantees is required in response to the digital transition, positioning workers – and their emotions – as a key element in this transition to a new model.

Safety at work can be and already is being used as grounds for collecting and processing employees’ data, but the measures must be part of a rationale of prevention. In other words, such practices are acceptable only if they aim at avoiding or reducing the risks present in the working environment. Another safeguard is that the measures must be subject to a proportionality test and a risk assessment prior to their adoption. Here, the risk that it will affect other fundamental rights (such as privacy and protection of personal data) is real. All the more reason to guarantee the participation of workers’ representatives at each step of the adoption process.

‘If a camera registers more than five events for every 100 trips, drivers can automatically lose the bonus that many of them depend on.’
Why did Latin America’s handling of the Covid-19 crisis improve?

In the summer of 2021, Latin America, with 8% of the world’s population, accounted for one third of deaths from Covid. This region had a combination of political, social and economic factors that could have turned the pandemic into the worst disaster possible. However, following the summer, there was a relative recovery compared with the richest countries. Why was that?

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ETUI

The pandemic struck two continents, Europe and America, with particular force. In April 2022, of the 30 countries with the highest cumulative mortality rate per million inhabitants, 21 were in Europe and 8 in Latin America. Many factors had a role to play in shaping this impact, such as age structure, population density, urban concentrations, housing and public transport conditions, the intensity of international contacts and the prevalence of certain chronic diseases. To these should be added social and political forces, as well as the vulnerability of the most underprivileged sections of society.

The ruling classes were overtaken by events. They went from denial to panic and then to an authoritarian and very short-termist mode of managing the crisis. But they did not all act in the same way. Some politicians made the situation worse, while others mitigated it. And, above all, they did not act on their own. Governments often nursed the illusion that a state of emergency would allow them to impose their strategies unchallenged. But the reactions of their citizens reshaped the policies that were actually followed.

From the start of the crisis, Latin America showed itself to be a particularly vulnerable region. In June 2020, Pierre Salama, a French economist who is one of the leading specialists on this region, published a book that had a tone of sober pessimism. In it, he analysed the structural factors that presaged the worst of all disasters for Latin America, with economic stagnation and public health catastrophe leading seamlessly to the rise of extreme right-wing populism.

For the first 18 months of the crisis, his arguments were borne out by the facts. However, surprisingly, from summer 2021 onwards, the situation began to change. In early July 2021, there were about 4,000 deaths a day in Latin America, compared with 470 in Europe, but by 1 November Latin American mortality had dropped by around three quarters (885 deaths a day). During the same period, European mortality had shot up by a factor of nearly four (1,774 deaths).

In my view, the spectacular turn-around in the situation in Latin America may be ascribed to ‘grassroots’ political and social forces, based on a number of factors that I will endeavour to summarise here.

From the conquest to the development of social medicine

The shock of the conquest of the Americas in the 16th century was passed down from generation to generation. Numerical estimates diverge, but there are three certainties. The majority of the indigenous population perished in the 16th century. The main cause was the circulation of infectious diseases against which local populations had no immunity. The biological shock led to
In April 2022, of the 30 countries with the highest cumulative mortality rate per million inhabitants, 21 were in Europe and 8 in Latin America.

such a disastrous outcome because it was magnified by the violence of the conquest itself. Before the 20th century and its genocides, no other continent had experienced such an intense interaction between the political and the biological spheres. The world that emerged at the end of the first century after the conquest was radically new for all sectors of society: for the Amerindians, for the European colonialists and their ‘creolised’ descendants, and for the slaves deported from Africa. Unlike the situation in the United States, there evolved a degree of porosity among the larger ethnic and social communities. The mixing of races and cultures prevailed in social relationships as a whole and increasingly so down the social scale towards the most oppressed strata. In a context of extreme physical violence, control over life, death and reproduction was framed directly in political terms.

This past was repeatedly brought back to life over the course of history by social conditions that created serious vulnerability to contagious diseases and to catastrophic risks (earthquakes, volcanic activity, floods and droughts). After the continent’s achievement of independence, the development of capitalism brought with it an influx of millions of migrants to the more developed countries. It is estimated that between 1812 and 1932, 12 million Europeans emigrated to Latin America. On their arrival on the continent, a large proportion of these people were at the bottom of the social scale. Debilitation as a result of hard work, poor housing and new environmental conditions placed them in a vulnerable situation. It became a priority for the working classes to collectively and politically tackle the conditions that were conducive to disease. This involved grassroots preventive practices and debates, leading to the radicalisation of some health workers. In the last third of the 20th century, this tipping point towards social medicine, which dates back more than a century, led to a demand for public health systems based on three characteristics: universal, free coverage of the population; a major role for prevention and primary care that was not exclusively physician-based; and active participation by the population in the health system. Costa Rica was one of the forerunners, with access to healthcare becoming universal back in 1961. Brazil set up a similar system after the fall of the military dictatorship. Even in countries without a unified public health system, this model still has great influence.

The illusion that transmissible diseases had been beaten

In the world’s richest countries, from the 1950s onwards there were the beginnings of a turnaround in the approach to health issues. The proportion of chronic diseases was continually on the rise, whereas mortality associated with infectious diseases was falling. In the case of the former, the significance of social inequalities was often played down. For infectious diseases, the primary preventive approach, in the form of improving living and working conditions, was gradually cut back. The illusion emerged that these were diseases arising on the margins of society (mainly among immigrant workers, the homeless and certain minorities). The AIDS crisis did nothing to change that view. Because of the very strong link between AIDS and sexual practices, this disease could be reduced to a problem of ‘high-risk groups’ rather than a political, social and health issue facing the whole of society.

Things were different in Latin America. Contagious diseases continued to be a major factor in mortality. This fostered a more universal concept of health, which established a link between contagious and non-contagious illness. Regular crises, such as dengue fever, helped to provide continuity between the past and the present. Mobilisation against AIDS was far more comprehensive, particularly in working-class environments, and was more directly political in some countries (mainly Brazil but also Mexico).
The rising of the masses

The five years before the outbreak of the pandemic saw a resurgence of mass protests in Latin America, which broke through the political machinery whose ideological references were still haunted by the phantoms of the Cold War. They were carried forward by the new urban generations facing a loss of job security and precarious conditions of employment. Their main struggles were for social equality and democracy and against autocratic government and corruption.

Uprisings like this often occur when gaps open up as a result of paralysis or disagreements ‘at the top’. The progressive populism of many governments in the first 15 years of the 21st century did not change the economic structures fundamentally. Poverty was instead reduced by redistribution programmes. This relative failure has weakened the ideological influence of the past, in particular as the activists today are very young. New forms of mobilisation have been invented, including the creative use of social networks and forms of self-defence and internal democracy. They have a considerable cultural and festive dimension. Women play a far more central role than in the traditional parties and trade unions.

In parallel, however, a reactionary populism has been evolving. In several countries, it is linked to the development of the Evangelical churches, which provide it with a mass base. Its central reference point in the past few years has been the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro.

The most significant uprisings in the two years before the Covid pandemic were in Nicaragua in 2018 and in Colombia and Chile in 2019. In Venezuela, the desperation of the working classes was reflected in mass emigration by millions of people. In Brazil, the first years of the Bolsonaro government heightened the level of political conflict, with major protests against it, but also others in support of the far right and the army.

The crisis of the pandemic

With the arrival of Covid, confrontation between those in power and the masses became radicalised in several countries. This was not directly linked to criticism of public health responses as such (except, initially, in Chile), but rather to the exacerbation of social inequalities and the realisation that these could determine life or death on a large scale. In other words, it was Covid as an indicator of the true state of society rather than as a disease that lay at the heart of the protests.

Lockdown measures in various forms were implemented everywhere in Latin America. But they were significantly less effective than in Europe, where, within a few weeks from April 2020, there was a drop in the mortality rates in the first wave. In Latin America, mortality remained high. In May 2021, this region became the epicentre of the pandemic. The main reason was that, in countries where the informal sector was very widespread and where poverty levels were already high, lockdown did not work for a large proportion of the population. It was a choice between preventing Covid and day-to-day survival. Whereas, in Europe, anti-lockdown movements quickly turned into reactionary, Covid-sceptical revolts, in Latin America they tended gradually to lead to ‘grassroots’ prevention as an alternative to the imposed preventive measures. They did not lapse into denying the existence of the epidemic or how serious it was. They did not challenge scientific data. At the next stage, this would prevent them from turning into an anti-vax movement, which from the outset was confined to the far right, Trump and Bolsonaro and Neo-Pentecostal churches.
They turned the struggle against Covid into a community movement.

Community prevention practices in Colombia and Brazil

Colombia is the country where this rising of the masses was by far the strongest. From the end of April to mid-June 2021, the ‘paro nacional’ (national strike) gave rise to revolts in most Colombian towns. It was boosted by the mobilisation of indigenous communities, who travelled into several towns and joined forces with young people. The 2021 protests had been preceded by a large popular uprising in November 2019, just before Covid started. Despite fierce repression, millions of people joined in for a period of six weeks.

These circumstances helped to foster the emergence of community prevention practices, which, irrespective of any official guidelines, conveyed a sense of solidarity in the public health context and an awareness of a responsibility towards the future. This kind of practice emerged right from the start of the pandemic. For example, in Sumapaz, a small rural town near Bogotá, the population established stringent prevention rules. People’s arrivals and departures were monitored to check whether they were really travelling for an essential purpose. These early initiatives were boosted by active participation in politics, structured around community and trade union organisations, which, for a quarter of a century, had helped the population to resist attempts to seize their land.

In many indigenous communities, similar measures were adopted and combined with the use of traditional medicine for primary care. The fact that, in several regions, indigenous populations already had guards to protect them from intrusions by armed groups made for rapid decision-making in citizens’ assemblies. In the large towns, in the months following the popular uprising of spring 2021, tens of thousands of young people who had mobilised in grassroots collectives for self-defence formed close-knit mutual aid, solidarity and information networks and set up soup kitchens, first aid posts, cultural groups and associations opposing repression in poor neighbourhoods. In these circumstances, vaccine take-up was high.

Of all the countries of Latin America, taking into account the political orientations of the central authorities, it was Brazil that was in the worst position with regard to Covid. Throughout the crisis, President Bolsonaro’s stance was to deny the extent and seriousness of the pandemic. Once vaccination came onto the agenda, he became the leader of the anti-vax movement.

Initially, this allowed him to restore his popularity, with support rising from 29% of the population in August 2019 to 48% in August 2020. The middle classes liked the absolute priority he gave to allowing the economy to function normally. Benefits paid to the poorest categories also built up support among some sectors of the working class. For the poorest strata of the population, this government measure brought an increase in their purchasing power. Meanwhile, however, the pandemic was raging with a violence magnified by social inequalities. There were periods of mass mortality in the city of Manaus and the favelas of São Paulo and Rio. Despite the peak it attained in the summer of 2020, Bolsonaro’s popularity rating eventually experienced a dramatic downfall, falling to 32% in January 2021 and 22% in September 2021.

Resistance to Bolsonaro’s policy emerged at various different levels. In the federated states and large towns, the local authorities generally decided to adopt more stringent measures. In other countries, this would not have presented any problems. In Brazil, it led to a climate of civil war, stoked up by incendiary statements from Bolsonaro, who set himself up as the people’s saviour. Little by little, grassroots resistance also came about. In a number of companies, trade unions demanded proper prevention measures. They resorted to the ‘greve ambiental’, which is the equivalent of the right of a worker in Europe to leave the workplace when his or her life or health is in serious danger. Afro-Brazilian organisations condemned the way the pandemic was being managed, which ignored the very high mortality in their community resulting from living and working conditions. A number of citizens’ organisations adopted practical prevention initiatives. The role of associations of victims of occupational diseases is exemplified by the experience of the ABREA (Brazilian Association of People Exposed to Asbestos) in Rio de Janeiro. This organisation held lists of workers who had been exposed to asbestos in the past. It realised that they were at severe risk of serious or fatal forms of Covid. Moreover, if the hospitals were paralysed, this could have serious consequences for health problems other than Covid, and these people (generally quite elderly) could not receive help from their families because of lockdown. Using funds obtained in legal proceedings against companies that had worked with asbestos, ABREA set up a special health system with local operators, a remarkable primary care programme conducted with very simple resources: a mobile team with a vehicle, a telephone hotline and follow-up programmes by videoconference. Each of the people involved was trained, and regular contact was maintained to identify any problems. Physiotherapy was delivered by videoconference. This helped to combat the respiratory diseases frequently suffered by asbestos victims.

There were thousands of experiences like this. They turned the struggle against Covid into a community movement. Despite Bolsonaro’s hostility, there was widespread take-up of vaccinations by the population. The milestone of 10% of the population vaccinated with their first dose was only achieved on 7 April 2021, but by 24 September one dose had already been administered to 70% of the population.

It is still too early to draw final conclusions about the management of the Covid crisis in Latin America. However, we can already see that the basic differences compared with the situation in Europe lie less in governmental policies and more in the interplay of mass mobilisations holding out the hope of an egalitarian society, decentralised and often informal community prevention practices, and a more responsible individual attitude towards the most vulnerable members of the population.
Remembering Chico Mendes

A look back at the political legacy of the late Francisco Alves Mendes Filho, known as Chico Mendes. The murdered Brazilian trade unionist is celebrated in particular for his defence of the rights of the seringueiros, workers who collect latex in the rubber tree plantations of the Amazon. HesaMag finds out what remains of his struggle today.

Angelo Ferracuti
Writer
When I arrived at the deserted Rio Branco Airport in the middle of the night, Dom Luiz looked much the same as in the photos I had seen. A man of lean build, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, with short, white hair, a sparse beard and a talkative, determined air. This follower of Father Boff, the liberation theologian, who was dazzled as a very young man by the universal creed of the Second Vatican Council, later a driving force of the Acquedotto felice in Rome on the Appian Way, alongside the shanty-town dwellers who lived under the arches of the Porta Maggiore, was the very person described somewhat laconically by the American science journalist, Andrew Revkin, as ‘Xapuri’s priest […] Ceppi, who was Italian and a member of Italy’s Communist Party,’ in his book The Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest.

Burning, because there have always been both blazing killer fires and gunfire here, Wild West-style shootings and gunmen firing at anyone who stands up against the law of the big landowners and agri-business multinationals, as well as acts of arson started by the estate owners to free up vast areas of forest and turn them over to cattle ranching and intensive crop farming. They call it the ‘flame season’, the 60 ill-fated days that, each year, come between the period of tropical heat and the long spell of torrential rains that swell the rivers: days which, in August 2019, fed 2 000 fires in this region. Rio Branco is a city of 400,000 souls in the region of Acre, in north-western Brazil, seized from Bolivia in 1900. In the forests on the border with Peru, 600 uncontacted people still live, Indians who have miraculously survived the rubber boom and the wave of migration from the north, primarily of Portuguese people. ‘The first-born were the result of the rape of indigenous women,’ comments Dom Luiz bluntly on the way to my hotel. He has been living here for 40 years, he knows every corner of this region and he was one of Chico’s friends.

When, in the following days, we drive out of the city in his ATV and cross the new bridge to take Route 364, the road to Porto Velho, the tarmac strip cuts through vast, treeless grasslands. Here there has been a 57% increase in fires, but no one talks about it, they are seen as something normal. ‘The West makes a fuss about the big scandal of the burning forest,’ Roland Poalanca, former Member of Parliament for the Workers’ Party, now a judge at the Court of Auditors, told me acerbically yesterday. ‘But it’s so that you can have soya and meat. Italy has imported 25,000 tonnes of Amazonian grass-fed beef in the past year.’

Further along the road, on an industrial estate at the end of a dusty road, is the Coperacre cooperative, which markets Brazilian chestnuts. It is a big green warehouse with a workforce of about 60 employees. Here, as we tour the different sections, Leandro, a tall, rugged young man with a chubby face and wide-awake eyes, proudly explains that they export to the UAE, the US, Russia and Germany. ‘Here we sell what nature produces; we maintain without destroying anything,’ he tells me as we visit the storerooms where the young sorters separate out the chestnuts with their skilled, nimble hands. ‘Initially, they were all sent to Belém to the Mutran family, which had the monopoly, but now the work has been cooperativised, and it employs the people who live here. We process 2,500 tonnes a day.’ These workers are the true political legacy of Chico Mendes, the rubber tapper and trade unionist murdered in 1988 because his activism hindered the activities of the agri-business lobby.

Symbol of an alternative model

Experiments in progress in agroecology, or natural extractivism, are also taking place in Crelândia, Chinari, Porto Velho and Nova Califórnia in Rondônia, where the Reca cooperative is based. On the way there, carrying on along the apparently never-ending road, which goes up- and downhill, stretching towards the horizon, we pass, on the one hand, tenant farmers’ smallholdings, and, on the other, large ranches, vast prairies stretching for kilometres with grazing
white cows and horses, bison, entire tracts of forest wiped out and the occasional silhouettes of towering trees.

For 35 years, 500 families of tenant farmers, joining forces in the Reca cooperative, have been replanting trees and processing local fruits, like heart-of-palm and cupuaçu, which are made into confectionery, liqueurs, jams and medicinal products, preserving the biome with its specific vegetation without bringing in new crops, a form of exploitation that is compatible with the life of the forest. When we arrive, in woodland nearby, 20 hectares are burning. I can see the thick, white smoke, rising high in the sky, blurring out the scrubland.

Sergio Lopez, one of the cooperative’s managers, explains that the media used to vilify Chico. ‘They said he wanted poverty, not to touch the plants, to let the birds and butterflies live.’ Then, through the Catholic Church and the Unified Workers’ Central (CUT) trade union, they met him and they realised: ‘Chico stood for a different model of development.’

Now, reafforestation is going on here, with trees being replanted at high density and the environment being restored, respecting nature and the people working there. Like José, a small, gentle, quiet, elderly man, once a rubber tapper and now one of the forest guardians, who lives here with his family. When we go to meet him, he shows me round his 97-hectare farm with 600 chestnut trees, and we walk around them under the burning sun. He knows them all, he knows how old they are, he touches the trunks and brushes the leaves with the palm of his hand. ‘You see, I used to cut lots of trees; now I replant them,’ he says cheerfully. He reminds me of Elzéard Bouffier, the shepherd in Jean Giono’s book, The man who planted trees.

The legend of Chico Mendes began in the region of Cachoiera, near Xapuri, during the first revolts. There, at the age of 10, he started tapping the trees to extract the latex with his father along the tracks of the rubber plantation. He met a Bolivian army officer, Fernando Távora, who had escaped into the forest from his country after taking part in the struggles of the Communist Party. Távora taught him to read and write and sparked a passion for politics.

Cachoiera is almost 200 kilometres away on the BR317, a drive across vast plateaux: boundless, obliquely lit grasslands, under skies of deep blue. When I arrive in Xapuri, the heat is torrid and searing. The road to Cachoiera is red and unpaved, and the Toyota limps forwards on the slopes. At first, there are still ranches and pastureland, but after just a few kilometres the surrounding vegetation becomes thick and full of shadows, and at the sides of the road the forest becomes an insurmountable green wall. This is where Chico Mendes gained his training and organised the first struggles of the tappers. Here too, the first natural extractivism project was conceived, and this is where the little, yellow-painted family house is, where his cousin Sebastião is resting peacefully in the shade of the veranda.

Mendes’ remaining cousins Antonio, Francisco and Nilson, who manage the extractive reserve, are waiting for me. They remember the days of the ‘stand-offs’. ‘We used to go to where they were cutting trees, we seized the chainsaws and demolished the houses,’ recalls Nilson, with a surly expression, wearing a wide-brimmed brown felt hat. ‘It was a stand-off based on conscience, without any violence,’ and they sang as they did it. ‘Enough suffering, enough weeping, the land belongs to the workers; in our struggles and under the law, we won’t give in,’ he sings out loud. ‘After those struggles, the landowners’ Democratic Rural Union decided to go elsewhere,’ says Antonio. ‘Here, at that time, we had the Death Squad of Hildebrando Pascoal, an army colonel and Federal MP, a criminal. He used to tie people by their arms and legs to two trucks and mangle them to death.’

When we go into the reserve, Nilson heads boldly into the tangle of trees and branches, clutching a machete and the tapper’s knife to carve the groove in the tree, followed by Dom Luiz and me. He shows me one tree that has been being tapped for 100 years, whereas itauba trees have to wait two centuries to become mature plants. He knows this forest like the back of his hand.
every pathway, he knows every escape route and even remembers the tree that his father cut 20 years ago in a ravine and the tree which has leaves that provide an antidote to cobra venom. Then there is also the sequoia they call ‘the queen’, a striking 700-year old samauma tree, 35 metres tall.

At least they dreamed

On the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve, covering almost one million hectares between Assis Brasil, Brasiléia, Capixaba, Xapuri and Serra Madureira, is the farm belonging to Raimundo Barros, Raimundão, Chico’s fellow activist. When I arrive, he shows me the green cap with the Cuban flag on it. It was he who took Chico’s place in the movement, and he remembers Chico with tender-hearted respect. ‘He was an admirer of revolutionaries and revolutions. He said that someone who embraces a cause is unlikely to see the fruits, but at least he dreamed,’ he continues in a low voice. Around here, he and his children work 500 hectares of land. ‘Three thousand rubber plants, chestnuts, pineapple, which coexist with wild boar, deer, native bees.’ He is also against the exploitation of community timber, the share that each person can take for him- or herself. ‘I will never cut down a tree from here again,’ he says seriously, with a gesture that suggests this is a solemn promise.

Xapuri is a small town that has grown up alongside the River Acre, land of the rubber tappers. Looking at the facial features of the people you come across, they belong to Indians, light-skinned blonds from northern Europe, dark-skinned Africans. If you talk to Chico’s old comrades, who can be found at the trade union headquarters, a sense of despondency prevails. The Bolsonaro government, which obtained 70% of the vote here, is drawing up a decree that is set to halve the size of extractive reserves and indigenous lands and hand them over to entrepreneurs and multinationals. The intergenerational conflict is heart-rending. ‘They say that, if we don’t clear the forest, we will die of starvation,’ Julio Barbosa tells me. But his father is sardonic: ‘They’re trading the wealth of the forest for animals that bring in more money. They turn up at festivals dressed as ranchers, hats and all,’ which is quite the opposite of what they were. ‘What can we do to rediscover our zeal?’ says another. ‘It’s as though everything we’ve done has been of no use at all.’

Even the Chico Mendes Museum is closed, on the pretext that the building is unsafe. The house is at the end of the village. It is a small wooden structure, blue in colour, containing the few objects that commemorate him: the typewriter, the books and, in the background, the table where he played dominoes with the police guards the night before he was killed, on 22 December 1988, when Darcy Alves Ferreira blasted him with a shotgun. There are still traces of bullet holes on the door. The father of the killer, who instigated the attack, still lives on a farm outside the village; one of the two cowardly guards, who ran away rather than help him, is a big man who has a beer outlet in the centre of the village. ‘When he was hit, he fell by the door to our room,’ recounted his daughter Elenira, who was four years old at the time. ‘He tried to say my name, but he couldn’t.’ And when she was 19, an aunt showed her a photo of herself with a dedication from her father: ‘She is the spearhead of hope. Elenira, one day you will carry on the fight that your father will not manage to win.’ At the funeral, his comrade Juan Correia, the bricklayer, was supposed to seal the tomb, but he could not bring himself to do it. ‘Then all Chico’s comrades started shouting and crying in the rain,’ relates Dom Luiz. ‘For seven days, we recited the Mass outside this house, and so many people gathered there in the morning.

But to really understand what happened during those years, and what continues to happen today in the forest, you need to see it from above. When Cassiano Marquez starts the burner, the hot air balloon rises, following the direction of the wind, and then ascends further, to 800 metres above ground level. From the skies above Rio Branco, there is a dizzying view. Where there have been fires, dark craters have formed – I can see the charred trees, the parched land, and the huge forest has disappeared, giving way to big green spaces where herds of grazing cattle and horses run about. The forest – the great mother of the rubber tappers and the Indians, of the forest people – known to Chico as Pacha Mama.

To really understand what happened during those years, and what continues to happen today in the forest, you need to see it from above.
Working life in France before 1914, documented by the Bonneff Brothers

From 1905 to 1914 – a period spanning nearly 10 years, brothers Léon and Maurice Bonneff studied many aspects of working life in France and wrote several reports on the subject. Their deaths in the early months of the Great War brought a premature end to a body of work that was picked up on by their contemporaries and is now particularly valuable to anyone pondering the history of work and recent trends in the field.

Their first notable initiative was to conduct an investigation into the murderous working conditions that prevailed in certain industries, working with the trade unions for the occupations concerned. The survey was published in 1905 in the form of a book, *Les métiers qui tuent [Occupations That Kill]*, structured around each source of poisoning or type of medical condition. They supported their analyses with proposals drawn up with 20 or so professional trade unions and federations, including the withdrawal from use of poisons such as lead and mercury and the implementation of safety procedures in workshops and construction sites. They also advocated vigorous trade union action on health matters.

The Bonneff brothers led life at full speed and, from very early on, blended social curiosity with commitment and writing. As sons of Jewish traders in precarious working conditions who lived in Franche-Comté, eastern France, they entered secondary education before each leaving for Paris after reaching the age of 16. The elder brother was taken on as an apprentice by a cousin who was a social sciences and philosophy publisher. He became familiar with processing texts and the writers’ world, and worked on journals where he mixed with committed intellectuals. The era was simmering with the rise of the strike movement, the development of trade unionism and socialism, and the intellectual sparkle that fosters experimentation. Léon involved his younger brother in some joint publishing projects. Having dreamt of becoming writers, they were urged to observe the social world, ordinary people and workers’ lives. They acted on that advice with skill and imagination.
advocated vigorous trade union action on health matters. The book's style was sober and factual, and it was an effective tool for the unions. It built the brothers a reputation in the trade union movement as thorough and methodical investigators who listened to the difficulties encountered by workers and put forward practical proposals.

This initial experience of cooperation with the unions was repeated in the brothers’ preparation of a second book published in 1908 entitled \textit{La vie tragique des travailleurs [The Tragic Life of Workers]}. The authors extended their investigations into the circumstances of female and male workers, on the basis of their occupations. The first group included the major industries such as textiles, glassmaking and steelmaking; the second comprised various hazardous or murderous activities such as the manufacture of grindstones, the repair and maintenance of furnaces, or rubber production. The third section related to home-based work by seamstresses or Jewish tailors living as refugees in Paris. The book tackled the technical, social and economic aspects of the occupations. Without shying away from the damage to health arising from housing conditions or alcoholism, they noted the harm caused by the work itself in terms of injuries or sicknesses. The work drew comment from the trade union and socialist press, and opened the doors of the major daily newspapers to the brothers.

Later the brothers followed each other into writing literature. Maurice’s novel \textit{Didier, homme du peuple [Didier, Man of the People]}, published in 1914, traces the story of a worker as he becomes a trade union activist and is based loosely on the life of Henri Péault, a unionised labourer. When he left for the front, Léon left a manuscript, \textit{Aubervilliers}, which was published posthumously in 1922-1923. This is a more lyrical novel set amidst the harsh conditions for workers in Aubervilliers, a Parisian suburb, and offers a vision of a decent, happy life.

It is chiefly through these publications and their occasional re-release that the Bonneff brothers’ work is known. Nonetheless, a significant and perhaps the most important share of their activities was for the journals that printed their work from 1908 until they were called up at the end of July 1914. They also published an impressive number of articles (370 in all) in \textit{L’Humanité, La Dépêche de Toulouse} and a few trade union and socialist periodicals, all under a joint byline using both their given names. A few of the texts deal with social issues, but the bulk of them concern workers’ lives and working environments. As part of their activities as journalists, the brothers continued to work frequently with trade union organisations and, when the occasion arose, with experts. However, their strength lay in the reports they did following on-site visits, asking questions and sometimes experiencing the working conditions for themselves. Disputes were a special reason for reporting, and sometimes their articles on such matters included an appeal for support. They soon adopted a lively style, sometimes addressing readers by appealing to their emotions or their sense of humour. Yet the foundation of the Bonneff brothers’ work lay in the wealth of sound information they had. They almost always set down working hours, forms and levels of remuneration and, where appropriate, categorised them by job type. In so doing, they covered most grievances. The brothers did not stop there: in their investigations into the origins of the disputes, they were uncompromising on working conditions, unhealthy conditions, accident risk and the factors involved in occupational sickness. They drew such matters into sharp focus and did not hesitate to cast the spotlight on them when, in their view, those issues were more significant than wage-related grievances. ‘We describe the work in detail’, they stated in one article, ‘in order to illustrate that the grievances are legitimate.’ The focus was therefore on people in their social context. Finally, they took the fairly unusual step for the time of often giving male and female workers a voice. They would gain recognition as pioneers of social reporting.

The articles were written as news stories developed, rather than as part of a set schedule, and the brothers were not trying to construct a representative tableau of the world of work in their era. However, the elaborate fresco painted by the articles when combined creates an astonishing image of that world: it is at once very removed from our own society yet carries very strong echoes of current trends.

The tableau depicts workers from various industries, including metalworking, textiles, woodworking and glassmaking, as well as mining and oil extraction. Plenty of room is also given to smaller-scale

\underline{They took the fairly unusual step for the time of often giving male and female workers a voice.}
The brothers focused particularly on children, who were exploited shamelessly, often in disregard of very conservative legislation. manufactures such as foodstuffs, school slates/blackboards or artificial flowers as well as to sectors that often have a lower profile such as construction materials or waste processing. Workshops, however, were far from the only point of reference. Construction sites occupied an important place in the world of work, whether their purpose was to extract materials or erect buildings, especially since mechanisation was in its infancy and hand tools were still predominant. Home-working was also huge, involving mainly women. The Bonneff brothers were also interested in commerce, especially small shops, although their gaze also landed on large stores and jobs in hospitality and catering. They also studied many occupations in transport and communications, for example the railways, mail, docks and shipping. In addition to blue-collar workers, they also looked at white-collar workers, whose conditions and grievances varied widely between quasi-servitude and the development of 'wage-earner' status. Across this patchwork of jobs and occupations, the two reporters noted the value of professions and know-how, but never at the expense of the health and safety of the people concerned, sometimes taking unscrupulous bosses to task for exploiting workers' pride or courage. They never overlooked the weakest people in the workforce, aids, assistants, labourers or apprentices. Their articles focused a great deal of attention on women performing tedious or menial tasks in many industries while exposed to accident or sickness. They showed that the overall system of remuneration was inherently gendered and that women's value was often half that of the men's regardless of their mastery of a job's skills. The women working in cottage industries earned, as one of the women themselves put it, enough to cheat death, but not enough to live. The brothers focused particularly on children, who were exploited shamelessly, often in disregard of very conservative legislation. In commerce, apprenticeships were often a pretext for working long hours and living in unfit conditions in exchange for highly variable training. In industry, the two journalists waged a campaign against the derogations afforded to the metalworking and glassmaking sectors on the age requirements and working hours for children. They doggedly denounced child trafficking, the long nights, the brutal abuse inflicted on children sometimes younger than 10 years old, and the obstructive practices employed by glassworks bosses in respect of labour inspectors' checks. Another legacy of their reports relates to the strength of the remuneration systems, which was a determining factor in the pressure brought to bear on the length of the working day, which was often more than 12 hours, and the effort put in by workers. As a general rule, these two aspects were where the emphasis lay in workshops, construction sites and home-working. Piece-work was in operation because it directly reflected the work done by the female or male worker concerned. The bargaining was often performed by a master craftsman or woman who sometimes involved others in the actual work. The system could result in a multi-stage process in garment-making, to the disadvantage of a dressmaker or tailor looking for work from arrogant intermediaries. Moreover, the commercial and employment relationships often overlapped at the expense of reliable remuneration. The weakness of worker status is evident in some of the distinctions drawn between workers and employees. Although wages varied, protection was the area where the gap was starkest. As a general rule, workers' remuneration was linked to gender, as we have seen, as well as to the occupation in question, and finally to a worker's strength. It therefore peaked before old age beckoned. After that point, as for children (who were yet to attain it) and women of all ages, the pool of family resources was what prevented a lonely, poverty-ridden existence. In some industries, employees' remuneration did not fall with advancing age; moreover, some establishments implemented forms of retirement or mutual funds to cushion against life's risks. Stability and certainty of resources, together with occupational health, are perhaps the issues with echoes for contemporary society that give pause for thought in the picture of the world of work that emerges from the Bonneff brothers' writings. All the details of the circumstances they describe mark the gap that separates the two eras. However, the 1900s and the weak policy, wage and social protections that the era provided have implications for our times too, when regulations are being called into question to varying degrees. ●

FURTHER READING
European Commission proposes measures on platform workers

On 9 December 2021, the European Commission proposed a set of measures to improve the working conditions of platform workers. The objective is to ensure that people working through digital labour platforms enjoy the rights and benefits they are entitled to, and to provide additional protection as regards the use of algorithmic management. To this end, the Commission is putting forward a proposal for a Directive covering three main areas.

First, it would seek to ensure that people working through platforms are granted the legal employment status that corresponds to their actual work arrangements. To determine whether the platform is an employer, the Commission has provided a list of five control criteria, of which two are sufficient to legally presume employability. A recent analysis conducted by the European Trade Union Confederation has found that Europe’s biggest platform companies would meet the majority of the criteria and therefore be classed as employers.

Second, the Directive increases transparency in the use of algorithms by platforms, ensures human monitoring of whether they respect working conditions, and gives the right to contest automated decisions.

Finally, in light of the fact that national authorities often struggle to access data on platforms and the people working through them, the Directive clarifies existing obligations on declaring work and asks platforms to make key information available to them.

Bullying culture in fine dining restaurants

A recent study conducted by Cardiff University revealed that violence, bullying and aggressive behaviours are commonplace among elite chefs employed in fine dining restaurants.

The study draws on 47 interviews with chefs employed in Michelin-starred kitchens around the world, mostly in European countries. It shows how working in closed, hidden-away kitchen environments influences the generation and reproduction of violent and aggressive behaviours. With isolation comes concealment, freedom from external scrutiny and the opportunity to act ‘in a different way’, as one participant described. More than the male-dominated culture and extreme pressure, it is the ‘geography of the workplace’ that causes misbehaviours among elite chefs.

But the study pointed out a paradox. Despite the brutality, most of the chefs interviewed reported a strong sense of camaraderie and were a highly productive and committed workforce. As co-author Rebecca Scott explained, ‘the chefs we spoke to gained a sense of belonging from their collective experience of physical, stressful, fast-paced work’. It is this feeling of community which enables them to ‘remain highly productive and committed despite the often brutal working conditions they experience’.

Measures are desperately needed, as poor working conditions and pay make chef retention difficult. A report from the Centre for London shows that around 20,000 chefs across the UK leave their roles every year.

Nursing home group Orpea at the centre of another scandal

The Orpea group is a leading global player in the field of healthcare and homes for the elderly, running a network of 1,156 establishments and offering more than 100,000 beds in 23 countries, mainly in Europe. In France, Orpea’s management methods have been the subject of regular scandals since 2014.

The latest scandal was revealed by journalist Victor Castanet in an investigation based on 250 testimonies, in which he exposed the system developed by Orpea to maximise its profits and the dividends paid to its shareholders — a complex strategy based on drastic cost-cutting and the maximum use of public funding. On top of the prohibitive rates charged, he revealed a range of abusive practices directly impacting the quality of care for residents and employee working conditions: systemic shortages of care staff, a ban on replacing absent staff, and the rationing of food and healthcare products. The journalist was even offered 15 million euros not to publish his work.

As a result of these revelations, Orpea is now the subject of a twofold — administrative and financial — investigation ordered by the French government. It was already the subject of charges from families concerning the deaths of elderly residents during the first lockdown. Jan Willem Goudriaan, General Secretary of the European Federation of Public Service Unions, is calling for an extension of the investigations to other EU Member States.
P&O Ferries' sudden sacking of 800 crew members

P&O Ferries, a British shipping company operating ferries to Ireland and continental Europe, sacked 786 crew members on 17 March to replace them with cheaper workers earning as little as £1.80 an hour – almost four times lower than the national minimum wage. Many of them were sacked by video message.

According to the national organisation of British trade unions (TUC), the company should face legal action for its failure to consult with staff. ‘UK law requires companies to consult with workers and unions before making redundancies. The company are clear that they did not do this,’ said General Secretary Frances O’Grady. P&O claims it did not act illegally.

According to an anonymous source within P&O, agency staff made between roughly £916 and £1,298 a month prior to the sacking, equating to less than £3 an hour on their 11-hour-day, seven-day-week rota. The crew could leave the boat while it was moored but were not allowed to take a weekend off. P&O insider and Labour Party member Karl Turner described the working conditions as like living on a ‘floating prison’.

This is not the first time the company displays such disregard for workers. In May 1988, P&O European Ferries sacked 400 personnel at Dover to replace them with untrained crew and strike breakers, which created a safety risk to passengers.

Eternit trial: fairer compensation for asbestos victims?

28 April 2022 marked the beginning of a trial against the fibre cement company Eternit in Belgium. The plaintiff Eric Jonckheere is suing the company, holding it civilly liable for exposing not only its workers to asbestos, but also those living near to the factory. Although this lawsuit follows other court decisions involving Eternit, the strategy adopted could have consequences for the whole process of compensating asbestos victims in Belgium.

Jonckheere is suffering from mesothelioma, a serious disease of which the only known cause is asbestos. He is the fifth member of his family to suffer from this disease, the other four having died. Not only did Eric’s father work for Eternit, but his whole family lived in the vicinity of the factory, whose responsibility for playing down the dangers associated with asbestos and failing to take appropriate countermeasures has already been recognised by Belgian courts.

As things stand in Belgium, victims of environmental or household exposure can obtain compensation by filing a claim with the Asbestos Victims Compensation Fund, which provides rapid and lump-sum compensation for victims of several diseases caused by asbestos. However, anyone using this fund is forced to waive the second route to compensation: legal recourse.

Health workers are facing dangerous neglect of their health and safety

In a joint publication, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have urged greater safeguards to protect health workers. The healthcare sector is known to be a stressful industry with high burnout rates, workplace violence and harassment, musculoskeletal disorders, infections, and allergies, all resulting from poor working conditions. But the Covid-19 pandemic has taken an additional heavy toll on health workers and, more generally, on frontline workers.

The joint call for action from the ILO and WHO points at the ‘dangerous neglect’ of the health, safety and wellbeing of healthcare workers. ‘Only a few healthcare facilities had programmes in place for managing health and safety at work’, said Maria Neira, Director of WHO’s Department of Environment, Climate Change and Health. The crisis has exposed the cost of this systemic lack of safeguards, with approximately 115 500 health workers dying from Covid-19 during the first 18 months of the pandemic.

Beyond exposing these issues, the ILO and WHO have provided recommendations on how to develop and implement stronger OSH programmes for health workers. Specifically, the report stresses the need for a comprehensive and sustainable approach, implemented at national, sub-national and health facility levels, and covering all types of risk factors – infectious, ergonomic, physical, chemical, and psycho-social.
The ban on glyphosate: in the balance between democracy and emergency

Laurent Vogel
ETUI

Glyphosate is the most widely used herbicide in the world. In the global pesticides market, worth around 53 billion euros in 2020, at more than 8 billion euros glyphosate is the number one product.

Since it was first brought onto the market in 1974 by agrochemicals company Monsanto, its toxicity has gradually emerged from a series of studies conducted by independent researchers. These have been validated by peer review, involving a critical analysis of the data and methodology by scientists from other institutions. On this basis, in 2015 the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified glyphosate as probably carcinogenic to humans.

In 2016, Monsanto was taken over by Bayer. The 56 billion-euro buy-out gave this German multinational control of 24% of the global pesticides market and 29% of the seeds market. But the lawsuits brought in the United States alone could add several tens of billions of euros to the bill.

When, in December 2017, Bayer secured a renewal of the approval of glyphosate for the European market for a five-year period, a U-turn by the German government came as a surprise. Despite a commitment to vote against the approval, Germany’s final vote gave the European Commission a comfortable majority.

Now, in the spring of 2022, the debate surrounding glyphosate is at a crossroads.

A report delivered in June 2021 by a group of four states (France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden) as part of the approval procedure came out in favour of renewing the approval. The credibility of this 11,000-page report was challenged in France in January 2022 by the National Commission on Ethics and Alerts in Public Health and the Environment. The Commission’s Chair, Denis Zmirou-Navier, explains: ‘It has been shown that the preliminary European report involved radical screening, excluding most of the studies on glyphosate published in international scientific literature and basically using the ones provided by the manufacturers, conforming to standardised protocols. This method has to be questioned: we cannot go on having reviews that ignore scientific advances.’

As far as the Member States are concerned, the number of countries that might vote in favour of a ban will probably increase. This time, it might be difficult for Germany to object to it. The new ‘traffic light’ tripartite majority of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals that came out of the September 2021 elections has taken a firm stand in favour of a ban on glyphosate from January 2023 onwards, regardless of the outcome of the European procedures. Conversely, France has done a U-turn without ever clearly admitting it. In November 2017, President Macron undertook to put an end to the use of this pesticide within three years. In March 2022, in the context of his reelection campaign, he admitted that he had not kept this promise, on the pretext that the decision needed to be taken at European Union level. This justification sits uneasily with the French Presidency’s propesticide turnaround in the past few months.

As far as public opinion is concerned, there are also contradictory trends. The crisis of the pandemic has brought to light an uneasiness with political decisions that rely on somewhat unclear scientific advice. This is the conclusion of an analysis by Stéphane Foucart, a journalist and environmental specialist who covers science for the French newspaper Le Monde. Although decisions about vaccination were based on sound scientific evidence, significant parts of the public were unconvinced: ‘Defiance of Covid-19 vaccination policies has thrived on the recent health and environmental scandals fomented by questionable reviews.’ Of all the examples cited by the journalist, glyphosate comes top.

On the other hand, the combination of the pandemic and Russian aggression against Ukraine is paving the way for authoritarian decisions in the name of a state of emergency. This situation is perfectly epitomised by the chemical industry, which is setting itself up as the guardian of Europe’s self-sufficiency in food. Accordingly, in March 2022, the European Commission postponed the adoption of two key texts on reducing the use of pesticides and restoring the environment.

In this context full of contradictions, trade unions play a crucial role. Trade union organisations in the agricultural sector are struggling to have the herbicide banned worldwide. Their European federation (EFFAT) has demonstrated that significantly less dangerous alternatives exist. However, there is a rift that calls to mind the debate around the banning of asbestos towards the end of the last century. At that time, trade unionists from industries that used asbestos ultimately realised that a ban was needed. However, some trade unions in the chemicals industry and mining sector aligned themselves with their employers for fear of job losses. Will trade unions today take effective action and defend occupational health in a spirit of solidarity, no matter which sector is involved? The stakes are high. It is a question of the society we want to build, of democracy, and of the important links between occupational health and the environment.
The Unequal Pandemic: Covid-19 and Health Inequalities
By Clare Bambra, Julia Lynch and Katherine E. Smith

Policy Press, Bristol University, 2021
Available open access: https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/the-unequal-pandemic

The Unequal Pandemic is written in an engaging manner, intertwining data, historical perspectives, and accounts of lived experience. In the end, the reader is able to clearly understand how health is determined by societal circumstances, such as working and employment conditions, housing, and access to essential goods and services. And it could not be more evident that the longstanding systematic differences in health between groups of people are not only unfair – they are socially produced and avoidable. In the words of the authors: ‘To prevent the pandemic from creating worse inequalities, we need not only policy change, but also political change: changes to our political parties and institutions that can lead to a greater voice for working people, and limit the outsized and growing influence of elite, corporate and financial sector actors whose short-term interests are promoted by inequality.’

The Covid-19 pandemic is fundamentally unequal: it has killed unequally, been experienced unequally, and will impoverish unequally. This book explains how and why.

Bringing together a vast range of evidence from public health, epidemiology and political science, the analysis by the three professors busts the myth that ‘we are all in it together’ and that the Covid-19 virus ‘does not discriminate’. A person who is exposed to and gets infected with SARS-COV-2, falls ill, or passes away, is more likely to be from a deprived urban neighbourhood and/or region than a more affluent one and more likely to be a member of an ethnic/racial minority group.

The authors outline four different pathways that link inequality to higher Covid-19 infection rates, case numbers, case severity, and deaths. First, increased exposure to the virus is a result of inequalities in working conditions. Lower-paid workers, particularly in the service sectors – such as care, food, cleaning, or delivery services – were required to go to work during lockdown, and more likely to be reliant on public transport for doing so. Moreover, people in lower-skilled occupations are generally less likely to be able to work from home. Second, the new ‘pandemic vocabulary’ has introduced us to the concept of ‘underlying conditions’ which increase the risk of severe illness and death. This book unpacks how health conditions that increase vulnerability to Covid-19, such as diabetes, heart disease or obesity, arise as a result of pre-existing inequalities in the social determinants of health. Third, even without any underlying conditions, people from deprived communities are more vulnerable to infection from Covid-19 as a result of chronic stress due to long-term exposure to adverse living and environmental conditions. And fourth, poor housing conditions – such as small living spaces, multiple occupation, or lack of outside space – increase the likelihood of transmission. In Barcelona, for example, the risk of contracting Covid-19 in lower-income areas is almost double the risk run by people living in higher-income areas.¹

The authors explain how the impact of the blanket public health measure of ‘lockdown’ – which in practice concerns everyone – has also been very unequal. The immediate mental health inequalities have been caused by job and income losses, crowded housing, lack of access to green space, and gender-based violence. In addition, evidence from previous global crises indicates that the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to have huge consequences for health, and particularly health inequalities. The message is clear: These health inequalities before, during and after the pandemic, are a political choice – with governments effectively choosing who gets to live and who gets to die.’

In six chapters, the book manages to document the unequal impact of the pandemic on health and to explore what can be done to decrease health inequalities. Countries with higher rates of social inequality and less generous social security systems have had a more unequal pandemic. In this context, weaker sickness protection for workers – especially lower-paid, lower-status workers – has meant that those who fall ill must choose between endangering themselves and others by going to work or losing their jobs and their income. Finally, where robust occupational safety measures and strong protections against unfair dismissal have been in place, fewer essential workers have been placed in danger.

¹ Chulvi B., Social inequalities: the only frontier the pandemic does not cross, HesaMag # 24, Autumn 2021. https://www.etui.org/publications/workplaces-pandemic
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