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# CLR News

## The lives and work of migrant workers

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# Note

from the editor

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In 2009 we published some outstanding global contributions dedicated to the working conditions of workers in nonstandard employment relations (CLR-News 2-2009). In that issue we published, for instance, an article on attempts by Chinese students and scholars to defend the interests of peasant workers that served as seasonal workers in the Chinese construction industry. Other contributions covered the lack of decent regulation and the higher safety risks for temporary agency workers. The data provided included the estimate that agency workers' safety risks are three times higher than the occupational risks for direct labour. According to the labour inspectorate, the main causes for these higher risks were and are lack of experience, with possible and potential risks and poor introduction and integration at the workplace. The temporary status of new workers, probably with difficulties in fully understanding the risks related to their workplace, may place them in danger. The idea is that these workers are used

to carrying out quite simple tasks and, therefore, the necessary training is usually only a couple of days. We also quoted the conclusions of a German health report that temporary workers have higher risks for muscular and skeleton diseases and that the chances for accidents and injuries are higher. The conclusion of the contributions was that temporary agency workers do not receive the same level of health and safety protection as permanent staff. Also, the representation of temporary agency workers via the classical systems of worker representation (local union representatives, works councils or health and safety committees) in work environment and health & safety issues is often missing.

At a later stage (in CLR-News 2-2010) we applied some of this knowledge to the theme of migrant labour. The position on work sites of migrant labour is often quite similar to the position of temporary agency workers. The construction industry remains a 'migrant dense' and precarious industry with the

vast majority of workers on short-term temporary contracts. In one of the contributions based on UK data on the level of migrant worker deaths in construction, an upward trend from reported deaths of migrant workers in construction in relation to the sector overall and migrant worker deaths across the economy was identified. This was supported by a number of case studies and by examining verdicts, legal support and prosecution in cases of migrant deaths.

In this issue we want to come back to this theme for several reasons. Of course there is the scandalous situation in Qatar where workers from Nepal, India and Bangladesh are treated as slaves. The Qatar government recently had to admit that, only in the period 2012-2013, 964 migrant workers had already died on the construction and infrastructure sites for the World Soccer tournament 2022, a rate of more than one a day. The ITUC has calculated that, if nothing is done to protect the rights of migrant workers, 4000 workers will have died by the time the tournament starts.

But also back here in the EU the news on health and safety is not always positive. The European Commission has just published its new H&S strategy (EU Strategic

Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2014-2020), more than 2 years after the previous one expired. The EU strategy does not come up with legislative improvements; on the contrary, the Commission excludes the adoption of new legislation and its focus is much more on the simplification of national regulations and on the elimination of 'administrative burden'. The strategy does not pay attention to the risks connected to the free movement of labour or migrant work whilst the old strategy (Improving quality and productivity at work: Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work) identified 'new and larger flows of migrants' as one of the challenges in the field of health and safety.

The growth of the world's migrant population more than doubled between the 1960s and the 1990s, reaching 2.6% in 1985-1990, and it is forecast that this trend will accelerate in the 21st Century. The term 'migrant worker' covers a wide range of people with different reasons for migrating and varying skills levels. Not all such workers are 'at risk' regarding their safety and health at work. However, there are at least three occupational safety & health (OSH)

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issues relating to migrant workers that should give concern:

- The **concentration** of migrant workers in traditional (often blue-collar) high risk sectors. According to Eurostat figures, there is enough evidence to conclude that the incidence of accidents is considerably higher in economic activities where migrant workers more frequently work, at least where male migrant workers are working. The number of occupational accidents varies considerably depending upon the economic activity in question and is positively skewed in relation to male-dominated activities. Within the EU-27 in 2009, the construction, manufacturing, transportation and storage, and agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors together accounted for just over two thirds (67.8%) of all fatal accidents at work and just over half (50.2%) of all serious accidents. More than one in four (26.1%) fatal accidents at work in the EU-27 in 2009 took place within the construction sector, while the manufacturing sector had the next highest share (16.1%)<sup>1</sup>.
- **Language and cultural barriers** to communication and training. At most workplaces workers have to work in a team. Workers are dependent from each other for their safety at work and their activity can have serious consequences for all other workers. In such a case it is of the utmost importance that newcomers are accepted and not isolated from their colleagues. But, if the communication is hindered, they will find it difficult to adapt to the local culture. Moreover, training related to the impact of their activity on health and safety at the workplace is often missing, for cost reasons and because of the temporary nature of their work.
- Migrant workers often **work a lot of overtime and/or are in poor health**. Evidence gathered by several European studies confirms the segregation of migrant workers into certain occupations and activity sectors that feature the worst working conditions in terms of wages and working hours. Migrant workers often work long hours, unsocial shifts and are less likely

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1. [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Health\\_and\\_safety\\_at\\_work\\_statistics](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Health_and_safety_at_work_statistics)

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to have holidays or sick leaves. It is also reported that migrant workers do heavier, more monotonous and more dangerous work, at a higher work pace, and that they work more often below their qualification level<sup>2</sup>. The topic is complicated by the varying definitions of 'migrants', an absence of robust statistics, and figures that do not cover the 'invisible' part of the mobile workers in the EU<sup>3</sup>.

And, of course we will again welcome your critical remarks and future contributions.

The subject articles in this issue of CLR-News have a broader scope than just health & safety. Both the article on Portuguese workers and the contribution on Russia and Italy give insightful information on the lives and work abroad of migrants. Based on talks with construction workers we can gain a glimpse into the work and time pressure to which migrant workers are exposed. The contributions also illustrate their motives and the struggle to survive. I can recommend this fascinating and valuable work of the respective authors. We have the usual reports and reviews, this time topical contributions, but not directly related to the main subject.

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2. [https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/literature\\_reviews/migrant\\_workers](https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/literature_reviews/migrant_workers)

3. [https://osha.europa.eu/en/priority\\_groups/migrant\\_workers](https://osha.europa.eu/en/priority_groups/migrant_workers)

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## **PORTUGUESE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN SPAIN: SITUATED PRACTICES AND TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS IN THE EUROPEAN FIELD OF CONSTRUCTION (2003-2013)**

For a short period of time the presence, so imposing if transitory, of Portuguese workers on building sites in Spain, appeared as a symptomatic and exemplar expression of the contemporary situation in the European construction sector. *Market integration* and *free movement of persons and services* were more than expressions of economic terminology here, apparently being concretely translated into the emergence and growing exchange between Portugal and Spain in the construction sector. Around 2003 and 2008, a mass of approximately 90,000 Portuguese construction workers officially laboured in the Spanish construction projects (other sources, attempting to calculate in addition the number of workers without any kind of registration, refer to 120,000 workers). Often commuting via weekly or fortnightly trips between their workplaces in Spain, above all in the Galicia, Madrid and Basque regions, and their places of residence in Portugal (concentrated, in social and economic terms, in peripheral areas, such as the Sousa Valley region), these workers seemed to constitute a particular case of transnational migration space (Faist, 2006; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007) for the contemporary European construction sector. Suddenly, however, this wave of *workers in transit* started to dissipate when the first unmistakable signs of a prolonged crisis in the Spanish construction sector were felt. From 2007 to 2008, the annual influx of Portuguese workers to Spain fell from 27,178 to 16,876, with a particular impact on the construction sector, whose proportion of the total in the same period fell from 46% to 39% meanwhile (Pinho and Pires, 2013). Of those workers who passed through Spain, only about 20,000 appear to have been rooted in that country; the remainder extended

their migration paths, transferring themselves to other work contexts promising employment (Angola, France and UK, among others) or, simply, returned to their even more economically depressed Portuguese villages and towns.

The traces of such movements were, however, fragile, being virtually invisible in terms of institutional registration. The instruments of statistical classification and monitoring were frankly unable to record, other than imperfectly, the movements of workers, since their legal or professional situation cannot always be fully clarified by resorting to traditional indicators. Moreover, even when the predominant scholarship is usually technically competent to register them in terms of people flows or economic balances, it is not always able to realize this *on the ground*. At the same time, it shows a tenacious insistence on avoiding precarious working populations like construction workers. Indeed, despite the continued relevance of the construction sector in Portugal, there remains a certain degree of negligence regarding research on the work context, with important exceptions however in the 1990s (Freire, 1991; Pinto, 1999; Queiroz, 2003). Such considerations led to a research strategy, which we will later explain in detail that facilitates the capture of both territorial movements and the everyday experiences of construction workers.

### **1. The emergence of the commuting migration to Spain.**

The *crisis* situation that emerged in Portugal in the 2000s, evident from the slowing down of the business cycle and convulsion of the political and economic system and culminating in recourse to external sources of financing, has had a particular impact on the area of the Sousa Valley region. Here, the number of unemployed workers grew by 150% between 2001 and 2006 (Monteiro and Queirós, 2009). The rapid and intense growth in unemployment was only the most visible expression of the loss of competitiveness of traditional industries in the region (textiles and clothing, footwear, furniture, etc.). These segments of the local economy (which, whilst sustained by a

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workforce with low wages and low skills, were, in contrast, characterized by the incipient though reluctant integration of innovation and technology into the production process), were hit hard by the growth in international competition and the liberalisation of European and world trade. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate continued to grow steadily, coming in 2012 to skim 21% in some municipalities - though, in 2001, it only slightly exceeded 4% (IEFP, *Unemployment Monthly Reports*, 2001 and 2012). At the time, local politicians even used a 'calamity' vocabulary, such as 'social alarm', to characterise the social situation of the Vale do Sousa region.

Simultaneously, the paralysis in the construction industry in Portugal (which, incidentally, was another major employer in the Sousa Valley region), locally created with the growing speculation in housing values and the meanwhile curtailed access to bank credit (especially after an interest rate rise), together with the impasse in investment in public works, served to magnify the situation. It enhanced the economic weaknesses of the Sousa Valley region and made it even more difficult to find a replacement job for these workers, whose educational weaknesses in turn complicated any occupational change. The consequence was the creation of a massive contingent workforce, without occupation and under the pressure of supplementary economic constraints, for instance, to pay back frequent bank loans negotiated for the purchase of a house or vehicle (Monteiro and Queirós 2010).

In turning to migration as a *choice*, not only possible but also reasonable, the previously internalized tendency of these workers was to rely on their previous social experiences. They were usually already in contact with local communities with highly precocious and compelling means of entry into manual jobs, they remained connected to family and community networks of migration (some going back to the 1960), and they had a strong concern to sustain a positive personal and customary image. Not only was their preferred system of work characterised - via their biographical trajectories - by arduous

tasks, low wages and prolonged immersion in informality, but this also came to be seen as the priority for investment and reward or the primary means to access the universe of consumption and the universe of symbolic virtues (Monteiro, 2014). Similarly, the long-standing and close contact with family and neighbourhood experiences of migration, as well as access to entry-points and gatekeepers for construction companies or networks of migration, turned migration into a plausible future, in particular in rendering the territorial and social transitions usually entailed (such as legal and material precariousness, change in occupation, or family isolation), less onerous - in all senses of the word.

Until approximately 2008, the construction sector in Spain experienced an exceptional period, buoyed up by the injection of public funds and privileged access to bank credit, creating a feasible source of employment for workers from the Sousa Valley region as soon as the set of *intermediaries* characteristic of the construction sector began to operate on the ground. Prone to link shortages in the construction sector with the *dispositions* of workers, these constitute a complex swarm of micro and small subcontractors, promoting job announcements, temporary work agencies, and even illegal or paralegal networks of recruitment. In order to achieve convergence between *demand* and *supply*, concepts that synthetically express composite and complex social formations, these means of assembly, rather than the supposedly spontaneous equilibrium of the market, were crucial. The compatibility between the propensities and interests incorporated in workers on the one hand, and the objective system of opportunities and demands that encompass the transnational construction labour market on the other, was significantly promoted by this web of intermediaries, which simultaneously compete and cooperate among themselves to form a floating, ready-to-use and precarious proletariat (Bosch and Philips 2003).

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Around 2003 and 2004, the situation of posted workers in Spain remained largely 'unregistered, unnoticed and unmonitored' (Byrne, 2011: 25). According to Justin Byrne, Portuguese construction workers, who at the time constituted the most important contingent among posted workers, found (in generic terms) a triple level of employability. First, a small segment of these workers was able to find employment at the 'high-end' of the professional scale, being placed in technically more skilled occupations, with higher wages and in frequent demand from Spanish companies. However, this situation did not arise solely or even mainly because of their experience or expertise, but was also a consequence of the 'willingness of Portuguese tradesman to work for longer hours and less money than their Spanish counterparts', on the one hand, and because the 'employer's social costs are significantly lower in Portugal than in Spain, representing a further saving in overall labour costs', on the other (ibid.: 28). Secondly, the workers were able to enter a 'low-end' segment, 'involving both tradesmen and labourers formally employed by English sub-contractors', which often promotes, even when fully operational on a legal basis, 'labour market segmentation and social dumping' (ibid: 29). Thirdly, there were the workers who participated at the 'bottom end' of migrant labour, where transactions founded in 'systematic and continued illegal, fraudulent practices regarding conditions (working and living conditions), evasion of social security and tax obligations, or health and safety standards and norms' (ibid: 29) were common. This shows quite clearly that, contrary to assumptions of homogeneity or innateness accompanying so many interpretations of workers groups, labelling them with a common national or ethnic attribute ('the Portuguese'), the same category of migrants ('Portuguese workers', 'posted workers') hides a plurality of personal profiles and a beam of previous biographic trajectories.

Box 1:

**The construction sector in Portugal (2001-2013)**

After reaching its zenith between 2000 and 2001, the Portuguese construction industry has since faced a trend towards stagnation. However, in 2012, the construction sector still accounted for nearly 12% of the number of firms, 11% of employment and 7% of turnover from non-financial corporations in Portugal; the sector was, in fact, the second most important in terms of the number of companies and the third in terms of turnover and employment (BdP, 2014). Even if fragmentation is a prominent feature of the construction industry - populated by a cloud of small and medium enterprises where traditional technological and organisational characteristics continue to prevail (for instance, a strong incidence of informality, labour intensity or customary management formats), it is necessary to note the process of concentration into conglomerates and the renewal of the protagonists of the business (fusions or mergers, bankruptcies, foreign acquisitions of Portuguese companies and Portuguese acquisitions of foreign companies). Quite contrary to the general trend, the number of companies with more than 250 employees increased from 64 to 97 between 2005 and 2010. If the turnover of the whole sector grew timidly from 32,917 to 35,124 M€ (6.7%), the turnover of companies with more than 250 employees rose from 6,841 to 11,453 M€ (67.4%) in the same period. In particular, it was found that the significance of the nine largest companies for the total turnover of the sector grew in the meantime from 12.6% (4,140 M€) to 20.3 % (6883 M€) (Rosa, 2013: 309-312). We must also note the significant internationalisation of the (geographical) circle of intervention of these companies (in 2010, 59.8% of the turnover of the top nine companies was attributable to foreign markets) and changes in the composition and strategies of the enterprises themselves, such as the horizontal diversification of their areas of activity (in 2010,

20% to 50% of the turnover of the five largest companies was attributable to areas outside construction activities in a strict sense) or the importance of their links to financial initiatives (ibid.: 115). Symptoms such as the tendency towards the centralisation of capital or the externalisation of execution together with the centralisation of conception and management activities (Rosa, 2013: 322-323), appear to have completed the process of inter- and intra-corporate reshaping of the Portuguese construction sector. In this new century, the number of construction workers in Portugal has been enormously compressed: just between the third quarter of 2011 and the same period of 2013 almost 150,000 Portuguese construction workers disappeared from the statistical records according to the figures provided by the Eurostat (respectively, 436,400 and 283,800 workers).

## 2. The emergence and functioning of the European construction field

The emergence and institutionalisation of a European political and economic space (Fligstein, 2008: 8-18), in which individuals and collective actors compete and cooperate (communitarian programmes and agencies, nation states, political parties, companies, organisations for the representation of collective interests, etc.), gradually promoted the emergence and consolidation of a *cohesive European field of construction*<sup>1</sup>. On the basis of their partially converging interests in present and future European integration initiatives, such individual or collective actors compete to maintain or modify

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1. As we use it here, the concept of economic field recalls the system of concepts articulated to foresee the economy as an order of action that is internally structured through the invisible and elastic relationships of competition and cooperation between its participants (national and local political bodies, companies, workers, interest representation organizations, etc.). These participants converge, in practical and symbolic terms, with the form of value created, traded and accumulated within such an order but are, at the same time, unequally empowered with opportunities and resources and, therefore, specifically oriented in accordance to them (Bourdieu, 2001; Fligstein, 2008).

the distribution of economic opportunities, the structures of political regulation and the balance of power that prevail in the simplistically called *single market*. The transformation of the European project, which led to a dominance of neoliberal conceptions pointing towards a progressive universalisation of the economic market principle (Hooghe, 2004: 118-141), had an exceptional impact within the field of European construction, where strong economic and political pressures powering the movement of workers and businesses at the European level were felt (Cremers, 2004: 7-13; Lillie and Greer, 2007: 551-581). For the construction sector, changing political equilibria promoted corporate strategies that, among others, introduced: economic and political measures liberalising the regulatory frameworks for wages and rights at European and national levels; the extensive use of subcontracting, outsourcing and inter-enterprise cooperation practices; or the invention and widespread application of solutions for the 'flexibilisation' of the labour force, such as innovative forms of temporary or precarious employment, the fracturing of collective bargaining procedures and agreements between the social partners, or the increasing posting of workers across countries (Druker and Croucher, 2000).

The growing integration of the Portuguese construction sector in this European plan recently found further encouragement in the depressing situation in Portugal, as the circle of operation of construction companies and workers apparently expanded until a broader European scope was achieved. On one side, the growing value of Portuguese migration, which continues to involve mainly workers without high academic qualifications and is associated with low-skilled jobs (construction, hospitality, cleaning), surpassed, in 2013, even the massive flows of the 1960s (in the past year, there were 121,460 Portuguese leaving the country). For its part, Portuguese construction companies in the meantime saw the importance of the external market for their turnover and investments to accrue (see Box 1 for more precise data). Even if these appear as episodic clues, they are beneficially integrat-

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ed when considered in relation to the concept of a European field of construction, a concept that helps to overcome the hermetic conception of national states and markets, avoiding the well-known *methodological nationalism* (Fitzgerald, 2004). Thereafter, this concept helps to replace mechanical conceptions of the functioning of economic and political institutions (even if at the transnational level) with a relational conception that sees them as an interdependent system of relations of force conditioning and being conditioned through the transnational strategies of the protagonists (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2007).

The movement of Portuguese workers to Spain cannot be fully explained by isolating and inquiring into just one location or protagonist (for instance, conducting research on a subcontractor, the community of departure, or the construction site in Spain). The social experience of Portuguese workers is formed around a constellation of places, geographically separated but socially interconnected, which simultaneously co-produces the phenomenon of commuting migration. The polycentric character of this phenomenon and the mutual relationships that unite its social and physical locations, led us, therefore, to conduct a multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus, 2005) from 2008 to 2013, that has sought to encompass simultaneously the communities of departure in Portugal, located precisely in the aforementioned Vale do Sousa region, and in the communities of arrival in Spain (or, more specifically, in Galicia). Such an option has, therefore, allowed for the observation of connections and situations that conglomate the multiplicity of economic and political forces operating across European transnational space, supplemented by the ethnographic registration of commonplace transactions (following the suggestion of Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2005). The work was completed through a series of interviews with workers and employers in the construction sector that, along with interviews with Portuguese and Spanish trade union representatives as well as policymakers from both countries, allowed us to reconstruct the collective views on migration that

its principal players hold. Finally, we took into account the corpus of information on the construction sector produced in Portugal and Spain between 2001 and 2013, in particular statistical series of public and private organisations and press reports.

### **3. The everyday life of Portuguese construction workers in Spain.**

From 2003 onwards, the emergence of a mobile workforce in the construction sector was noteworthy, characterised by territorial and social commuting across national borders, i.e., a contingent of workers with a pattern of existence whereby the weekdays were spent working in Spain and the weekends in Portugal (Monteiro and Queirós, 2010). Under these dipolar circumstances, a peculiar way of organising social experience for these workers can be seen to have arisen, transforming them, through the junction between erratic itineraries and cascade subcontracting, into a 'nomadic' population (Pinto, 1999: 27). One of the features of these commuting migrants is the pattern of *double disconnection* with regard to their sociability (Monteiro and Queirós, 2009), in sharp contrast with traditional Portuguese migration characterised by a 'relationship of double connection' (terms of Albertino Gonçalves). In Spain, the triangle 'site-house-restaurant' practically monopolises workers' everyday cycles. On the other hand, meetings with Spanish locals tend to be avoided, due to the lack of linguistic competence of many Portuguese workers, as well as the feeling of inferiority that these workers experience as 'foreigners' and - what is more important - as 'trowels', which tends to turn these meetings, if they happen, into troubling events ('shame', 'they do not respect us'). When expressing their inhibitions and uneasiness in encounters with other persons (supervisors, inspectors and native), migrant workers seem to provide the very proof of evidence that initially justified the prejudices heaped on them ('incompetent', 'rough', 'incomprehensible'). The constant exposure to a situation of negation, where one is 'a complete stranger, linguistically inept, economically insecure and social-

ly stigmatised' (Jackson, 2008: 80), may in some cases lead them to offer spontaneously a negative image of themselves. In fact, the loss of social value surrounding them, in reality due to the situation of social and economic deprivation in which they live, is exactly what promotes their loss of public visibility and appreciation. At the same time, an impoverishment is also to be observed in the occasions necessary for renewing personal and collective links in the communities of origin in Portugal ('I avoid going to the cafe', 'there are people who do not even know me'), resulting in their interactions just being confined to the domestic sphere ('I stay at home').

Another feature of their lives is the logic of seeking to accelerate economic earnings while in Spain ('make money fast', 'take advantage while it exists'). For workers who must face the shortness, seasonality and uncertainty of periods of work in the construction sector and its various social and physical vicissitudes ('bad weather', 'bankruptcy', 'accidents'), the widespread existence of remuneration schemes connected with the intensity and extension of work ('work at an hourly base', 'extra hours') promotes, as a consequence, competition between workers ('teams' that compete with 'teams') and their atomisation ('prizes' connected with the personal performances), which creates, paradoxically, the impression of fairness since wages vary in the same proportion as the labour applied ('the more you work, the more you earn'). Moreover, these schemes tend to promote self-exploitation through overwork ('work till you drop'). We noticed the occurrence of bulimic patterns of behaviour among Portuguese workers, in which the extent and intensity of work ('overtime', 'fast-paced') merges with the confinement of personal and collective movement and consumption ('do not spend', 'to save as much as possible', 'not go out'). Under a situation of relegation ('in Portugal there is no way'), where the physical and social precariousness of construction is coupled with systems of contracting and payment closely linked to a strategy of compressing labour costs (Cremers, 2009), the compliance of the worker - apparently voluntarily but strongly penalised -

with company impositions in terms of deadlines and productivity is only furthered. As this occurs with moves to outsourcing and subcontracting, companies seek to ease their capacity to react to market fluctuations (Bosch and Philips, 2003: 3).

However, it was also noteworthy that the work had a positive component for workers. Without ignoring or deceiving themselves about the violent nature of their work ('hard work', 'it drains you'), extending 10 to 14 hours a day and permanently exposing them to significant danger factors, these workers seemed to recognise virile and virtuous values to the work ('it's not for everyone', 'you must have padding'). It was turned into a series of tests and trials that allowed them to develop physically and morally ('to win strength', 'fulfil') and consisted of 'practices of personal integrity' (expression of E. Dunbar Moodie) that supported a sense of self-worth for workers in potentially injurious and poisonous circumstances. In these cases, it is possible to convert personal sufferings into electable symptoms. Rather than being just the product of customs and traditions of the trade, these behaviours and feelings sponsored the accumulation of symbolic and practical resources ('respect', 'know-how'), allowing the worker, under certain conditions ('luck', 'it is necessary that the foreman in charge likes you'), to be promoted up the hierarchy of the construction site and possible progression within his occupational career. Seeing the construction site as a spatially circumscribed configuration of relations of power (Elias, 2004), and not just as a functional unit, it is possible to understand that workers, however short their margins of freedom may be, can avail themselves to practical manoeuvres where their investment and obedience ('always available', 'do what we are asked to do ') are exchanged for employers' favours and rewards ('gave us respect', 'gave us a better job').

A third feature we wish to emphasise precisely encompasses the *double truth* of work (Bourdieu 2003: 190). On construction sites, work is a circuit for the consumption, conservation and valorisation of the worker's body ('effort', 'to gain experi-

ence'). On the one hand, the body is the worker's principal, or sometimes unique, source of economic and symbolic resource, functioning as a reservoir for the technical and ethical values of workers ('strength', 'skill', 'respect'). Ensuring access to payment, work also permits participation in a process of virile and virtuous aggrandisement ('to become a man'). However, the worker's body easily becomes *risk capital* in literal terms, not only because it is subjected to progressive usury, but also because it can easily suffer a sudden crash in its valuation ('accident'). Very frequently, construction work can easily become demeaning and humiliating ('be a workhorse', 'a slave') (for a similar phenomenon, this time in the French context, see Jounin, 2008). At the same time, workers themselves are aware that their bodies are often publicly seen and regarded as vile or dangerous objects ('the Portuguese people are seen as hard people'). Through the pride or shame that Portuguese workers feel whenever they are confronted with institutional sanctions or interpersonal opinions of those with authority to judge their manners and attitudes in Spain (Holmes, 2006), they can end up perceiving themselves as necessarily belonging to the place that they actually occupy in the hierarchy of occupations and statutes of construction sites ('I was born to be only such a guy'). Accordingly, a curious naturalisation of their bodily events (such as accidents or involvement in physically-demanding tasks) can creep in, as these are therefore seen as complementary or inherent to the innate behaviour of workers.

Quite ironically, whenever they try to escape the usual silence and avoid ('shut up myself'), refuse or resist ('yelling') such imputations of inferiority, their reactions tend, through their very assertiveness ('to make noise', 'use the hand'), to turn into signs of confirmation of the initial presumptions of inaptitude and violence that are hung on these workers ('violent', 'ignorant'). When they respond with words or actions, sometimes in exuberant ways, to the implication that they are technically or intellectually incapable, their appearance sometimes corresponds precisely to preconceptions about which

they felt initially offended. For instance, when Portuguese workers try to show themselves as valuable workers, they usually tend to assume imprudent and temerarious behaviours ('working with high speed', 'going there where the Spanish don't go', 'without fear'), which, in turn, only amounts to a justification of the initial conjectures concerning their deficits ('they don't think about safety', 'they aren't careful').

#### **4. Alien pains: experiences of negation, combustion and naturalisation among Portuguese construction workers**

We will now try to understand the consequences that the precarious situation of Portuguese workers in Spain has for their use and representation in relation to *safety* per se. It is necessary to emphasise the importance of the 'somatic culture' (Corbin, 1991) to construction working practices, the implicit and embodied schemata of thought and action continuously reproduced through the mutual appropriation occurring between the worker and his work, operating without any conscious calculus or prevision. The worker appropriates simultaneously the abilities and conventions, the routines and rhythms that are necessary for the proper and efficient performance of the work ('habituation'), while he is, on the other hand, appropriated by the work itself, integrating himself, under the pressure of the hierarchy or by his own interests, in the collective body of the construction site ('obedience', 'discipline', 'do not create problems'). The site is an institution with an intrinsic structure of opportunities and constraints that, because they reflect a hierarchy of effort, prestige and remuneration, are constantly subjected to the convergent trends of workers, technicians and managers to maintain it, or, on the contrary, to transform it. Such an imbrication between worker and work seems to support the *naturalisation* of conditions, impositions and obligations, which, however crude these may be, tend to be sensed as inherent to the proper (and even virtuous) execution and completion of work (Pinto, 1996).

Although tolerating a wide variety of personal and collective situations, construction work generally assumes the character of a *regime of combustion* of bodies, which the strongly precarious circumstances of commuting migration appear to worsen (Monteiro, 2014). The long working hours, perilous and heavy movements, reproaches and pressure from above, the aspiration to a premium connected with meeting deadlines (and the threat of penalties for their extension) - all these aspects show literally that 'work comes out from the body'. Paulo F. had narrowly escaped ('five minutes more and it was me who was dying there') an accident that killed his co-worker in the underground works in Madrid. A few months later Paulo F. would be the victim on another Spanish site. When we interviewed him, he was still recovering from the accident, hoping to return as soon as possible to Spain. That would not happen again: restricted by the accident scars and pains, Paulo F. would, after a long period seeking employment, resign himself to a job as a night watchman in Portugal.

BM: How did you have an accident?

PF: I was working in a pool and I hitched my pants on an iron and I turned down. It happened... Well, it was an accident! And I was always warning the others to pass there with care, because of an iron that was there at the top... Then, voilà, the boss stopped caring for me... It is like that, it is only necessary who's here, who's not here is not [necessary], and as I was no longer useful to the company: "You have to find your own way!" I had to look for insurance, had to walk to deal with the paperwork that I never thought was necessary... (...) My life went backwards! Turned completely! I stood without receiving [any money]. I went to the recovery clinic every day, two sessions per day. I wanted to get out of there; I wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. Until I reached a point that the doctor told me I had deformed muscles after pulling them so much in the physiotherapy...

BM: Did you want to recover quickly?

PF: I wanted, I wanted to leave that shit to see if I could work - but I cannot. I still went to work two days as a trial to see if I could handle it, but... When I jumped down off a ladder, I felt that something was defective.

BM: The boss's attitude changed towards you then?

PF: Very, very much. I was a bit disappointed... You know that life is like that anyway. One cannot expect anything. One cannot expect from the bosses one thing... Anyway, I was for him just a way to make money, from the moment that I am no longer useable, it is obvious that he will no longer give me importance. This is an example as there are many. This is so, you are working in a company, you are a machine, you are a way to make money... You have to give money to win to the boss, right? From the moment you cease to do that... You stop being useful to the company, you are disposable! Another one is found!

BM: You told me that you had a good relationship with that guy in Spain...

PF: This is the case, it is the kind of relationship that you know that it is good because it is cynical, it's a cynical relationship you know that. You know that he is using you, are you being used, do you understand? Only you'll use him also, in the way you can... After the accident, everything is going well, we have lunch, he paid for the lunch, everything is very beautiful. But we are coming to the end, he knew what I wanted [return to the job] and he fucked me...I preferred that he had not paid the lunch, I said to him, "I would prefer that you had said the shits in my face," and he laughed, because he is the one who wins, this is it. We feel discouraged a bit.

It is the critical moments, such as those that follow accidents, which make clear the nature of the superfluity ('a number', 'a machine', 'is disposable') of the worker who no longer meets the economic requirements of companies that employ or recruit them to other companies. The obsolescence that followed the accident of Paulo F. becomes for him unbearable not only because he depends upon the remuneration, but

also since he has an image of himself as an applied and honest worker ('I worked with effort', 'I lived for the work'). These situations, beyond having the nature of a corrosive offence for workers ('you are losing the willingness to work'), forces us to consider the long-term costs of construction work (Bosch and Philips, 2003: 10), in particular those that follow the return of the employee to their country of origin. In a sequence of implications, accentuating or at least replicating the situation of initial asymmetry between the countries of origin and the receiving-countries that made migration probable, since receiving countries usually have the possibility to use a workforce whose breeding and training costs were at least initially supported by the countries of origin (Burawoy, 1979), we see the mechanism of externalisation of costs operating again in the future. Though the receiving country meets its social obligations (retirement pensions, for example), the worker who returns later to his country of origin will rely on its institutions, so easing the political and financial responsibility of the receiving country for him.

### **5. Faster, harder – and hazardous. The immediate consequences of the rhetoric and practices of flexibilisation**

Extremely sensible to fluctuations in the business cycle, construction companies have always tried to strengthen their capacity for reaction and response to the factors of volatility that afflict the sector (Bosch and Philips, 2003). Although reluctant in principle to adopt solutions such as mechanisation or prefabrication of the production process, the sector has followed the trend of a number of other industries with a strong manufacturing character, consisting, in particular, of increasingly applying means to mobilise the workforce through a combination of intensified work rhythms and demands and weakened employment conventions and guarantees (Balazs and Faguier, 1996; Green and McIntosh, 2001; Hatzfeld, 2004).

The interview with Hélder S. allows us to highlight the consequences that arise in the immediate workplace from the intertwining of compressed time, pulverisation of workers' legal and organisational links (especially, with the conversion of workers into single 'service companies' or 'temporary workers'), and physical exposure to risk. The compression of time, parallel to the consecutive pressures concerning labour costs down the cascade of subcontracting companies, is sometimes fuelled through the tendering system between companies seeking to gain public and private construction contracts (in which the shortening of deadlines has the characteristic of an advantage over competitors) and sometimes through accelerating the pace of work in the name of *productivity* superimposed by the management logic that rules over a significant portion of the European construction sector. On the other side, the same management logic explains the extensive recourse to subcontracting practices that has slimmed down the connection between companies and workers through the creation of multiple legal and institutional intermediaries (e.g. temporary work agencies).

BM: That is to say that the inspection of the Ministry of Labour and the company's own inspection have different attitudes?

HS: Yes, the supervisor is there all day to see if you are complying with the safety standards or not.

BM: What does he do often?

HS: He draws your attention... You're cutting with the trimming machine, if you don't have the glasses, he is able to draw your attention: "Look, at the second or third time, you'll go a day or two to home". For example, I was working in Y [in the facilities of a large oil company], if you were hunted working without gloves, without the glasses, without the vest or so, you have to pay a fine.

BM: You as a worker, and not your company?

HS: I myself, since it was me who was against the law. They give you the standards of that work, you have to comply, if you don't... In this case I infringed the law of

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passing over the [safety] net to the other side. I was punished [personally], it was not my company, I was a month at home without working.

BM: But you told me that the work could only be done that way...

HS: It could be done only that way, but we've been doing that way without anyone seeing. If they leave the net there, we cannot put in the tubes. (...) They wanted us to hire a crane to hoist the pipes there. [The problem is] Only you will not call a crane, paying five or six hundred euros for a crane to do a job that you're going to do in five or ten minutes, right?

BM: And what does the company tell you in these cases?

HS: In this case, my boss said, "Were you hooked to the belt?" And I: "I was." [So, the boss said:] "So what can I do? I can do nothing." Had I not been engaged with the belt or so, he was able to dismiss me, it was normal, but as I was hooked with the belt, it was the only thing that safety said: that I was violating a law, the one that says I could not pass the net to the other side. The inspector sanctioned me during a month. The boss then said: "If I can put you on another work, you go to another work, otherwise you'll have to endure a month at home." And I'll be waiting to see. (...)

BM: But if you're going to have to use all the rules and if the rules make you take more time and give more complication, this is not harmful when the works have a deadline to be finished?

HS: Sure it is. In this case, we have three or four months to finish this work, if we were to meet the standards as all want safety, you were there two years to make that work. You cannot climb a pipe by a rope, you cannot climb without being hooked, you cannot walk from one side to the other of the estanteria [pronounced in Spanish] without being hitched... (Author's note: Hélder S. was no longer called back to work for that company. He remains unemployed.)

In Spain, the legislative initiative to bind companies legally to occurrences that happen to firms or workers that they subcontract (Byrne and van der Meer, 2003) has encouraged the creation of a preventive system of fines and punishments that Helder S. refers to in the interview excerpt transcribed above. However, the legal liability of the company can be reconciled with institutional punishment and worker (self) blame. The changes that the schemes of 'servicealizing' and subcontracting the construction workforce have brought about (Druker and Dupré, 1998), as a means of discipline and utilisation, are based on the assumption that employees act only in their own interests and direction. These changes have supported the passage from a paradigm that made the employer responsible over the employees - because the subordination implied by the wage system carried with it a (legal and ethical) guardianship over the workers (Jounin, 2006: 77, 80) - to a regime of production that incorporates preventive punishment and the personalisation of infringements in parallel with the increasing individualisation and casualization of contracts and wages.

The combination of *new* and *old* forms of precariousness that pervade the construction sector seems to compromise the application of safety parameters. The suspension or erosion of collective agreements was accompanied by the 'flexibilisation' of work contracts, the erosion of social protection (with the privatisation of health insurance, for instance), or the lowering of wages (Cremers and Janssen, 2006). It is also possible to include among these changes the intensified and personalised prescription and evaluation of workers' objectives and outputs. Such circumstances seem propitious for an enervated encounter between workers and safety procedures. Whenever the obligation to meet deadlines, results and standards weigh acutely over single workers, contractual and remuneration schemes demand of them an accelerated pace and longer working hours, thereby excluding or minimising the need for any intentional intervention from the company. At the same time, as the system encourages them to better their col-

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leagues or other work-teams in order to obtain or maintain the opportunity of working for that contractor, it also impels subcontractors, subjected to reciprocal and ongoing comparisons and evaluations under a common contractor, to compete with each other extensively. Sometimes, such a constellation of factors impels workers to a seemingly voluntary violation of security procedures, contrary to the express recommendations of companies, the official safety regulations or even the customary rules of the trade ('knowing how to do things with common-sense,' 'do not run at work'). Principles that previously correlated just in economic terms with the logic of *free enterprise* and liberalism appear to extend to the realm of safety: it is now expected that the worker himself takes on board under his own private initiative the hazards he or she is confronted with.

Without questioning the preventative nature of surveillance and enforcement of safety rules enacted by companies, or the sincerity of philanthropic convictions of those employers who apply them, as they individually punish the worker, they force him to hide transgressions and comply with the opacity of the construction sites' everyday routines. Under these circumstances, workers strive to camouflage or simulate behaviour ('at the meeting I said it was all okay') that only mimics official regulations, or to regard 'the inspectors' as intruders and ultimately as opponents of their (more or less precarious) professional situation. So, workers, when they anticipate the penalties or constraints that could be created by the intervention of safety inspection, seek to voluntarily evade or circumvent safety procedures. Such situation is neither because they ignore the advantages that can be drawn from compliance with safety rules nor do not understand the technical procedures for applying safety regulations at work. The existence of mechanisms that rely on the preventive and individualised punishment of workers means that transgressions in safety rules - by which the accident is, so to speak, the corollary - are presumed to rest only on behavioural aspects, that is, as a consequence of implied worker' idiosyncrasy. In this sense, the

managerial logic that has individualised and 'flexibilised' wages and contracts appears to have contaminated the imposition of norms that evaluate workers' use and representation of safety rules and equipment.

## **6. New avenues of inquiry: on the need to move beyond the purely psychological, technical or individualistic interpretations of safety use and representation**

When confronted with an unsafe situation apparently caused by their own initiative, because it was they who 'violated the rules' or 'left out safety equipment', workers may even assume a sense of personal guilt – a conviction they share with a vast range of specialists in work health and safety issues. Bearing in mind that safety equipment has, however, its uses, biased less by the existence of psychological impairments or behaviour inspired by a certain 'culture of risk' than by the prosaic contexts of actual practice and power relations on site, we can begin to understand the limitations (since the benefits are already widely known) in initiatives that have recourse only to pedagogical instruments to promote and raise awareness among employees of compliance with equipment and rules. Workers are not 'ignorant' or 'impulsive' as regards safety matters; they are, rather, immersed in a system of interdependences that transcends their boundaries of intervention by demanding the accomplishment of urgent and unavoidable routines and rhythms. Depending on the balance of power and the continued interaction existing between political actors, firms and workers, there are invisible and intangible pressures hanging over the building site that have very palpable and visible consequences; the hierarchical and technical segmentation of the site, on its part, acts as a prism that refracts the balance of power among the actors according to its own specific and internal logic. Strong evidence exists that the new epochal changes have promoted a trend towards accelerating the pace of construction work and increasing competition among companies (and workers themselves) for

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the acquisition, maintenance and completion of economic opportunities. Altogether this has instigated a pressure on labour costs and completion times and, thereby, furthered the economic and social precariousness of contracting and bargaining in the construction sector. Such principles are translated to site level, as the accounts of workers and ethnographical observations show us. The atomistic vision of workers, isolating them from long-distance relationships of interdependence connecting them to other economic and political actors in the production of the social reality of the construction sector, usually fails to offer an explanation other than cognitive limitations or (ir)rational behaviour.

Psychological and technical interpretations of the use and representation of safety ('ignorance', 'maladjustment of equipment', 'greed') appear to ignore the fact that workers' professional capacities and ways of working are strongly connected with a *practical culture* that is not easily changeable through ideological inculcation and is deeply embedded in their own bodies. The importance of work habits, which are internalised along the biographical trajectory of workers through their continued material and symbolical inclusion in particular contexts and circumstances, needs to be taken into account. Only through social and economic changes that effectively transform such contexts and circumstances, strongly connected with the balance of power in the European construction field, would it be possible to concretise legal and technical procedures already endorsed by information campaigns and pedagogical initiatives. Even if there is strong evidence of the seemingly intentional avoidance of work regulations by the very workers that are supposed to be protected by them, safety equipment needs to be more than a simple technicality but inscribed in the social context in which workers operate. Already in 1952, Donald Roy observed that sometimes the concept of 'cultural drag' could be more heuristic than the concept of 'cultural lag' in explaining resistance to technological innovation (1952: 442). Departing from the notion of somatic culture and then relating workers' practices to

the system of power relations that structure, at the local site level as well as at the transnational European economic space level, the everyday reality of construction work, it is possible to pursue new avenues of inquiry to understand the use and representation of safety equipment and rules.

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## LABOUR MOBILITY IN CONSTRUCTION: MIGRANT WORKERS' STRATEGIES BE- TWEEN INTEGRATION AND TURNOVER

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The construction industry historically is characterised by high levels of labour mobility favouring the recruitment of migrant labour. In the EU migrant workers make up around 25% of overall employment in the sector<sup>1</sup> and similar if not higher figures exist for the sector in Russia<sup>2</sup>. The geo-political changes of the 1990s have had a substantial impact on migration flows, expanding the pool of labour recruitment within and from the post-socialist East but also changing the nature of migration. The rise of temporary employment has raised concerns about the weakness and isolation of migrant workers and the concomitant risk of abuse<sup>3</sup>. Migrant workers though cannot be reduced to helpless victims of state policies and employers' recruitment strategies. Findings of the research presented here unveil how they meet the challenges of the international labour market, the harshness of debilitating working conditions and the difficult implications for their family life choices.

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1. Stawinska, A. (2010). The EU-27 construction sector: from boom to gloom. Eurostat: Statistics in Focus, 7, 1-7: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-SF-10-007/EN/KS-SF-10-007-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-10-007/EN/KS-SF-10-007-EN.PDF)
  2. Zayonchkovskaya, Zh. A., Mkrtychyan, N. & Tyuryukanova, E. (2009). Rossiya pered vyzovami immigracii [Russia facing the challenges of immigration]. In Zayonchkovskaya, Zh. A., Vitkovskaya G. S. (Eds.), Postsovetskie Transformacii: otrazhenie v migraciyakh [Post-Soviet Transformations: Effects on Migrations] (pp. 9-62). Moscow, Russia: Adamant. (p. 34)
  3. EFBWW study - Temporary migrant workers in the construction industry in the EU. CLR-News 4/2013.
  4. In-text citations for interview data will be provided in this order: expert interviews are fully anonymised and will provide information about institution/place/year of interview; materials from interviews with worker respondents will be cited in this fashion first name/place/year.

The research consists of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with Moldovan and Ukrainian construction workers and key experts based in Italy, Russia and Moldova<sup>4</sup>. Fieldwork has been carried out to investigate and establish the impact on migration processes of informal networks, recruitment mechanisms and employment conditions. Migrant trajectories reveal the rationale behind short-haul and temporary migration strategies as well as the present limitations of integration in host countries. Migrant workers' individual forms of resistance prove unable to overcome the constraints imposed by states, employers and intermediaries, yet their accounts show how policies aimed at their protection require greater alignment with their practices and expectations.

### **Migration, mobility and turnover in Europe**

In the last twenty years, two distinctive migration systems have developed in Europe, one in the enlarged EU the other in the former Soviet Union<sup>5</sup>. In both areas, the construction sector has been the primary beneficiary of migrant labour inflows. The institutional processes affecting these geopolitical areas have long appeared diverging, with integration and promotion of free movement in the West contrasting with fragmentation and instability in the FSU. Yet, socio-economic dynamics have been remarkably similar, inspired by neo-liberal notions of the centrality of the 'market'. Post-socialist countries in 'transition' to capitalism have been subjected to 'shock therapies' prescribing large scale liberalisation and privatisation at the expense of workers' rights and representation<sup>6</sup>. EU enlargement, despite its apparent economic successes, has pursued the marketization of employment relations with equal determination, leading to a decou-

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5. Molodikova, I. (2008). Patterns of East to West migration in the context of European migration systems. Possibilities and limits of migration control. *Demográfia* 51 (5): 5–35.

6. Upchurch, M., Croucher, R., Morrison, C. & Danilovich H. (2014) The Transformation of Work and Industrial Relations in the post Soviet bloc: 25 years on from 1989. *Work, Employment and Society*, e-special issue, forthcoming.

pling of labour rights from salaried work which has represented the cornerstone of citizenship in modern Europe<sup>7</sup>. Income inequality, as a result, has grown dramatically between and within countries. Employers have taken advantage of the cheapening of labour through outsourcing and delocalisation. In industries such as construction, agriculture and personal services, characterised by immobility and seasonality, the precarious employment of migrant labour has prevailed. This notwithstanding, labour mobility has not proved the only outcome of structural changes introduced by capital and states. Workers in post-socialist countries, among others, have responded to declining wages, employment security and welfare provisions with 'exit' strategies, generating high levels of labour turnover. Employers have responded by expanding the areas of recruitment and modifying recruitment strategies, further sustaining migration flows. This process is evident in the formation of an international labour market supplying the European construction industry. Here employers have designed tighter forms of control such as 'subcontracting and worker 'posting', to protect themselves from legal liability, while isolating migrants from the economic and social norms of the host society<sup>8</sup>. These strategies prevail in northern European countries due to greater regulation. In the south, a large shadow economy has allowed informal methods of migration, recruitment and work to prevail<sup>9</sup>. There, the costs and difficulties of entry, combined with expectations of legalisation and formal employment, have so far favoured long term migration strategies. Workers can follow a path of integration but also taste its downside as migrant discrimination and class relations call into question the myths about the West. In the former Soviet Union, a large grey area of economic activity

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7. Meardi, G. (2012). *Social Failures of EU Enlargement: A case of Workers Voting with their Feet*. London, UK: Routledge.

8. Lillie, N. & Greer, I. (2007). *Industrial Relations, Migration, and Neoliberal Politics: The Case of European Construction Sector*. *Politics & Society*, 35 (4), 551-581. (p. 552)

9. Cremers, J. (2007). *Self-employed and the Free Provision of Services*. *European Institute for Construction Labour Research News*, 2, 34-47.

also facilitates the informal employment and open discrimination of migrants.

Here labour migrants are prevalently FSU citizens, entitled to a three months visa-free stay dependent on obtaining registration and work permit. Specific regulations for individual nationalities and fluctuations in the harshness of implementations have varied over the years<sup>10</sup>. Such arrangements have engendered a system of circular migration. The propiska regime of the compulsory residence, to which access to welfare and legal jobs is tied, guarantees the exclusion of most migrants, including internal migrants, from contractual employment rights. Family ties, the large presence of Diasporas and a common language, among others, make sure Russia remains a primary destination for CIS migrants. In Russia too, research indicates that agency recruitment of teams from central Asia is replacing Moldovan and Ukrainian migration based on informal networks<sup>11</sup>. Experts suggest that informal networks, which are held primarily responsible for abuses<sup>12</sup>, offer greater bargaining chances vis-à-vis agencies<sup>13</sup>. Another emerging feature is represented by the use of bogus self-employment, set to avoid employers' contractual obligations. This is widely reported in the EU.

In both areas, segmentation by nationality, migratory status and skills allows for the continuation of dividing tactics and enforcements of informal, often illicit, forms of employment. It is generally held that informal networks and regulations concur to heavily constrain workers' agency, leaving them exposed to fluctuating market conditions. The crisis has ap-

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10. Rios, R. R. (Ed.) (2006). *Migration Perspectives: Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. Vienna, Italy: International Organization for Migration: <http://www.iom.it/documents/Migr.Perspectives-eng.pdf>

11. Expert interview, Centre for Social and employment Rights, Moscow 2012

12. Human Rights Watch (2009). "Are You Happy to Cheat Us?" – Exploitation of migrant construction workers in Russia. New York: [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/russia0209web\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/russia0209web_0.pdf)

13. Expert interview, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow 2010

parently further restricted options available to migrants, reducing them to survival tactics<sup>14</sup>. While appreciating structural constraints imposed by capitalist accumulation, this research has found some evidence of migrant workers' agency and resistance. Following the migrants' own trajectories across spaces, labour markets and workplaces, the research explores their individual and collective forms of agency. The study unveils their practices and expectations and shows how these translate into a wide variety of strategic options. Migrants' accounts also reveal how they perceive the structural differences between these two geo-political spaces.

### **Moldovan and Ukrainian workers between East and West**

The recently constituted republics of Ukraine and Moldova are neighbouring countries with a population of respectively 47 and 4.3 million inhabitants. Constituent parts of the Russian empire and later the Soviet Union, their independence has emerged from the geopolitical earthquake following the collapse of the Union. They now stand as a contested borderland between new Europe and a smaller Russian Federation, marred by weak economies, fragile institutions and crippling foreign interferences. Their peculiar position makes for substantial and continuous migratory flows in both directions.

Migration from the region began in the mid-1990s and has now reached considerable proportions: by prudent estimates, there are now six to eight hundred thousand Moldovans and about two-three million Ukrainians working abroad. The experience of migration is popular in many households. In Moldova, about one third of families receive some kind of support from remittances<sup>15</sup>. Ukrainian migration affects directly

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14. Krings, T., Bobek, A., Moriarty, E, Salamonska, J. & Wickham, J. (2011). From Boom to Bust: Migrant labour and employers in the Irish construction sector. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 32(3), 459-476.

15. Mosneaga, V. (2008). Circular migration of the population of the Republic of Moldova. Carim-East Explanatory Note 12/68. EUI and RSCAS.

up to 20% of the working age population but at household level the experience of migration involves about one third of the population. At home, migrants worked with very low monthly wages, respectively 50–200€ in Moldova and 150–300€ in Ukraine, often without an employment contract.

### **Migrant construction workers in Russia**

Reports on international migration indicate that only a small proportion of Moldovan and Ukrainian migrants who work in Russia express a preference for permanent resettlement. Those who move to Russia are *na zarabotki*, which is understood as leaving temporarily one's place of residence in order to earn a living. In this 'temporary' situation workers could live for years:

*My family now is in Moldova. Well, temporarily – but you know what they say: 'there is nothing more stable than what is temporary'. . . I say it again – I left for a year or two and it is already six years. (Arkady Moscow 2012)*

Mobility to Russia is perceived as a 'work trip' during which work performance is temporally concentrated, so that workloads and intensity are unusually high. Migrant workers indicate that family or friends either offered jobs or facilitated the search initiated by the respondent:

*My father and brother were on zarabotki on construction sites. In Russia, I went by myself: my friends work there. (Stas, Cainari Station 2010)*

Some respondents originally left for different jobs ('I first worked as a plumber in a company, then back home, then again in St Petersburg I fitted fire alarms, then I worked as security guard,' Roman, Pervomajsk 2010). Construction proved attractive, at least until the crisis, since it is better paid and more rewarding than some of the menial jobs mentioned above ('Every job has its wage: I went where they pay more', Roman, Pervomajsk 2010).

If family and friends act as facilitators, actual recruitment is carried out by intermediaries who work on site and are in direct contact with site managers or subcontractors. Once the migrant has been familiarised with the work and is acquaint-

ed with the bosses, he will await a call or seek an offer from them. On occasion, he can be required to recruit others and, over time, become a recruiter or brigade leader. This way, long chains of recruitment are constantly developed.

Most respondents are returning migrants, observing the three-month threshold set by the state and enforced by employers (Roman: 'I work for 3 months then home for 2-3 weeks, bosses know'). This pattern allows the migrants to recuperate from an arduous job and the often dismal conditions afforded by life in barracks on isolated construction sites ('.../morally and physically I could not tolerate it,' Ivan, Pervomajsk 2010). It also proves highly advantageous for both business and the state. It allows the extraction of high productivity and maximum flexibility ('I would not have left if they kept paying; now it seems all right – they ask me back,' Dyma, Pervomajsk 2010). Workers' accounts indicate the unsuitability of these forms of employment for long-term settlement and a stable family life. Issues most commonly raised concern the insecurity of job tenure, pay and career prospects due to the informal nature of the employment relationship as well as the hazardousness of the work.

### **Employment, wages and working conditions in Russian construction**

Migrants universally report irregularities in their migrant status or employment position. As FCU citizens, since 2001 they are required to register for immigration, obtain a work permit and ideally an employment contract too. Most of them failed one or more of these stages. The risk of hefty penalties has put pressure on bosses and employees alike, yet resistance on the part of employers is still strong and sometimes sustained by the workers' interest in higher pay ('In Russia, I work without a contract. Even if I had a work permit, they employ without contract' Stas, Cainari station 2010). Even Russian nationals struggle to find genuine employment, with actual pay and benefits matching the official paperwork. Viktor, a Russian from the Volga provinces who works for one

of the 'safest' employers in Moscow (a protégée of the former mayor with a steady procurement portfolio) voices equally sceptical remarks:

*I am officially employed, yes, but it's a fraud! We never get holidays and as for sick leave they only allow it in serious cases, which are normally their fault anyway. (Viktor, Navoloki 2010)*

Informality means that the workplace is governed by custom rather than law and collective bargaining, resembling in many aspects the paternalistic and authoritarian management of the soviet shop floor but with less bargaining power for the workforce. Pay and working conditions can vary significantly depending on type of site, size of firm and skills of the individual employee. Nationality is the primary factor deciding occupation and its conditions. Piece-rate is the prevailing pay system ('The employer prefers hourly pay, but in general everybody goes for piece-rate', Slavic, Moscow 2010). Working time can stretch from a minimum of nine up to eleven hours per day. Late hours and weekend work do not generally garner extra pay, and workers often bargain over timetabling. Virtually all respondents report payment in cash by the manager, the brigade leader or even from fellow colleagues. Payments are made in stages with only small sums anticipated for expenses; therefore, disputes over wage arrears are common. Work organisation is based on small teams or brigades, often ethnically homogeneous, performing specific tasks under the supervision of a brigade leader. Workers' interviews portray him as the target of resentment – 'Brigade leaders, who get paid for work but sit and smoke' (Slavik, Zalotiefka 2010) – but also as a leader of whom workers have high expectations: 'We do not get paid holidays: it's the fault of the brigade leader – he could do much more for his brigade' (Andrei, Zalotiefka 2010).

The whole employment and work relationship hinges on intermediaries, but workers do not appear to be at the mercy of brigade leaders. They try to turn this volatile system to their advantage by differentiating and selecting recruitment net-

works and constantly bargaining over conditions. A 'good' intermediary has to prove himself by guaranteeing jobs and regular payments:

*This is the way it works: there is a brigadier [i.e. gangmaster] who has long worked in the field. And people know that if you turn to him there's a job awaiting you. It is up to his intelligence and his ability to bargain whether people go to work with him or not. Wages are also his responsibility. (Victorio Kishinev 2012)*

Turnover, therefore, can be used by workers to their advantage. According to Professor Mukomel this has affected intermediaries, 'Nowadays, they are interested in a stable market /.../this is decent form of employment relations, yet it exists as part of the shadow economy'<sup>16</sup>. The latter represent a stumbling block to reducing turnover. Issues of health and safety also continue to rate high among workers' concerns:

*Yes, it is heavy and dangerous work. [Safety equipment] gets in the way of working /.../ there were [fatal incidents], people fell off /.../ in 4 years 2 died: a guy just arrived, no induction, fell and crashed to the ground. Minor injuries are more frequent: often something falls down on someone's head, leg or hand and [the protective helmet] is uncomfortable, falls off all the time. (Viktor, Navoloki 2010)*

Finishing jobs are less heavy and dangerous than structural work; the construction site, though, is always described as being awash with risks, especially when working at heights.

### **Workers' agency: between informal bargaining and further mobility**

Despite the many constraints to which they are subjected, workers display acute awareness of their condition and try to act upon it either individually or in small groups. Grievances range from wage issues to working time and poor working and living conditions. The informal character of the employ-

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16. Interview with expert, Sociology section of the Russian Academy of Sciences, RAS, Moscow 2010

ment relationship and the lack of union support mean that such bargaining occurs in a direct, often personalised fashion, with line managers on site. Roman explains: 'There are no trade unions over there; in Europe they defend [workers]. Here they do not exist, if only we saw them' (Roman, Pervomajsk 2010). Slavic's account summarises the options normally open to workers to further their grievances:

*One morning the brigade leader calls the managing director, workers refuse to work because of unpaid wages.../ Once he failed to do so and people started to quit. I went to his office.../ and said: 'I demand to be paid'. He gave me only half of it. /.../You just go and take the wage yourself. (Slavic, Moscow 2010)*

Individual mobility between firms, jobs and ultimately countries, remains the most common strategy for addressing those issues. This raises the question of resettlement and family arrangements.

### **Circular migration and dilemmas of resettlement in Russia**

Migrant strategic options revolve around the need to combine employment and social life satisfactorily. Respondents, depending on their circumstances, develop a variety of options to answer this dilemma. The older generations who acquired family, home and profession in Moldova and Ukraine during soviet rule expect to sustain their social capital at home. They can return to low paid local jobs hoping for support from children or wives abroad. Among the younger generation, those who reject distant resettlement also exist, especially when locally married. They show an interest in developing their own business or moving into new professions. Most respondents, however, continue to travel. For them there are two options: the long and difficult process of moving to Russia or a more complex compromise. Mobility to Russia is favoured by the apparent homogeneity of rules governing work and everyday life in former Soviet countries. Permanent resettlement, though, is perceived as a different enterprise linked to hard-to-obtain access to secure and well remunerated jobs,

public welfare and full residence rights. As for the latter option, this may consist in minimising shuttle work, including easier destinations to southern Russia and Ukraine. Finally when options in the region are exhausted, those with connections or knowledge of the West begin to contemplate the longer step to 'far flung' destinations:

*Saint Petersburg is a cultural centre; there are friends asking me to go.../My wife's in Italy – Bologna. Vicenza would be fine. Russia is a progressive country, it does not stand still. In Italy I can do everything. I do not have to go to Russia necessarily. I am not even sure whether to remain here or not. (Tolik Cainari 2010)*

The wide variety of geographic destinations contemplated by workers in their plans is certainly significant in terms of agency. Mobility in the East, therefore, does not simply mean engaging in survival strategies but entails a wide variety of options. More importantly, mobility appears as the opposite to acquiescence or acceptance of life and working conditions offered to manual workers. In this way, reluctance to resettle in Russia, for example, can be reconsidered ('a passport makes no difference: Russians too work informally – the firm has no interest in having many formally employed' Dyma Pervomaisc 2010); in other words, there is a realisation that they will have it no better as workers elsewhere, if they move permanently. Workers' aspiration to remain in their place of origin too should not be disregarded – it expresses a claim to the right to stay, behind which stand their unanswered social demands. The difficulty in finding a feasible answer to these demands does not, therefore, limit strategic options but rather multiplies them. Workers, through direct experience and word of mouth, build up 'mental maps', detailing the financial and social costs of various destinations. In this way, they can regularly evaluate their position and compare between geographic options. The experience of migrant workers to Italy allows us to verify to what extent the West, with its promises of integration, represents an altogether different experience rather than just another point on the migrant's map.

### **Migrant construction workers in Italy**

Moldovans and Ukrainians have increasingly turned toward Western Europe where Italy represents the preferred destination for both men and women. Important factors influencing the choice of migration to Italy are the presence of social networks, EU passport and, for Romanic speaking Moldovans, language and, sometimes, strong anti-communist sentiments. Moldovan and Ukrainian women are seen as prime movers in Italy, but most of our (male) respondents emigrated first.

Their accounts signal that migration to the West entails expectations of 'stability', i.e. permanent resettlement to a place allowing them to 'earn a living and live their lives'. Stability contains the aspiration for development both of professional skills, and in this way a 'career', and of a life project. In general, stability at work implies continuity of employment and wage payments. Life projects are checked against opportunities in the labour market but also potential for agency both in the workplace and the wider social environment. There is awareness though that such achievements, if any, come at the cost of sacrificing the web of family and communal relationships from back home and the rich cultural texture in which they are embedded.

Migration flows to Italy from the FSU are fairly recent and there is little evidence from interviews of recruitment structures but, as first migrants settled, chains facilitating mobility have grown. Earlier work experience in Russia is common, and reverse benchmarking, that is workers evaluating different work settings the same way businesses normally do, emerges from workers' accounts ('[In FSU] the discipline is harsher than in Italy or Spain /.../ let's say the boss is not only the chief, he feels like a king there' (Ivan, Padova, 2010). It also differs in that it is a financially and legally onerous enterprise, which generally implies a period of illegal stay. Family re-unification with spouses engaged in the much expanded private care sector is the only exception. Respondents refer invariably to the purchase of tourist visas, false residence permits or false passports as an entry device. Prices for such services vary consider-

ably – from five hundred up to two thousands Euros. The debt burden forces migrant workers to accept irregular jobs to pay off their debts.

### **Employment and working conditions: from illegality to regularisation**

Until 2007-8 finding an illegal job on a building site was a matter of days: 'All people work in construction, because they find work more easily' (Sasha, Milan 2010). Migrant workers can easily move to where jobs are available, and selection for recruitment is carried out on the spot. Wages are initially very low, ranging from three to five Euros per hour, including transport but not meals. Working time ranges from nine to twelve hours, usually for six days a week. Initially, migrants will find work on construction sites through word of mouth, generally from other migrants. At busy times, recruiters are said to visit public locations, such as bars or squares, normally populated by migrants looking for journeymen. These jobs are poorly paid and normally without contract. This results in significant labour turnover as workers seek better conditions elsewhere. Undocumented migrants working illegally can easily be subjected to harsh working conditions and abusive management. Increasingly, migrant workers can find employment in small businesses run by their own country's nationals or other migrants. Recruitment is informal and relies heavily on language-related ties. In such cases, workers feel under particular pressure to perform because of personal trust bonds with intermediaries.

Regularisation of stay has an immediate effect on employment conditions and reduces turnover. Most commonly reported changes relate to formal employment, access to union services and reduced risk of abuse. Regularisation, they argue, may also lead to a reduction in working time. Outstanding issues remain, however, concerning the role of the trade union, work organisation and the extent of integration. The union is described by respondents as an organisation providing discrete services, rather than a tool to organise and defend

their interests in the workplace.

*I am a union member from the very beginning /.../ When I need to fill up some forms I always go there; they are very kind all the time. If there is an issue with the employer though, I better deal with him directly, with the unions you never know how is going to come out. (Stefan, Padua 2010)*

As a result, workers are often left to fend for themselves in the workplace. Here, the contentious issue is represented by harsh discipline aimed at taxing production targets, augmented by ethnic segregation. In Italy, direct supervision prevails and strict discipline is imposed: 'You can have a chat [with colleagues] but never stop moving; if you do, insults start flying at you' (Dyma, Padua 2010). Migrants with substantial work experience in both the East and Western countries exercise a sort of reverse benchmarking: 'I got used to it in Portugal: 'you have to work all the time'. Even if you smoke, you always work' (Emiliu, Padua 2010). Ukrainians and Moldovans are also perceived and treated differently, exposing the extent of occupational segregation by country of origin. The division of labour among different nationals in the construction sector both in Italy and in Russia is succinctly captured in a worker's sarcastic reply to the interviewer's questioning:

*Vasile: To build a house [in Russia], as we put it: the Tajiks dig, we [Moldovans] do the walls and Ukrainians handle the roof.*

*Interviewer: How would it be in Italy? Who is the digger here?*

*Vasile: Well, here, what about digging, I am the one doing the digging.*

*(Vasile, Milan 2010)*

Not surprisingly, working in Western construction sites does not feel any easier despite higher levels of mechanisation. Accidents followed by serious injuries, such as 'loss of limbs' or 'broken ribs', are relatively common among respondents. A worker who suffered from a fall comments, 'I have worked here for a year; once I got injured /.../ if you suffer an injury it is not a good thing because after that they look bad at you,

you understand? They need you to work; they do not need you to stay home sick, never' (Vasile, Milan 2010). Control by state inspectors and trade unions is largely absent: 'For eleven years I have been working in Italy, but I have never seen any safety inspection on construction sites' (Emiliu, Padua 2010). Some workers report moving into self-employment. Employers' pressure is most commonly referred to as motivating factor, 'I decided to start my own business because they forced me' (Bogdan, Milan 2010). These workers can then hire a relative or a friend or ask them to follow the same path. Some migrants resist the change, fearing discrimination over prices in sub-contracting work. They also note how self-employment offers flexibility for employers transferring the risk onto the migrant. Self-employment has a dual aspect. When initiated by the migrant, it represents an attempt, like in the Russian cases, to escape the pressures of wage labour. However, findings suggest that its popularity owes more to the employers' attempts at countering workers' demands.

Moving to Italy represents a complex and often life-changing experience which these workers clearly identify as migration. Migration trajectories are not homogeneous: those with experiences in the East retain network relations which allow for wider options and further mobility. In contrast, those immediately re-settling to Italy rely entirely on their family. For all, migration holds the prospects of improving substantially and permanently their social and economic position. However, integration is often perceived as an entrapment. These workers realise that access to limited social opportunities entail substantial losses in both emotional and status terms. In other words, western destinations are much less the expected land of opportunity than a last stop in a complex set of migration routes.

### **Conclusions**

Findings from this study contradict commonsensical assumptions about workers' acceptance of flexibility, their dependence on networks and, generally, their lack of strategic op-

## Subject articles

tions. In comparative terms, labour turnover in the Russian and EU construction industry is structurally different. In Russia, job rotation built around the visa-waiving regime and the overall temporary nature of employment allows for continuous and substantial turnover. This circular migration system is entirely functional to the production system and applies also to internal migrants. The system is policed by state control on immigration and by gang masters, but is also managed by the workers themselves. Positive changes in brigade leaders' behaviour can be seen as partly accommodating their' expectations. In Italy, migration is built on long-term expectations. Legalisation of stay and work are associated with a decline in individual mobility. The employment system allows for stabilisation, but both at the initial stages and later, employers' strategies – easy hire-and-fire and self-employment – mean that such opportunities can be easily reversed. In both areas, the increasing use of self-employment and agency work suggests the employers' preference for a more controlled management of migration flows.

Migration satisfies the workers' immediate need for higher cash earnings but falls short of their aspirations for stable employment, family plans and professional growth. Their attitude is not without consequences. In Italy, they seek regularisation and unionisation. In Russia, where this is not possible, they minimise trips or seek alternatives to zarabotki. Employers and states are reluctant to accommodate such pressures: in Italy, they force workers into self-employment; in Russia, they push recruiters to seek cheap labour further afield. In both countries, migration is willingly expanded in new forms: posted workers in the EU, Asian workers in Russia, shipped by agencies to replace 'free' migrants.

Migrant workers' life trajectories reveal a wider range of migratory paths and mobility options than normally acknowledged. Migrant workers have adapted to the breakup of national systems by inhabiting complex networks at transnational level. Few respondents engaging in geographical mobility

are actually interested in either migration or long-term resettlement. What Moldovan and Ukrainian respondents, those who stay put no less than those who emigrate to different places and with different strategies, share is an appreciation for socio-economic stability. Their transnationality, therefore, calls for rethinking labour and citizenship rights beyond the confines of the nation-state.

# Report

Jan Cremers,  
CLR

## **International Asbestos Conference** *Vienna, 6-7 May 2014*

Over a hundred delegates of the building and metal working sectors participated during a two-day conference in Vienna organised by the global trade union federations, Building Workers International (BWI) and IndustriAll. After the welcome by the Austrian host organisations, BWI health & safety director Fiona Murie sketched out the perspectives and the changes since an earlier conference (in 2008), also in Vienna. Brian Kohler, director of health & safety at IndustriAll, the global federation of metal workers unions, rightly stated that it is a shame that we still have to discuss the use of asbestos.

With contributions from the Asian ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN), Canada, Europe, South Africa, Australia, Japan, India and Latin America a broad overview was provided of the actual consumption of asbestos, with Russia having the lead of asbestos suppliers and exporters. In the top ten of asbestos consuming countries 6 Asian countries are presented, led by China (the biggest user and second producer), followed by India (the largest importer). Also Brazil still figures in the list. The domestic use in Russia decreased substantially after a peak between 1985 and 1990. The European ban that became effective in 2005 and the withdrawal of Canada, after a change of government in September 2012, had a serious impact on the production and export of asbestos. However, in recent years the number of countries that have decided to ban asbestos has not increased. Only recently, from 4 April 2014 on, Hong Kong decided to introduce a ban on the use of the dangerous fibre. The fight for a ban is still topical.

Asbestos use is not limited to the building trades, but can be found in a broad range of industries. The use (and the exposure risks for workers) is, for instance, notorious in the Chinese textile industries, but can also be found in shipbuilding. The life cycle of ships is quite long: the scrapping of ships that

are constructed with tons of asbestos containing-materials takes place in Asia and Turkey, whilst asbestos waste is collected and 'reused' in slums.

United Food and Commercial Workers Canada's trade unionist Larry Stoffman illustrated the disastrous effects of the production of asbestos for those regions where asbestos pits were based: ghost towns and deserted mines, a doubling of asbestos-related occupational diseases among the population since the mid-1980s, with 500 workers dying of mesothelioma every year. It took a long time to bring the campaign against the asbestos lobby to a successful end and this was the result of a strategy that can be characterised by four interrelated and crucial activities: the creation of union solidarity among workers of producing and using industries, community coalitions, media support and political alliances.

Larry also pointed out that the lobby organisation International Chrysotile Association that promotes 'the safe use' of asbestos is still active, and is nowadays mainly focusing on the promotion of asbestos and asbestos-containing products in Asia.

One session was dedicated to the EFBWW campaign and the national experiences in Europe after the ban of asbestos. Several contributors referred to the CLR-Study on asbestos, published in 2013, as an important source and handbook for activists who are interested in the lessons that can be learned from the campaign for and achievement of the European ban.

The different contributions to this conference including a report on future strategies and activities are available on <http://www.bwint.org/default.asp?Issue=asb2014&Language=EN>

# Review essay

Hans Baumann

Stefan Schmalz, Klaus Dörre (eds) **Comeback der Gewerkschaften? Machtressourcen, innovative Praktiken, internationale Perspektiven.** (Comeback of the Trade Unions? Power Resources, Innovative Practices, International Perspectives.) Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York, 2013. 454 p., €34.90, ISBN-13 978-3593398914.

Looking at the situation of the trade unions in 2014, the predominant picture is gloomy. In most industrialised countries, membership figures have been on the decline since the 1990s and the membership rate is dropping. This development is associated with a weakening of the 'institutional power' of trade unions, as measurable, for instance, by the coverage rate of collective agreements, though for example in Europe this trend was not as unambiguous as with membership rates<sup>1</sup>.

Anyhow, in Germany the coverage rate of collective agreements ('Flächentarifbindung') declined from 70% in 1996 to 54% in 2011 (Urban, p. 386). For many countries a decline in trade unions' possibilities of influence also meant a worsening of social protection through the reduced importance of collective agreements as well as the dismantling of statutory health and safety regulations. Even after the financial crisis of 2007, this trend could not be reversed. On the contrary, in particular in Southern and Middle-/Eastern Europe, the contractual and statutory protection of employees was again severely reduced. This happened in spite of trade union mobilisation in Southern Europe, in spite of strikes and mass protests. The development of the various crises since 1970, its impact on the organisational power of trade unions as well as their counter strategies are presented in the contribution of Schmalz and Weinmann (pp. 76 ff.)

Given these developments, what motivates the editors of the present book to choose 'Comeback of the Trade Unions' as a

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1. ETUI, 2014: Benchmarking Working Europe, Brussels.

title? It is not a coincidence that the title has been given a question mark. For Germany, the authors notice a degree of 'trade union revitalisation', evident for instance, through the fact that in recent years the largest German trade union, IG Metall, witnessed an increase in membership. Also the second largest German trade union, ver.di, for the first time for many years has been able to increase its membership. This is not a pattern typical of all countries. Nevertheless, many social scientists defend the thesis that trade unions are definitely renewable and do not have to emerge weakened from the stage of 'market-driven conquest', characterising post-Fordist capitalism. Others have their doubts about trade unions' ability to reform and assume, like André Gorz, that the trade unions will disintegrate irreversibly and that an entirely new model of labour relations will develop (Dörre/Schmalz, p. 18).

The 36 authors of the present book resume this controversy and analyse the most important developments of recent years and approaches to reform in various countries. In this, most articles use the 'Jena Power Resource Approach' (Jenaer Machtressourcenansatz) as their analytical tool. This approach was developed in Jena by the working group 'Strategic Unionism', whose members represent some of the authors. The question is raised, what represents the foundations for the possibilities of the trade unions to wield influence (power)? In this a distinction is made between structural and organisational power, which means the position of the employees in the production process, on the one hand, and the genuine capability for organisation and collective trade union action, on the other. The third power resource, institutional power, stems from the position of trade unions within existing institutions (for instance collective agreements or social insurances) and is a help to stabilise trade union ability to assert itself. Finally, strategic capability is an additional fourth power resource. This denotes trade unions' capability to take a position in the public sphere confronting employers and the state and to use or mobilise their power resources at the right moment. A first set of articles in the book is dedicated to these theoretical foundations of trade union power and the debate about

its renewal. Two sets deal with the present trade union policy in Germany including examples of trade union revitalisation. Then the perspective is widened through examples from international case studies. Finally representatives of the working group and a representative each of IG Metall and ver.di try to draw conclusions for trade union practice.

Kim Voss in her contribution reminds us that current trade union approaches to revitalisation originated in the USA. It was there that in the 1990s a model was developed under the term 'Social Movement Unionism' (SMU), which focussed on organising the non-organised and relates to the experiences of the US Civil Rights Movement. The contribution also resumes the current discussion about the effects of the SMU model on internal trade union democracy. A top-down organising model introduced by the trade union leadership may well have the effect that representation of the interests of employees already organised become neglected and internal democratic principles denied. It becomes evident in Voss' contribution how different the preconditions for revitalisation are in the USA and Europe. Thus, for instance, the unionisation rate of 11% in the USA is extremely low as compared to the OECD countries. The same is true for the coverage rate of collective agreements. In addition, in the USA the dominant level of collective bargaining is the enterprise and the institutional power of trade unions is significantly weaker as compared to most European countries. The regulation in companies as well as beyond is usually at a completely different level in Europe. This concerns typically codetermination, collective labour rights, or tripartite structures. It is astonishing that, despite these differences, in Europe most of the activation efforts summarised under the term 'Organising' are based on the US approach. And, according to the reports presented in the book, at first glance they seem to be successful. This may be related to the fact that the organising approaches have been applied in particular in areas of so-called 'white spots' or 'trade union deserts', for instance, the fight for improving the conditions for agency labour (Schmalz/Hinz/Woschnak/

Schwetje/Paul, p. 258) and various examples of successful organising in the services sector such as the German health sector (Neuner, pp. 213 ff.) or child-day-centres (Kutlu, pp. 226 ff.). In most European countries, the private services sector is notorious for being difficult to organise.

One contribution (Scholz, pp. 199 ff.) deals with construction trades (Handwerk), that is the small-enterprise sector. For a long time IG Metall has neglected the trade sector (plumbing, electrical, heating and ventilating engineering) resulting in rapidly declining membership rates in the past 10 years. For the construction Union (IG BAU) the slump was equally evident, most pronounced in the trades, in which the membership rate was no more than 18% in 2009. Ten years earlier it had been about 60%! The decline is also recognisable among painters and roofers, though less pronounced. This weakening in the trades is also a reason for the drastic membership decline of IG BAU, which from 2000 to 2011 across all sectors of organisation lost almost every second member. IG BAU applied the organising approach for the first time during a country-wide wage dispute of the cleaning sector in 2009. Though in this sector a collective agreement existed, the trade union had no roots in the companies and only very few organised employees. Due to the organising approach focussed on the Berlin region, it was possible to organise a 19-day strike and to achieve essential improvements in the collective agreement. In addition, there was success, just in the Berlin region, in gaining 900 members for the sector and getting a foothold in some important companies.

In the present collection there is no contribution about Switzerland. That is a shame because here for some years the largest trade union UNIA has already gathered experience in organising projects in the sectors of health, retail, gardening, industry, and construction<sup>2</sup>.

The view beyond Europe conveys examples of labour conflicts and trade union renewal from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

With regard to the international division of labour and location competition, the contribution about China is particularly interesting (Butollo/Lüthje, pp. 276 ff). It provides an overview of production regimes and industrial relations in this country and describes the most important industrial conflicts since 2010, displaying the common feature of relatively spontaneous labour conflicts associated with a lack of organisational trade union power.

Using the Jena Power Resource Approach, the book tries to draw a balance sheet of the diverse reform projects in many countries. This is difficult, however, because not only the pre-conditions but also the reform approaches in the diverse countries are very different. Some refer to SMU experiences and some do not. It becomes clear that the partly entirely different conditions and trade union cultures do not allow the same reform approach to operate and that the respective organising projects have to be tailored according to national and local conditions. An important conclusion for me is also: even where the institutional power of trade unions is still in place (e.g. through works councils, codetermination or tripartite structures), if organisational resources decline and conflict capability becomes questionable, sooner or later the institutional power of trade unions can be disposed of. Therefore, fundamental reforms are at any rate indispensable for the survival or comeback of the trade unions.

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2. These projects are documented in: Patrick Angele, Adrian Durtschi, Tanja Walliser, 2011: *Organizing in der Schweiz*. In *Widerspuch 61*, Zürich sowie in: Jörn Boewe, 2013: *Das Kräfteverhältnis ändern*. In: Detlef Wetzel (Hg): *Organizing. Die Veränderung der gewerkschaftlichen Praxis durch das Prinzip der Beteiligung*. Hamburg.

# Review

Frank Manzo, Robert Bruno (2014), **Labour Market Institutions Reduce Income Inequality**. Research Report. Illinois Economic Policy Institute/University of Illinois

Hans Baumann

This study analyses the effects that labour market institutions have on income inequality in the construction industry in the US. The subjects researched include unionisation, prevailing wage laws (PWL) and right to work laws (RTW). Prevailing wage laws, as implemented in some US states, establish minimum standards in labour markets for publicly-financed projects. This is similar to what we would call a social clause for public procurement, guaranteeing a minimum standard for wages and social conditions for construction workers, employed on public projects. Right to work laws are restrictions for collective bargaining, prohibiting agreements between labour unions and employers like, for instance, exclusive rights for union members, demanding a fee from non-union members or extending the collective agreement to all employees in the company.

The report begins by giving arguments as to why we should care about rising inequality in our societies: redistribution to the wealthy may reduce aggregate demand in the economy, poorer people have fewer resources to invest in their own education and this may increase the probability of financial crises and criminal activity. Then the report shows the importance of the construction industry for the US economy, employing 8.9 million American residents and with good economic forecasts until 2022.

The authors show that decreasing unionisation is one important reason for income inequality and that Right-to-work laws decrease unionisation by between 5 and 8 percentage points. In the construction industry right-to-work laws decreased worker incomes by 13.5 percent. On the other hand, in states with collective agreements and prevailing wage laws, incomes are higher and more equal. The effect of the different labour market regimes on income inequality seems very

## Review

obvious: For the median worker, employment in a collective-bargaining state yielded a 26.7 percent total income benefit compared to his or her equivalent in a right-to-work state. And Prevailing wage laws reduce inequality between the highest earners and the lowest earners by 45.1 percent. Labour unions are the most effective institution to reduce income inequality: a state union membership rate that was 10 percentage points higher reduced income inequality by between 4.7 and 14.5 percent.

The authors of the report draw very clear conclusions: Unionisations and prevailing wage laws strongly reduce income inequality in the construction industry, while right-to-work laws tend to intensify the problem. They recommend the states therefore not to repeal prevailing wage laws but to strengthen them. Construction Unionisation should be encouraged since unionised workers are more productive and earn higher incomes. Right-to-work laws on the other hand should be repealed to raise workers' incomes and productivity.

The findings of this report cannot automatically be transferred into the European reality as conditions in the US are too different. In most European countries there are, for instance, no restrictions like a right-to-work law. But there is also a strong tendency in the European Union to restrict collective bargaining or to challenge minimum social standards in public procurement (see the decisions of the European Court). The report's findings underline the benefits of a pro-unionisation and pro-collective bargaining policy for the labour market in construction industry.



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