

Posted workers

La condizione dei lavoratori in distacco transnazionale in Europa

a cura di Rossana Cillo e Fabio Perocco

The Impact of Postings on the Belgian Construction Sector

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Abstract The increase of postings in the Belgian construction sector has accelerated and intensified the transnationalisation of the labour market and the reorganisation of the production model, transforming this sector into a laboratory of new forms of workforce fragmentation and stratification. Referring to the findings of the field research carried out under the EU projects *Poosh* and *Con3Post*, this chapter presents the main characteristics of the incoming postings in Belgium, the links between work organisation and the spread of postings, and the consequences on working conditions of the application of an increasingly flexible productive model based on subcontracting and contingent work.

Keywords Belgium. Construction sector. Posted workers. Social dumping. Subcontracting. Transnational labour market. Working conditions.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Growth of Incoming Postings and Its Effects on the Labour Market of the Construction Sector. – 3 The Transformation of Work Organisation and the Spread of Postings in the Construction Sector. – 4 Working Conditions of Posted Workers. – 5 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

In early June 2021, some Portuguese firms rose to the headlines for a trial held in Namur regarding a € 20 million fraud to the detriment of more than 600 Portuguese posted workers sent to provide their services in dozens of construction sites in Belgium (Dethine 2021). On 18 June, just nine days after the trial began, the media returned to focus on working conditions in the construction industry due to the collapse of the scaffolding and part of the building of a school under construction in Antwerp, which caused five deaths and nine injuries among the workers. The victims who died in the accident were all of foreign origin - three from Portugal and two from Moldova - and were employed as posted workers by one of the subcontractors of the Belgian company that had won the public tender (Zuallaert, Vuylsteke 2021).

Both cases contributed to reopening the public debate concerning the working conditions of posted workers, the effect of social dumping on the Belgian labour market, and also the responsibilities of Belgian construction companies, which derive a substantial part of their profits from incoming postings through the subcontracting system, but rarely end up in the dock (Balboni 2021). Indeed, in Belgium, the posting of workers has become a structural feature of the labour market, in particular in the transport sector and the meat processing industry and above all in the construction industry (De Wispelaere, Pacolet 2017; Zuallaert, Vuylsteke 2021) - a sector in which the reorganisation of production to obtain greater flexibility has had to depend on services outsourcing relying on labour subcontracting due to the impossibility to relocate abroad (Buckley et al. 2016; Graham, Grunenberg 2000). Additionally, the impact of the spread of postings in Belgium has accelerated and intensified some of the most relevant trends related to the transnationalisation of the labour market and the reorganisation of the production model, transforming the construction sector into a laboratory of new forms of workforce fragmentation and stratification (Cillo 2021; Laboratorio di Ricerca Sociale 2020).

Referring to the existing literature and using the findings of the field research of the EU projects *Poosh - Occupational safety and health of posted workers* and *Con3Post - Posting of Third Country Nationals. Mapping the Trend in the Construction Sector*,¹ this essay

¹ The *Poosh* project (2018-19) integrated the study of the academic and grey literature on occupational safety and health, labour and working conditions of posted workers with the thematic analysis of the findings of empirical research on the Belgian case study. The fieldwork was carried out in Belgium between October 2017 and February 2018 and included fourteen semi-structured interviews with: seven stakeholders (four representatives of the Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue, in charge of labour inspections; an expert on the topic of posting of workers; a trade unionist; a representative of a bilateral body, expert on wellbeing at work), five posted work-

presents the current trends of the incoming postings in the Belgian labour market focusing on the construction sector (§ 2) and analyses the transformations in work organisation that have made the posting of workers a structural feature of the labour market of the building industry (§ 3). Paragraph 4 examines how the application of an increasingly flexible productive model based on subcontracting and contingent work influences the working and living conditions of posted employees, while the conclusions (§ 5) highlight the strict connection between the transnationalisation of the labour market, the transformation of work organisation and the increasing casualisation derived from the posting of workers.

2 The Growth of Incoming Postings and Its Effects on the Labour Market of the Construction Sector

Over the last fifteen years, Belgium has been one of the most important destinations for postings, together with Germany, Austria and France. Between 2009 and 2019, the number of incoming posted workers significantly increased from 83,958 to 254,759 persons, involving especially sending companies based in neighbouring countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, France and Luxembourg, and in the principal sending countries at the European Union (EU) level, such as Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Romania (European Commission 2012; De Wispelaere, Pacolet 2020; De Wispelaere et al. 2021). Similarly to the trends that characterise the transnational labour market at the EU level, the number of incoming postings has begun to grow since the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, increasingly concerning workers from the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe, and augmented further following the 2008 economic crisis, involving workers from Southern European countries, who have been strongly affected by the rise in unemployment (Laboratorio di Ricerca Sociale 2020).

Additionally, in the last few years, Belgium has also recorded an increase of third-country nationals that are employed as posted work-

ers, a cross-border worker, and an immigrant worker. The *Con3Post* project (2019-20) integrated the study of the academic and grey literature with the thematic analysis of the findings of empirical research on migration and posting of third-country nationals from Morocco and Tunisia to Belgium via Italy. Empirical data were collected between June and November 2019 through three focus groups and three foresight exercises, which involved 26 representatives of public authorities, social partners and other experts from Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Morocco, Switzerland, and Tunisia. Both projects received financial support from the EaSI-Progress Programme of the European Union and were coordinated by the Slovenian Migration Institute (ZRC SAZU). The study on the Belgian case was carried out by the research team of Ca' Foscari University of Venice and coordinated by prof. Fabio Perocco.

ers by sending companies based in the EU Member States. In 2018, in fact, “LIMOSA² registered 28,000 third-country nationals, 20,000 (72%) of whom were posted to Belgium from other EU member states, i.e. without a Belgian work permit” (MYRIA 2019, 94). In this case, the main sending countries are Poland, Slovenia, Portugal, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, while the main countries of origin of third-country nationals are Ukraine, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Kosovo and Morocco (Mussche, Lens 2018; MYRIA 2019).

The construction industry is the principal sector that utilises the posting of workers and has absorbed practically all the growth of incoming postings recorded over the years (De Wispelaere, Pacolet 2017, 10-14). Posted workers tend to be employed through the subcontracting system by large, medium, and small clients that use posting services in all branches related to the construction industry, with a higher concentration in the construction of residential buildings and some specialised construction activities, like plastering, electrotechnical installations, roofing, central heating and ventilation installation and painting (De Wispelaere, Pacolet 2017; Cillo 2018; 2021; Ouali 2012).

The spread of the posting phenomenon is closely related to the economic performance of the Belgian construction sector during the last fifteen years. Indeed, compared to other EU countries, it has been less affected by the 2008 economic crisis thanks to state investment in public infrastructures and the growth in the private housing sector (Laboratorio di Ricerca Sociale 2020). The Regions of Wallonia, Brussels-Capital and Flanders have introduced medium and long-term investment plans for transport facilities, while the EU has funded specific projects to improve transport infrastructures under the Connecting Europe Facility. As for the private sector,

the Belgian housing market has been relatively stable and unaffected by the economic crisis, displaying a steady growth in house prices, good availability of mortgage credit and low household indebtedness. (European Construction Sector Observatory 2018, 2)

Over a single decade, this economic trend has led to a 12.6% growth in employment in the broad construction sector (2010: 452,285 employed persons; 2019: 509,172 employed persons), which has con-

2 The LIMOSA data are based on a mandatory registration system of incoming posted workers introduced in 2007, which detects the number of unique persons posted to Belgium. The LIMOSA declarations must be completed by employers who send their employees to work on a temporary or part-time basis in Belgium and by self-employed workers who go to Belgium to pursue a temporary or partial self-employed activity in high-risk sectors - like construction, meat processing industry and cleaning industry. See: https://www.international.socialsecurity.be/working_in_belgium/en/limosa.html.

cerned the real estate activities sub-sector (+35.7%), the narrow construction (+13.2%) and the architectural and engineering activities (+12.6%) (European Construction Sector Observatory 2020, 7).

As emerged from the *Con3Post* research, the growth of the construction industry has not corresponded with a complementary expansion in the domestic workforce employed in the sector. In both the private and public sectors, these dynamics have led to labour and skill shortages that have not been filled through labour immigration from third countries due to the migration policies adopted by the Belgian state, which favour the entry and residence of only highly skilled workers (see also Mussche et al. 2016; Mussche, Lens 2018). Additionally, these shortages have not been filled through permanent labour migration from Eastern and Central European member states due to the long-term consequences of the extension of restrictions concerning the free access to the labour markets of the EU15 member states³ implemented during the second phase of the transition period after the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements. Indeed, the restrictions pushed a number of nationals from the new member states to enter the Central and Northern European labour markets through the posting of workers and self-employment, rather than stable immigration, thus contributing to lay the foundations for a more flexible - and precarious - mobility regime (see also Arnholtz, Lillie 2019; Cillo 2021; Mussche, Lens 2018; Wagner 2018).

As a consequence, these dynamics have gradually boosted the process of transnationalisation of the labour market through an increasing use of postings. Indeed, as De Wispelaere and Pacolet (2017) pointed out, the widespread diffusion of the posting of workers has largely satisfied the increase in workforce demand that occurred during the last decade in the narrow construction and has combined with a simultaneous decrease in the number of workers employed by Belgian companies, thus having a displacement effect on the number of domestic employees in some activities, like the plasterboard sub-sector, and some professional qualifications, like the manual labourer.

3 The Transformation of Work Organisation and the Spread of Postings in the Construction Sector

At the base of the labour market dynamics described in the previous paragraph, there are not only factors related to the transformation of the migratory and mobility regime at the Belgian and EU level,

³ EU15 Member States include Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom (until 2020).

but also factors strictly linked to the needs of the production organisation. Similarly to what has happened in other EU receiving countries (Arnholtz, Lillie 2019; Buelen et al. 2013; Cillo 2017a; Cremers 2011; Danaj, Ćaro 2021; Perocco 2018; Sciarra 2008; Wagner 2018), also in Belgium the posting of workers has been used by businesses to obtain competitive advantages by lowering labour costs and restricting workers' rights, particularly in labour-intensive sectors and low-skilled professions. The social dumping effect resulted from this use of postings is strictly linked to the international division of labour of the EU internal market, in which the distribution between sending and receiving countries

mirrors the division of labour that neoliberal globalisation and EU labour market liberalisation have gradually determined in the EU over the last thirty years, which, incidentally, has boosted long-term labour migrations besides the temporary posting of workers. Globalisation and EU labour market liberalisation have brought about deep social polarisation, which, in turn, has made Eastern European countries specialise in supplying cheap labour to both companies relocating in Eastern Europe and Western Europe and firms employing immigrant and posted workers. (Cillo 2017a, 17)

As highlighted by a Belgian trade unionist during the *Con3post* project, this use of the posting of workers has facilitated an enhanced competition among the companies that used postings and those that mainly employed domestic workforce, as the EU regulation concerning the posting of workers allows lowering labour costs by leveraging the differential between the social contributions and tax levels of the sending and receiving countries. A similar reflection, focused on the vulnerabilities of posted workers, was also made by a Belgian labour inspector involved in the *Poosh* project:

The first cause of vulnerability for incoming posted workers is related to the fact that they depend on the social security and taxation of the countries of origin. So, this concept that Europe has established in a legal way, namely the possibility of exercising social dumping, the competition between workers, is already a crucial factor of vulnerability. Since [posted workers] are cheaper, it is certain that they will be used. And when they are used because they are cheaper, [their employers] take delinquent shortcuts, which allow them to do everything, no matter what and with whom. (Cillo 2018, 13)

Both the *Con3post* project and the *Poosh* project shows how the increase of incoming postings has been favoured by the fact that Belgian construction companies have preferred increasingly flexible forms of employment, more linked to the temporary nature of the

projects and less tied to permanent employment that prevails in the Belgian labour market. This trend is also related to the application of just-in-time principles to the work organisation, which has prompted the construction sector to use a workforce management model based on the exploitation of different forms of contingent work, including temporary and circular labour migration - like the guest workers' regime in the US or the Gulf countries or, in the EU case, the posting of workers (Buckley et al. 2016; Cillo 2017a; Costello, Freedland 2016; Kathiravelu 2016; Lillie 2012; Ness 2011).

The application of the just-in-time model has also fostered an increasing use of outsourcing, which was made possible through prefabrication, enabling the transfer of some activities from construction to manufacturing,⁴ and through services' outsourcing relying on labour subcontracting. The spread of outsourcing - which concerns not only Belgium, but all the EU member states and the global market - has led to a marked polarisation in the business structure, allowing the clients and the main contractors in the construction sector

to largely detach themselves from direct involvement in wage rates, productivity or unit labour cost. Instead, they use their market power, when they can, to push subcontractors' prices down. Subcontractors may be able to maintain some level of profitability out of their operations. (Graham, Grunenberg 2000, 49)

As highlighted by the findings of the research projects, the formation of transnational subcontracting chains has involved companies based in several EU member states that have recruited posted workers both in the EU labour market and in third countries, allowing businesses to reduce labour costs and to increase flexibility, and favouring the spread of social dumping and unfair competition, through the employment of undeclared workers or social frauds (Danaj et al. 2020; Kall et al. 2020; Laboratorio di Ricerca Sociale 2020). The transnational subcontracting chains have also contributed to fragmenting the workforce composition in the workplaces. Indeed, the core workers are employed by the client or the main contractors, benefit from fair economic treatment and the respect of social rights and are usually unionised. On the contrary, subcontracted workers are usually employed in temporary and casual jobs, their condition tends to wors-

⁴ According to Bosch and Phillips, "prefabrication may or may not be a labour-saving technology, but it surely is a labour-displacing technology from the perspective of the construction worksite. Prefabrication in construction is somewhat similar to a runaway shop in manufacturing. They both move work away from its present location. Historically, there has been a continuous process of moving work away from construction into manufacturing through innovations in prefabrication. This process of change focuses on making construction materials semi-finished products" (Bosch, Phillips 2003, 6).

en as the number of subcontracting levels rises, and they are often victims of anti-union practices (cf. also Graham, Grunenberg 2000).

Furthermore, the increasing use of the subcontracting system has favoured the fragmentation of work organisation, pushing large construction companies to hire construction site managers specialised in supervising posting companies in order to avoid issues related to the service quality and economic losses due to delays in the delivery of orders.

4 Working Conditions of Posted Workers

Posted workers employed in hazardous sectors, such as the building industry, usually experience multifaceted vulnerabilities, which range from the precarity related to their status of temporary workers in the receiving country, to irregularities regarding the contractual conditions imposed by their employers, to the infringement of existing regulations on working and living conditions (Cremers 2011; Danaj, Zólyomi 2018; Wagner, Lillie 2014). This situation was also confirmed by the findings that emerged during the field research of the projects *Poosh* and *Con3Post*.

One of the main issues related to the posting of workers in Belgium concerns the salary and the payment of taxes and social contributions in the sending countries. As reported by some interviewees involved in project *Poosh*, about half of posted workers employed in the construction sector does not get paid the Belgium minimum salary and, in some cases, they receive the equivalent of the wages of their country of origin. Many posted workers agree to work for lower wages, even when they are informed of the standard to be applied, because of the wage differential compared to the countries of origin. In this regard, a representative of the Federal Public Service stated that this differential feeds the continuous growth of the postings, accentuating the competition on the downside:

the problem is that the salary difference is too big. If you look at the minimum salary in Bulgaria or Romania, it is less than 2€ per hour, if you work in Belgium on a construction site that's at least 15€. [...] I always give the example of Spain and Portugal. The minimum salary in Portugal is 650€ brut per month and how long are they already in the EU? [...] But when are the Portuguese going to have our minimum salary? Never, we will never see that. It's even worse because of the crisis. They have lowered the minimum wage in Greece, they lowered the minimum wage in Spain also. And someone from Serbia or Montenegro earns even less than someone from Bulgaria, and now they are being posted. (Cillo 2018, 11-12)

Furthermore, trade unions and labour inspectorates have detected numerous irregularities relating to working hours and breaks in the construction sector. The representative of a joint body reported that posted workers employed in about half of the building sites work for 11 or 12 hours a day, including Saturday and Sunday, often without being paid for overtime and holiday work. Additionally, he pointed out that both the contractor and the supervisor of the building site usually impose the exceeding of the limits allowed by the law.

Regarding living conditions, there are quite frequent cases of overcrowding and poor housing conditions, and in some cases the housing costs are illegally deducted from the salary of posted workers to further lower labour costs.

As for health and safety at work, the research findings of the project *Poosh* detected numerous cases in which posted workers were not informed about their rights and were forced to work in dangerous conditions without having all the necessary collective and individual protection measures. Additionally, working and housing conditions deeply influence occupational safety and health of posted workers, helping to increase fatigue and make it difficult to recover physical and mental well-being, as highlighted by the case of a Polish posted worker employed in the construction sector, who

worked every day for two months: he worked seven days a week, twelve hours a day and then, after two months, he had a work accident because of working seven days twelve hours... That's ninety hours a week and, after two months, he had a work accident. So, the prosecution officer asked us to investigate the working conditions of that man, and he worked effectively for two months consecutive, and that's why he was so tired he had a working accident. And he brought his case to the criminal court. (Cillo 2018, 11-12)

The occupational safety and health of posted workers are also influenced by other factors, such as the work fragmentation that characterises subcontracting chains, the employment in workplaces where posted workers cannot access information in their own language, the temporary nature of posted workers' employment, the continuous mobility between different jobs and different workplaces that present different safety and health risks and different preventive procedures. In addition, the findings of project *Poosh* have also highlighted the close link between has also emerged between the occupational safety and health vulnerability of posted workers and the social dumping effects derived from the posting of workers, which allow employers to have a low-cost workforce ready to accept worse working conditions to keep the job. As stated by a labour inspector, the cases of severe labour exploitation are made possible by the economic dependence of the posted workers with respect to their employers

they are workers who need to work, they need to make money, so they are in a position of submission to their employers. Economic dependence is the factor that increases the risks, especially if the employer is a non-responsible person who does not respect its employees and does not respect the basic rules of protection of its employees. (Cillo 2018, 13)

Regarding the postings involving third-country nationals, the case of Moroccan and Tunisian workers sent by Italian construction companies to Belgium analysed during the *Con3Post* project confirmed that these vulnerabilities also affect their working and living conditions. However, it has also emerged that, in most cases, posted workers from Morocco and Tunisia are more vulnerable to forms of severe labour exploitation due to their precarious migration status in Italy and to the fact that Italian legislation on labour migration links the validity of the residence permit to the employment contract and the access to social rights to the migration status. Additionally, it has emerged that the employment of third-country nationals sent to Belgium by companies based in various EU member states has opened a new phase of the downward competition among workers, involving both the domestic workforce and EU workers who have been employed as posted workers in the construction sector for many years.

5 Conclusions

Since the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements and the 2008 economic crisis, the European labour market has been affected by the growth of temporary and circular forms of labour migration, like the temporary agency work, seasonal migration, and the posting of workers (Danaj, Çaro 2021; Friberg 2016; Perocco 2018). The spread of these forms of labour mobility was encouraged in particular by the demand for short-term, casual and highly flexible work from those sectors that have had to resort to labour subcontracting due to the impossibility to relocate abroad, as in the case of the construction sector (Cillo 2017a; 2021; Creemers 2011; Wagner 2018; Wilkinson, Johnstone, Townsend 2012).

By focusing on the case of the Belgian construction sector, this essay shows how the increase in incoming postings has been stimulated on the one hand by the formation of a transnational labour market that has internally reproduced the international division of labour derived from the neoliberal globalisation and EU labour market liberalisation, on the other hand by the transformation of work organisation based on the just-in-time principles that led the construction sector to gradually more utilise the subcontracting system and to employ a workforce that provides services literally on-demand.

The transformations in the labour market and work organisation have allowed the higher echelons of the subcontracting system to increase their profits to the detriment of labour costs. As a consequence, large strata of posted workers employed at the end of the subcontracting chain have to accept precarious employment arrangements and irregular working conditions, which can lead to forms of severe labour exploitation and increased risks in terms of occupational safety and health. However, as emerged from the article, this situation also affects the employment and working conditions of the domestic workforce and the strata of posted workers that access better working conditions – as demonstrated by the process of downward competition triggered by the employment of third-country nationals as posted workers and the displacement effect of the domestic workforce occurred in some activities and professional qualifications. These elements highlight that the dynamics of transnationalisation of the labour market in the construction sector are actually part of a global process of casualisation of the workforce, precarisation of the employment relations and worsening of working conditions.

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