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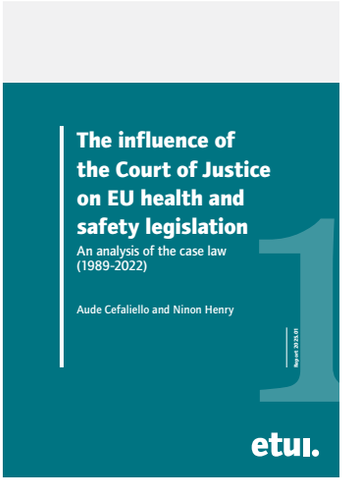

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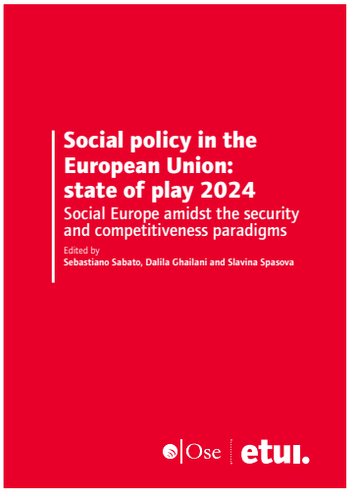

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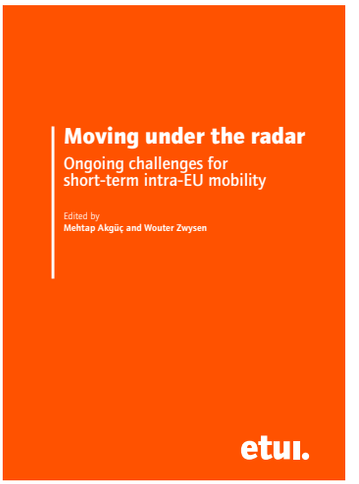

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The health and safety magazine with a European view

HesaMag is a biannual magazine published by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI).

The Working Conditions, Health and Safety Unit of the ETUI aims at promoting high standards of health and safety at the workplace throughout Europe. It provides support and expertise to the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the Workers' Group of the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work. It is an associate member of the European Committee for Standardization (CEN). It runs networks of trade union experts on issues such as standardisation (machine safety and ergonomics) and chemicals.

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HesaMag+
You can find all articles in both French and English, as well as some in their original language, on our website: www.etui.org

Cover photo: © Nicolas Landemard

Celebrating 30 issues of HesaMag

Health and safety at work: a battle we refuse to lose

You are holding in your hands the 30th issue of *HesaMag* — a testament to persistence, resilience and a commitment to justice. Our longevity is proof of our success in resisting the forces that oppose us. We intend to mark this milestone not just with celebrations, but also with a more reflective approach – by looking back at our past cover images, each one of which is a snapshot of the ongoing struggle to protect workers' rights.

This magazine, which was launched in 2009, is more than just another publication; it is a deliberate act of defiance against the forces that seek to erode social rights. One of the most fundamental of these rights is the right to work without sacrificing one's physical and mental health and wellbeing. Yet this right is once again under threat – from deregulation, from corporate negligence and from policies that prioritise profit over people. Let us be quite clear: as long as there are those who seek to undermine these rights, there will be those who fight back. *HesaMag* stands as a witness to this fight – and as a weapon in it.

This special issue focuses on education, an area closely linked to the origins of our magazine, which was born of a desire to make technical subjects accessible through the expertise of scientists and journalists.

Our celebrations are also an opportunity to thank the various ETUI leadership teams who have consistently supported the magazine, as well as our hundreds of contributors for their relevant and insightful articles offering both a distinctly European outlook and a strong trade union perspective. We would also like to pay tribute to the pioneers, Laurent Vogel and Denis Grégoire, and their successors, Mehmet Koksal, Bethany Staunton and Marian Schaapman, as well as to our indispensable editorial assistant, Géraldine Hofmann, and the agency Coast, which created the first layout and has continued to shape the visual identity of every issue since then.

Enjoy reading this 30th issue of *HesaMag* and browsing the cover images of its previous editions. Since the third issue, Martine Zunini has been responsible for the images of all the workers featured on *HesaMag*'s front pages. We are most grateful to her for this powerful visual testimony of workers' lives.

Dimitra Theodori, Editor
Alain Bloëdt, Managing Editor






Photos : © Martine Zunini




















Editorial

Teachers are more than just another brick in the wall

Dimitra Theodori
Editor

My mother was a secondary school teacher. That was a long time ago – it feels like another world. She would sit at the kitchen table, a soft, yellow light shining down on the large marksheet spread out in front of her, with each name and number carefully handwritten. I was only little, but I was diligent. My task was to hold the ruler steady against the seemingly endless list of names and marks, keeping the lines straight. I remember the pride I felt, holding that ruler, as though I was part of something bigger than myself in an effort to keep the world in order.

Back then, teaching was a dignified profession – a teacher's role was both demanding and deeply meaningful. I believe that, in many ways, it still is. But the world has changed. The pace is relentless now. The rituals that once gave the profession its quiet weight are now buried under layers of reporting, control and fragmentation.

Today, teachers across Europe long for space to teach with thought and care. Instead, they are hemmed in by bureaucratic burdens, their joy hollowed out by systems designed more for accountability than for learning. In some countries, the emotional toll is so great that full-time teaching becomes unsustainable. Many take a step back; others walk away. Burnout spreads, and vacancies grow.

Teaching is certainly not a 'bullshit job' like the ones described by anthropologist David Graeber, but it is true that, nowadays, teachers increasingly find themselves drowning in bullshit tasks. What they seek is not luxury – it is simply the space to teach with clarity and conviction, unencumbered by distractions.

The education sector demands an immense social, emotional and intellectual investment. This is true today more so, much more so, than in my mother's time. What's needed is not resilience training or lunchtime yoga, but a systemic approach to the psychosocial risks embedded in modern work. And not just in education, for workers in sectors such as health, social care, transport, academia, logistics – the list goes on – carry the same silent weight.

We now have evidence to support the urgency that this issue demands. A recent (2023) ETUI study[1] revealed that work-related psychosocial risks (PSRs) are not just intangible stressors; they are measurable public health burdens. Job strain, bullying, job insecurity and effort-reward imbalance together account for a significant share of depression and cardiovascular disease cases across the EU. In 2015 alone, over 10,000 deaths in the EU were linked to these risks at work. The numbers are more than abstract; they are staggering.

What about the economic cost? The second part of the study[2] found that coronary heart disease related to PSRs cost the EU between 11.8 and 14.2 billion euros (PPP), while depression linked to workplace PSRs came with a price tag of 44.7 to 103.1 billion euros (PPP). Tellingly, over 87% of the costs of depression – totalling nearly 90 billion euros – were borne by employers, largely due to absenteeism and sickness absence. These numbers are not just abstract figures; they reflect real people and communities impacted by the pressures of today's working conditions. The economic burden of these issues is not just a personal cost; it's a societal and global challenge.

That's why this moment calls for more than soft promises. We need a comprehensive EU directive on psychosocial risks at work, anchored in a broader quality jobs package. It won't fix everything overnight, but it will ensure that the issue is addressed structurally. It will also send a clear, symbolic message: these problems are real, widespread and urgent. And, most importantly, they are solvable. We know the causes, and we know the solutions. What's missing is the will to act.

Of course, there's going to be some resistance. Some argue that many employers already promote wellbeing in the workplace. But let's be clear: this alone is not enough. Moreover, it's important to recognize that wellbeing initiatives often fall short because they fail to address the root causes of employee wellness issues or they lack long-term commitment. Measures to support mental health should be embedded in workplace policies as a fundamental, ongoing priority, rather than being treated as a superficial add-on or a quick fix.

One common argument is that stress is subjective – what drains one person might energize another. But that misses the point. Even in 'high-flying' jobs – those that offer the most prestigious and well-paid roles – burnout is rampant. More than half of managers report being emotionally exhausted. Meanwhile, in 'low-flying' jobs – if such a term exists for low-paid, low-status occupations – the demands are just as high, but the buffers are gone. Irregular hours, intense workloads and a poor work-life balance are common currency across the labour market.

Others express doubts about the research itself. They argue that the field lacks consistent, objective and harmonised metrics, pointing out that many of the most respected studies rely on survey data rather than direct observation or measurement.

However, the implication that surveys are somehow unscientific is a mischaracterisation. Surveys are a recognised and essential tool in the study of complex social and psychological dynamics. Used across disciplines – from epidemiology to sociology – they allow researchers to trace broad patterns and connect them to real-world outcomes. Rather than dismiss these methods, we should value them for what they offer: a systematic, evidence-based picture of how work is experienced by millions of people across Europe.

Education, perhaps more so than any other sector, reveals the high stakes of inaction. As European Commissioner Roxana Mînzatu reminded us in her recent interview for the ETUI (featured in this edition), if we fail to protect our teachers, we risk undermining our skills strategy and, with it, Europe's competitiveness. I agree. That's also why only a binding legislative instrument will do.

Let's not mistake recognition for resolution. The time for symbolic nods has passed. We must hold the line – firm, straight, unwavering. Not just for teachers, but for all workers trying to keep the world in order. ●

1. Leka S. and Jain A. (2024) Conceptualising work-related psychosocial risks: current state of the art and implications for research, policy and practice, Report 2024.09, ETUI.
2. Sultan-Taïeb H., Villeneuve T., Chastang J.F. and Niedhammer I. (2023) The fractions and burden of cardiovascular diseases and depression attributable to psychosocial work exposures in the European Union, Report 2023.08, ETUI.

Europe

Deregulation: an old remedy with uncertain effects

Eric Van den Abeele
Senior lecturer honoraire at the University of Mons-Hainaut and at the Institut des Hautes Études des Communications Sociales (IHECS), and Associate Researcher at the ETUI

Since 1996, the European Commission has launched numerous initiatives to simplify the EU's regulatory and administrative framework. This approach is now making a strong comeback with the adoption of the 'Competitiveness Compass'. While regulatory simplification can make sense, it raises a central question: by constantly revisiting the rules, are we not at risk of eroding essential protections for workers?

Over the past three decades, the European Commission has repeatedly launched initiatives to streamline regulation and reduce administrative burdens – from the Simpler Legislation for the Internal Market (SLIM) pilot project in 1996 to the Regulatory Fitness and Performance (REFIT) programme in 2012, the Annual Burden Survey (2018) and the 'one in, one out' rule introduced in 2021. Despite changes in name and format, the underlying goal has remained constant: to make EU regulation more 'efficient'. This effort has generated a high level of activity: between 2015 and 2022 alone, the Commission adopted 274 simplification initiatives and carried out 210 evaluations and fitness checks across eighteen policy areas.

However, beyond this technical machinery, the simplification agenda has been increasingly driven by political pressure to produce tangible quantifiable results – especially in the form of reduced obligations for businesses. This shift has turned simplification from a tool of better lawmaking into a political performance metric – one that prioritises quantity over quality, and visibility over substance. Targets such as a 25% reduction in regulatory obligations or even 50% for SMEs, have become recurring mantras, often detached from any real assessment of what rules are necessary or effective. Ultimately, very little real progress was achieved – and, in some cases, the battle against bureaucracy ended up creating more of it.

Today, this logic is reemerging in a political environment marked by rising populism, Euroscepticism and the rejection of the regulatory role of the state. A dominant narrative presents rules and reporting obligations as obstacles to growth, innovation and investment. Prominent figures such as Mario Draghi lend weight to this view: 'Excessive regulatory and administrative burdens can hinder the competitiveness of EU companies compared to other blocs.' This seemingly self-evident claim elevates regulatory simplification to the status of miracle cure – especially in the face of global competition from the United States.

In the field of OSH, the real issue is not how many rules exist but how effectively they are implemented.

OSH risks call for stronger and more effective rules – not fewer

Debates on regulation often focus on quantity – too much, too complex, too burdensome. But, in the field of occupational safety and health (OSH), the real issue is not how many rules exist but how effectively they are implemented. Many OSH risks are invisible and develop over time – such as exposure to carcinogens, psychosocial risks or the physical strains that cause musculoskeletal disorders. Unlike accidents, these risks do not manifest immediately; they often become apparent only years later, sometimes only when the worker has left the company. This disconnect makes prevention harder to justify from an employer's short-term perspective. As employers seldom bear the long-term costs of occupational illness, they often lack sufficient incentive to invest in preventive measures. That's exactly why we need strong, enforceable OSH rules – not fewer of them.

A good illustration of this is the case of exposure to toxic substances in the workplace. Recent years have seen real progress, particularly on carcinogens. Yet many harmful substances still lack EU-wide exposure limit values. At the current pace, the EU risks falling short of its own goals for protecting workers from chemical hazards. To close this gap, efforts must focus on strengthening existing legislation and adopting new rules, as foreseen in the EU's 2021-2027 strategic framework on occupational safety and health. 'We have presented a common call in favour of an ambitious industrial agreement for quality industrial jobs… and to protect workers,' said Judith Kirton-Darling, General Secretary of industriAll Europe.

Despite such calls, limit values are often portrayed as bureaucratic burdens, when in fact they are essential safeguards against occupational disease and workplace risks. In this field, simplification is not the answer – what's needed is stronger, enforceable regulation backed by adequate resources.

Simplifying the EU acquis: an insidious trap

The idea that simplifying regulation will boost competitiveness and attract investment is based on questionable assumptions. Anticipated savings often rely on unreliable extrapolations and biased – even risky – calculation methods. Yet reporting obligations are an essential component of effective implementation. In the financial sector, the Basel III debate illustrates how crucial it is for banks to meet capital requirements. In the energy sector, reliable data and transparency are essential for reaching the EU's climate goals.

In today's complex, highly competitive world, simplification is not always feasible – or even desirable. Take the Digital Markets Act: often criticised for its complexity, it nonetheless plays an essential role in protecting citizens and workers from the unchecked power of big tech.

When America sets the tone

Donald Trump's arrival at the White House radicalised the debate. By advocating the massive removal of social and environmental regulations, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization (WHO), his administration embarked on a veritable war against collective protections. Worse still, the US Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), led by Elon Musk and already fiercely opposed by unions, threatens to go even further in dismantling existing safeguards. This drift has sparked sharp criticism from the AFL-CIO: 'Dismantling protections in the name of competitiveness consigns workers to a race to the bottom where only profits emerge as winners.'

In Europe, this ideology finds resonance among industrial lobbies, notably Business Europe and certain groups from the chemical, energy and digital sectors, who call for an 'alignment' with American flexibility. This discourse is supported by ultra-liberal and sovereigntist currents, which equate regulation with a bureaucratic hindrance detrimental to competitiveness. Several Member States, such as the Netherlands, Sweden and some central European countries, advocate for a more permissive approach in order to attract investments.

A critical test for the EU's future

The push to simplify EU regulation is more than a technical exercise – it is a test of the Union's ability to uphold its social and environmental values in a shifting global landscape. While eliminating redundancy and improving efficiency are valid goals, they must not come at the expense of protections that took decades to build.

Recent developments, including the 'Competitiveness Compass' and proposals to ease key parts of the Green Deal, show that deregulation is gaining momentum. But competitiveness cannot be the sole lens through which legislation is assessed. In fields such as occupational health and environmental protection, strong regulation is not a burden – it is a safeguard. Diluting these standards risks weakening public trust, worker protection and the EU's long-term resilience.

In the face of political pressure and economic uncertainty, the EU must resist the illusion that fewer rules mean better outcomes. What matters is not how many laws there are, but their capacity to protect people, guarantee fairness and reflect democratic priorities. ●

In fields such as occupational health and environmental protection, strong regulation is not a burden – it is a safeguard.

Europe

The changing world of work: EU set to plug a legal loophole

Alain Bloëdt
Managing Editor

For over three decades, European rules governing the workplace and the use of screens have not evolved, despite the major transformations experienced in the world of work. To deal with the new challenges presented by teleworking, heat waves and cognitive overload, the European Commission is preparing to modernise two founding directives with a view to providing enhanced protection for today's workers.

With teleworking and hybrid working becoming increasingly commonplace and new occupational risks – from climate change to mental health – emerging, a major step forward was taken in November 2024 in Luxembourg. The Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work took the decisive step in officially recommending, by a unanimous decision of its members, that Directive 89/654/EEC on workplace requirements and the subsequent related Directive 90/270/EEC on work with display screen equipment should be revised.

This Committee, a tripartite body that is more familiar to the experts than the EU's citizens and is generally known by its acronym ACSH (Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work), is regularly consulted by the Commission for opinions and recommendations on occupational health and safety issues and for assessments of current or proposed legislation.

Made up of representatives of national governments, employers' organisations and trade unions in three interest groups, ACSH's discussions are usually impassioned, but they have the advantage of reflecting all interests in an open environment. Although their decision is the result of years of difficult negotiations (see boxed text), the fact that it is unanimous highlights the importance and urgency of revising these two directives.

Why reform now?

Considered for many years to be effective, these two directives are now partially outdated, as pointed out by Roxana Mînzatu, European Commission Executive Vice-President for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness: 'The world of work has changed profoundly over the past 30 years. The rules need to be altered and updated so as to provide improved health and safety for workers whilst taking account of current working methods.'

The directive, adopted in 1990, on display screen equipment (screen working) makes provision, in particular, for ergonomic considerations, regular breaks, ophthalmological monitoring and clear information for workers. However, given that it was conceived in the era of the cathode-ray screen, the directive does not apply to modern laptop computers, smartphones or mobile devices, let alone to software that is becoming increasingly demanding from the cognitive perspective.

As for the 1989 Workplace Requirements Directive, it lays down minimum requirements concerning buildings, lighting, ventilation, emergency exits or even sanitary facilities, with a view to guaranteeing a safe working environment. However, it takes no account of the major developments over recent decades, namely, teleworking, coworking, increased temperatures and new psychosocial risks. The outcome of these trends is that tens of millions of workers today are active in environments that are not covered by this legislation.

The health crisis accentuated the loophole

The Covid-19 pandemic was the catalyst for change. It highlighted the limits of a legislative framework designed for a centralised, sedentary and predictable world of work. Overnight, workers in their millions found themselves having to work remotely, often without the proper set-up or equipment. In the absence of harmonised European rules, the levels of protection varied massively depending on the country or business concerned. Furthermore, risks that had long since been consigned to the sidelines, such as isolation, mental overload, increased sedentariness or even exposure to extreme climatic conditions, were now gaining in visibility, highlighting even further the urgent need for reform.

Even though the directives did not need to be revised simultaneously, the two instruments are nonetheless closely connected. The transformation of working conditions, the development of teleworking, the widespread use of mobile screens or the need to guarantee a right to disconnect make a

Conceived in the era of the cathode-ray screen, the directive on safety requirements for work with display screen equipment does not apply to modern laptop computers, smartphones or mobile devices.

consistent approach essential. As Roxana Mînzatu explains, 'Our priority is to help workers look after their physical and mental health, whether in the home environment or in the context of mobile working. This involves having to maintain a balance between professional and private life and ensuring that flexibility does not mutate into exhaustion.'

A more modern, more protective instrument

Were the Commission to adopt all the ACSH recommendations, the revision of the Workplace Requirements Directive would mark a turning point. The instrument, which has thus far focused on traditional offices, would be opened up to cover a broader reality, incorporating remote workplaces such as the home or coworking spaces. Employers would have clearer obligations, including the requirements to assess specific risks, to supply suitable equipment, to inform and train their employees. The directive would also provide for the introduction of measures to prevent the effects of climate change, for example in the event of a heatwave or extreme cold. It would promote increased accessibility for people with disabilities and introduce ergonomic criteria along with measures to limit noise pollution or prevent violence from third parties. This updated text would therefore be fairer and more appropriately focused on the challenges of the 21st century.

The Display Screen Equipment Directive should also be updated to reflect our digital uses more effectively. Teleworking would be explicitly incorporated into the directive, as would mobile devices (laptops, tablets, etc.). The idea is to ensure that the equipment is properly adapted to the tasks in question, that office furniture is height adjustable as required and that employers consider the risks associated with frequent interruptions, background noise or cognitive overload. The specific definition of a 'worker using a screen' would be clarified so as not to leave anyone without protection.

Will this long-awaited reform succeed in fulfilling its original ambition?

Up until now, the Commission has always adopted the Committee's unanimous opinions. However, for the first time, the Commission might consider this opinion to be too ambitious. Would it be such a big leap at that point to call into question the revision of the two directives? We would not go that far, but this unexpected reaction has taken occupational health and safety policy experts by surprise. However, these same experts have pointed out that, while the European Commission has the power of initiative, it is not beyond the realms of possibility for Parliament and the Council – to whom the Commission must submit its legislative proposal – to take action to reintroduce those measures deemed essential by the ACSH that the Commission would have preferred to see disappear. Watch this space! ●

How EU OSH law is made
Timeline of the revision of the Workplace and Display Screen Equipment Directives

Behind every EU OSH directive is a lengthy, structured process involving studies, expert opinions, negotiations and multiple layers of approval. Here's how the revision of the Workplace and Display Screen Equipment Directives is unfolding, along with what happens next.

1. Mandate / December 2019
The European Commission called on the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work (ACSH) Working Party – made up of five representatives of employers' organisations, national governments and trade unions – to prepare an opinion on the revision of the Workplace and Display Screen Equipment Directives.

2. External study / May 2020
A call for tenders was launched for an independent study to inform the revision of the directives.

3. Expert meetings (tripartite) / 2020 to November 2024
The Working Party met a total of 11 times, eight of which focused on analysing the study results and drafting an opinion. The draft was then submitted to the ACSH plenary for adoption.

4. ACSH opinion / 27 November 2024
Acting by unanimity, the tripartite Advisory Committee issued a formal opinion with recommendations to update both the Workplace Directive and the Display Screen Equipment Directive.

5. Complementary study / December 2024 onwards
A second study was launched to feed into the Commission's future impact assessment. The final report is expected to be published in spring 2026. This stage is usually skipped, but, as explained in the article, the European Commission found the ACSH recommendations to be too ambitious.

6. Impact assessment
The European Commission (DG EMPL) will prepare an impact assessment, which will subsequently be reviewed by the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (RSB).

7. Legislative proposal
If the impact assessment is approved, the Commission will submit a legislative proposal to the Council and the European Parliament.

8. Debate and adoption
The two institutions – the European Council and the European Parliament – will review and possibly adopt the revised directives at first, second or third reading. If no agreement is reached, the proposal will fail.

Who's driving Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) policy at EU level?

EU Agencies
EU-OSHA+
Eurofound


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Ivailo KALFIN
Executive Director of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EUROFOUND), based in Dublin

European Council
(upcoming EU Presidencies)


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Minister for Employment


Carsten GRØNBECH-JENSEN
Permanent Representative to the EU


Yiannis PANAYIOTOU
Minister of Labour and Social Insurance


Christina RAFTI
Permanent Representative to the EU

ACSH
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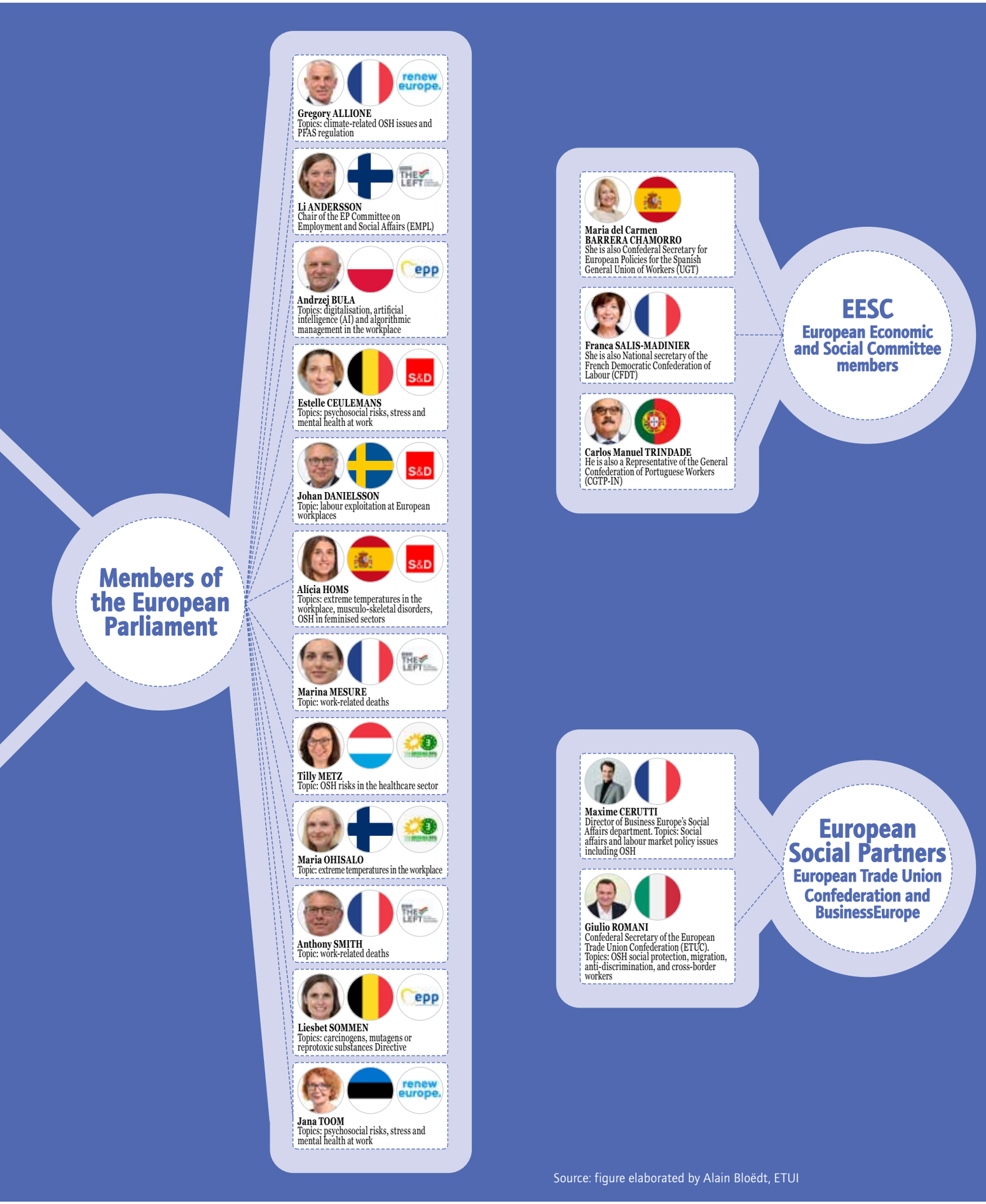


Source: figure elaborated by Alain Bloëdt, ETUI

Special report

HEALTHY TEACHERS, BETTER SCHOOLS

Special report coordinated by
Sonia Nawrocka and **Alain Bloëdt**

Even though our special report might suggest otherwise, the teaching profession should not be the object of our pity. The standing of teachers is still the envy of many a sector, and rightly so. But it would be wrong to overlook their increasing absence from the workplace, or the fact that they feel exposed and isolated, all too often lacking the support they need. Healthy teachers means better schools.

The school machinery keeps rolling on because the men and women operating it turn up, day in, day out, firm in the belief that every pupil matters. If we neglect their working conditions, we sacrifice the very thing that shapes our schools, namely, teachers who not only deliver the lesson verbally to the class but also demonstrably support, nurture and care for their students. For teachers, this profession is so much more than a means for transferring knowledge: teaching is about directing and supporting a class, embracing the problems encountered by the pupils, adjusting to constant reform and meeting evolving social expectations, all the while demonstrating the flair and compassion needed to keep the class on task in spite of diminishing recognition for their efforts.

Teachers are the backbone of our democracies, yet we have come to treat them as little more than content distributors. The school establishment has become a commercial entity, driven by figures and performance; its emancipatory function has ultimately been forgotten.

Backache, voice loss, chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, disrespect for the role and intrusive behaviours ... these problems, which are widely documented in the various articles of this report, have become the markers of this specific profession, but they could easily be replicated in other occupations, the main difference being that the ultimate goal of the teaching profession is to nurture our children. Therefore, in speaking of teachers' health and safety, we are not feeling sorry for them; we are addressing a matter of shared responsibility. If we take on responsibility for them, we do so for the school and, by extension, for our children.

The Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* recently invited readers to submit their personal recollections of the teachers who had changed their lives. The deeply moving accounts published by the newspaper remind us that, in spite of everything, this profession continues to inspire. Each and every one of us remembers some remarkable individual who imparted so much more than knowledge to us; they may have inspired our self-belief or a particular vision, or they may have even guided us towards a specific pathway.

Sometimes, one teacher is all it takes to change one life. They just have to keep going in this tough profession.

Alain Bloëdt, Managing Editor

Photo: © Nicolas Landemard

When political choices make teaching untenable

The EU-wide shortage of teachers is growing steadily worse, while teachers are nearing a breaking point.

Wouter van de Klippe
Journalist

Under the bridge next to the Gare du Midi train station in Brussels, the whistles, horns and chants began to ring as rain drops trickled down. On the 27th of January, Belgium's Francophone teachers were taking to the streets of Brussels to give voice to their feelings of indignation. Their demands included respect for the right to public education and an end to reforms that sacrificed their well-being for the sake of budgetary savings.

The manifestation took place on the first day of a two-day strike, and the participants numbered around 30,000. The Walloon Government was planning reforms that would eliminate teachers' tenure status and cut funding for technical schools, but the strike was about much more than that.

Jacques Theys, a teacher for over 25 years in the province of Namur, stood at the edge of the march overlooking his colleagues. In his words, 'You can't imagine what it's like for teachers at the moment. When I first started, you'd have 20 pupils in a classroom. Now, it's around 30.' He paused briefly before adding wearily, 'It's horrible. Teachers are in a truly horrible situation right now.'

Belgium's teachers are not alone in feeling overworked and under-resourced. All over Europe, teachers and unions are decrying prolonged staffing shortages, budget cuts and unsustainable working conditions. The result is a health crisis that has been years in the making.

Shortages and budget cuts

Europe's teachers were nearing breaking point even before the pandemic. Although it is difficult to gauge the exact extent of teacher shortages because different countries track this phenomenon in different ways, the data show that the number of unfilled teaching vacancies is rising across most European countries (see boxed text). At the same time, the proportion of teachers on temporary contracts is growing. According to the European Commission, Sweden is one of the worst-affected countries and will have a shortfall of around 12,000 teachers by 2035. Based on the Commission's report, only two EU countries (Croatia and Cyprus) are not suffering from shortages.

Yet EU countries are nevertheless cutting education budgets. The European Commission has found that education budgets as a share of public spending have declined steeply since the pandemic; education spending was around 10% of public funds in 2019, but had fallen to around 5.5% by 2022.

In most EU countries, salaries for teachers are significantly lower than salaries for other jobs requiring similar levels of education. In Hungary, for example, teachers in state schools are paid around 45% less than workers with similar qualifications; Belgium's French-speaking teachers receive around 16% less.

Burnout, depression and stress

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) published a report in 2022 that highlighted the growing health risks faced by teachers. It found that it was common for teachers to work overtime for no pay in order to prepare for classes, to provide feedback to pupils and parents outside working hours and to tackle some of the never-ending mountain of paperwork.

Although the general public tends to believe that teachers have generous holidays and relaxed working conditions, the reality is that they work many extra hours for no pay. One study found that teachers in Portugal were working 5.5 extra unpaid hours per week, and a study in Germany found that one third of teachers worked over the statutory maximum of 48 hours per week, and 15% worked over 55 hours in a single week.

What makes matters worse is that teachers' jobs aren't over when they leave the classroom. Marking, lesson preparation, feedback to parents and an ever-growing pile of paperwork – the list never ends, and the ultimate outcome is that teachers are working themselves to the bone to keep Europe's education system afloat. EU-wide statistics on burnout and depression among teachers are difficult to find, but one report established that 39% of Spanish teachers experience anxiety and depression, one third of Belgian teachers are at

risk of burnout, and over one third of German teachers feel emotionally exhausted at work.

As the demonstration continued in Brussels, the skies cleared up, and I spoke with Camille Adam, a young teacher wearing a green jacket in support of the trade union CSC. She told me that many of her peers are leaving the profession and that burnout, stress and feelings of exhaustion are becoming ubiquitous.

These symptoms are the reasons most frequently cited by teachers leaving the sector. EU-OSHA found that between 32% and 50% of older teachers choosing early retirement did so because of mental and physical illness.

Protecting teachers

One country where teachers fare better is Finland. Reports show that Finnish teachers feel more respected, work fewer hours and spend much less time on paperwork than the average teacher elsewhere in the EU. Finnish teachers also tend to be younger, report lower levels of stress, have smaller class sizes and earn salaries above the national average.

Studies have described how the Finnish education system is based on treating education as a public good and providing schools and teachers with significant autonomy. This system of trust gives teachers freedom in the classroom while cutting down the amount of time they spend on paperwork. Another factor protecting teachers has been the recent pushback by the country's unions in response to proposed budget cuts. In early 2022, Finnish teachers went on strike for the first time in more than 30 years over worsening conditions. The end result of this industrial action was that the government negotiated a deal with the unions in 2023, addressing many of the concerns that the teachers had raised. By invoking principles such as trust, autonomy, equality and workplace solidarity, Finland's teachers have obtained some of the best outcomes in the world, even though public spending on education remains around average for Europe.

Ultimate outcome is that teachers are working themselves to the bone to keep Europe's education system afloat.

The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) has promoted a set of policies to push back against teacher shortages, most of which focus on making the career of teaching more attractive. ETUCE argues that pay must be improved for teachers, especially those who are new to the sector. As well as pay, ETUCE and others have emphasised that cutting red tape, giving teachers more freedom and improving participation in decision-making also helps reduce stress in the workplace. (Read page 49 for the interview with ETUCE President John MacGabhann.)

Research conducted by the Karolinska Instutet assessed the effectiveness of a Swedish guideline aimed at preventing mental health problems among Swedish teachers. The research found that workshops informing senior leadership teams about workplace risks and mental health challenges, clear policies to protect against these risks and health assessments helped to reduce symptoms.

Yet even though these proposals are promising, they depend on schools having access to additional resources at a time when public budgets are being slashed. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that the current teacher wellbeing crisis stems from a dangerous political shift that actively threatens the concept of education as a human right.

↳ In early 2025, teachers take to the streets of Brussels in protest, calling for better working conditions, better pay and an end to the increasing pressures in the education sector.
Photo: © Wouter van de Klippe

Choppy political waters

In 2023, Hungary passed a law that meant that teachers would no longer be employed as civil servants, that their working hours would be increased and that they could be moved to other schools throughout the country. Many interpreted the law as an act of revenge on the public teachers who had been striking for better conditions, and many teachers were, in fact, dismissed as a result of participating in the strikes. One 28-year-old teacher told Euronews that the new law meant that her salary could be set by the head of the school district, and based on how loyal she was to the government.

The attack on state school teachers by the right-wing populist government in Hungary is especially blatant, but it is not the only one. Researchers have shown that right-wing parties frequently redesign education systems with a view to disseminating their cultural and political agendas, and this often means excluding or sanctioning teachers who stand up against this vision.

Yet Europe's move back to austerity represents an even more immediate threat to public teachers. Li Andersson, a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) belonging to The Left group and Chair of the Committee on Employment and Social affairs, told me that 'We have seen that austerity policies hit public services and the people who work in them hardest.'

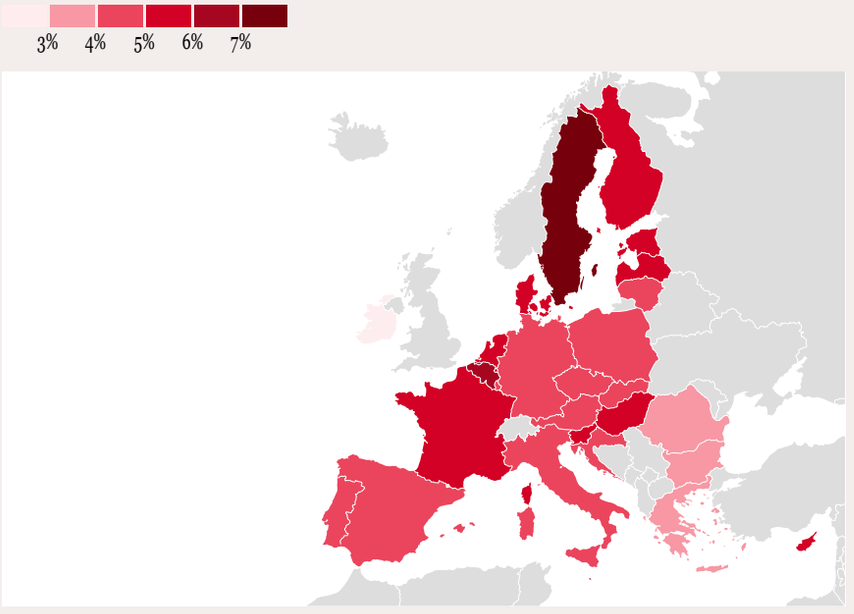
Ahead of the European Commission's new term, President von der Leyen sent a mission letter to Roxane Mînzatu, the incoming Commissioner for Social Rights, in which she called for an EU Teachers' Agenda to improve the working conditions of teachers. In response to a set of questions posed to the Commissioner-Designate, Ms. Mînzatu likewise emphasised the need to improve working conditions and support teachers, especially with regard to the teaching of STEM subjects and digital skills. Nevertheless, proposals detailing exactly how working conditions for teachers should be improved were largely absent.

According to Li Andersson, 'The Commission's work programme does not include any legal initiatives to improve teachers' working lives, and education is mentioned only in relation to filling the skills gap and improving the competitiveness of businesses. Nobody is expecting very much, unfortunately, but we will do what we can within the Committee to exceed these expectations.'

While the sun shone brightly and the demonstration in Brussels drew to a close, the union leaders representing Wallonia's education sector made the final speeches setting out their demands, and I asked Camille Adam what Wallonia's teachers were truly fighting for. Her response? 'We demand that all pupils have access to high-quality education.' Because education is a human right, not a business. ●

Although the general public tends to believe that teachers have generous holidays and an easy ride of it at work, the reality is that they work many extra hours for no pay.

Figure 1 **Overall government spending on education as a share of gross domestic product in 2022**



Source Adapted from Eurostat, Giovanna Coi / POLITICO
First published by Politico: https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commissioner-hearings-romania-roxana-minzatu-people-skills-preparedness/

Teachers wanted!

Wouter Zwysen, senior researcher, ETUI

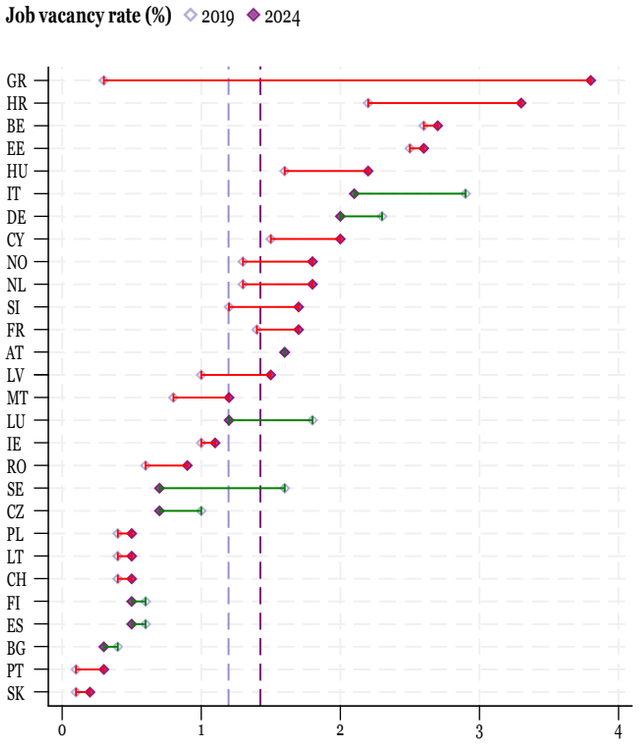
Shortages have become one of the most pressing labour market issues across Europe, with the pandemic forcing the problem to critical levels. As noted on many occasions by the ETUI and other organisations, these shortages are the outcome of both structural factors, such as an ageing population and the labour-hungry green and digital transitions, and cyclical trends. While much of the debate focuses on shortages of competencies such as ICT skills, many other sectors are fighting over the few workers left on the labour market and facing shortages in the stricter sense of the word, as is the case for the teaching sector.

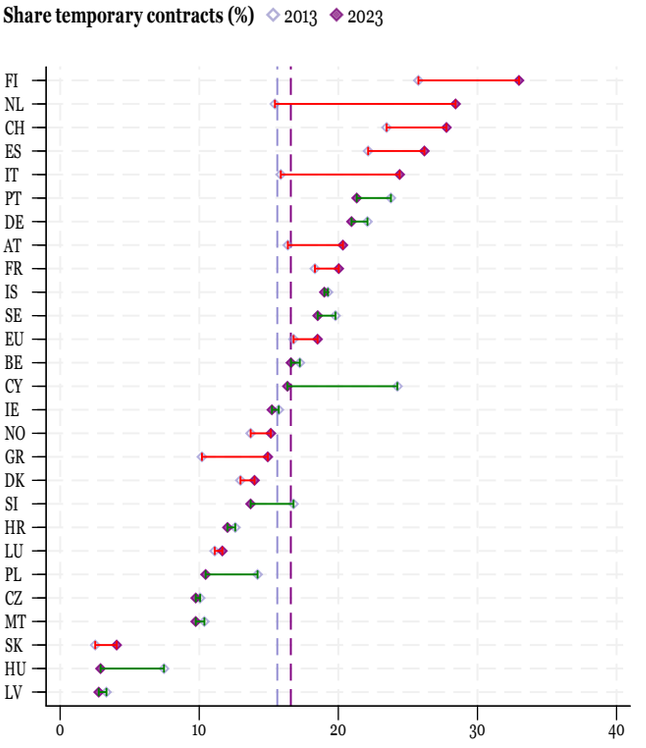
At the same time as teaching vacancies are going unfilled, the share of temporary employees in the education sector is growing. As explained by Giourgio Di Pietro from the Commission's Joint Research Centre in a report published in 2023, there is no single indicator of teaching shortages, but, in many EU countries, 'the lack of qualified teachers is a persistent problem that has become worse over recent years'. The two figures below show firstly that the number of unfilled vacancies as a share of total jobs has risen in most EU countries, and secondly that the number of temporary employees in the education sector has also risen.

Could matters be even worse than the data suggest? There is no clear answer to this question, but these numbers are likely to be underestimates. Even if vacancies are filled – because, after all, pupils need to be supervised by someone – they often get filled with teachers who do not have the right (or even any) teaching credentials. In many countries, teachers are now forced to teach subjects other than those in which they were trained. The situation also varies depending on subject, with maths and science teachers being particularly hard to find. The shortages can therefore be explained to some extent by a lack of individuals with the right training, particularly for subjects such as maths and science, but they also reflect lower and declining job quality and career prestige, and the fact that the latter are no longer viewed as adequate compensation for the heavy demands imposed. This is corroborated by findings from research into the economy as a whole, which indicate that it is precisely the least attractive jobs that have experienced the highest rise in shortages since the pandemic. Individuals with degrees in subjects that are in demand thus have many other options, and it is particularly hard to attract them to the career of teaching.

My own research shows a negative association between wages and shortages, meaning that shortages are comparatively higher in sectors where wages are comparatively lower. Employers must then compete for workers, and this competition provides opportunities by opening doors for workers and lending them greater bargaining power. Although the situation has improved in the private sector, this is far from the case in the public sector; according to the Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture, however, a few countries – Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania and Romania – have recently boosted teachers' wages significantly (by between 20% and 70%). It remains to be hoped that other countries follow suit.

Table 1 **Job vacancy rate and share of temporary workers in the education sector**





Don’t make waves!

Épinal’s image would have it that education is a profession and a passion based on the pleasure a teacher has in imparting information to respectful, attentive students who thirst for knowledge. However, the reality of life at the chalkface across Europe is completely different, especially where the relationship with children, parents and management is concerned.

Maha Ganem
Journalist

Photo: © Nicolas Landemard

In its 2023 report *It's not part of the job*, the European Public Service Union (EPSU) shows that violence towards teachers is not only widespread but rising sharply. In Denmark, around 56% of teachers reported aggressive behaviour in pupils in the form of harassment, threats and violence, resulting in higher levels of teacher burnout. In Bulgaria, the teachers' union found that 65% of teachers had suffered psychological violence and 2.5% physical violence perpetrated either by students and/or parents or relatives of students. In Germany, the union VBE found that school violence, whether between students or towards teachers, affects one in four of all schools there. Violent incidents that undermine the quality of teaching and teachers' wellbeing are occurring everywhere, even in the most prestigious schools.

Growing pressure from parents: the French Lycée in Brussels

Founded in 1907, the Lycée Jean Monnet in Brussels accommodates around 2,800 students from expatriate families and the multilingual international elite. School fees of up to 10,000 euros annually make for extremely high parental expectations regarding programme quality and school outcomes. The pressure used to be evenly spread, but is now increasingly levelled at teachers. 'In recent years, relationships with families have become tense, especially since French citizens have had to pay the full school fees,' we are told by a teacher at the Lycée who wishes to remain anonymous. 'They are increasingly taking it upon themselves to keep an eye on the teaching, and some will challenge even the tiniest thing!' she says with the wisdom born of a long career based in schools in France and elsewhere.

Between bullying and intimidation: teachers versus organised violence

Yannick has been teaching in the same Lycée (academic upper secondary school) for more than 25 years and also has trade union responsibilities, giving her an extensive overview of the situation: 'What we're seeing today, and it's something that's been increasing in pace over the past 10 years, are students with worse upbringings who increasingly reject rules and the school environment [...] they are continually negotiating over their assessments, goals and detentions.' She notes too how this growing minority is terrorising other students who then prefer to remain silent so that the trouble-makers won't bully them next.

This challenge to teachers' authority does not come from students alone.

Inclusion: a fundamental right, but without the necessary means – an empty promise

Alain Bloëdt
Managing Editor

Beyond physical and mental strain, managing students with special needs without adequate support places a heavy burden on teachers. In France, the lack of resources is turning a well-intentioned policy into a promise that's proving hard to keep.

As highlighted in the French Court of Auditors' September 2024 report, the enrolment of students with disabilities in mainstream schools has been a legal principle in France since the Law of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunities, participation and citizenship of people with disabilities. As a result, the number of such students in mainstream schools has tripled, rising from 155,361 at the start of the 2006 school year to 436,085 in 2022. However, the number of support workers for students with disabilities (AESH) has not increased enough to meet the growing demand. At the start of the 2023 academic year, around 136,000 AESH were employed. While this figure has increased by 42% since 2017, it still falls short of demand, as highlighted by the National Federation of Associations of Parents of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities and their Friends (UNAPEI). This places a considerable burden on thousands of teachers who must improvise daily.

One such teacher is Didier (not his real name), a primary school teacher in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques *département*, in the south-west of France, who has chosen to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation from his ministry – and also because 'criticising inclusion is frowned upon'. He is not at all opposed to inclusion, but, after 20 years in the profession, he notes the particular difficulty in managing children with behavioural disorders such as ADHD, autism or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). These children disrupt the class and require specialist support which is often lacking. As many primary school teachers who encounter these challenges have frequently experienced, the neuropsychiatrist's assessment takes time to come through – and, he adds, 'only when the parents are willing to spend the obligatory 400 euros!' During this time, a whole class of children grows up alongside those with these challenges, and the limitations of inclusive education become apparent. 'We'll manage, even though learning how to deal with these children will take a year or two,' he says candidly. Like many other teachers, he has requested a transfer due to the lack of support from school inspectors and the education authority. He goes on to explain, however, that this will cause additional harm to the whole class, who will have no choice but to support these children throughout their entire primary education.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools is an approach that several European countries have embraced for decades. Italy was a pioneer in this area from the early 1970s, followed by Spain and Portugal in the 1980s. The challenges seem to be common in these countries. While inclusion is an important goal, the lack of sufficient resources and support mechanisms creates significant challenges for students with disabilities, the entire class and teachers alike.

In this French drama released in 2024, inspired by director Teddy Lussi-Modeste's own experience, François Civil stars as Julien, a passionate young teacher falsely accused of harassment by a student. As the situation escalates, Julien faces isolation from his colleagues and indifference from the school administration.

This challenge to teachers' authority does not come from students alone: it is compounded by parents, including through WhatsApp groups that act as courts of public opinion where teachers are often the targets of virulent attacks. 'Some of our colleagues are also parents of students at the school and are members of the groups. They either leave the groups or shrink into the background.' As a member of the *Comité d'hygiène, de sécurité et des conditions de travail* (Health, Safety and Working Conditions Committee – CHSCT), she can relate that a female colleague informed her of several specific messages on a WhatsApp group that incited violence towards teachers. Management was informed, but, as its watchword is 'don't make waves', it asked for tangible evidence because it has to deal with demanding, fee-paying parents.

The law of silence protects influential parents and leaves teachers isolated.

The law of silence protects influential parents and leaves teachers isolated. The pressure can come from very high up; a case in point is where one particular family leapfrogged the entire grievance process and complained directly to the French Embassy about a teacher who had caught their child cheating. He was accused of antisemitism for tearing up the student's exam script and was reprimanded by management!

Yannick too has fallen victim to a poison-pen campaign; the perpetrator sent an email complaining about one of her lessons to her colleagues and students' parents. The origin of the message remains unknown to this day despite an investigation by the Belgian federal police and the school's information technology team. She is currently back at work on a part-time basis for health reasons and does not intend to return full-time because the gradual deterioration in relations between the school, parents, students and teachers is too harmful to her health.

Teachers on the front line without appropriate training

School violence is not restricted to international lycées or difficult schools. In a publicly managed primary school in Brussels, Patrick, a teacher with over 10 years' experience, has noted a worrying behavioural trend: 'There's a lack of respect these days, and some parents don't question themselves – they think anything goes at school.'

The situation is not made easier by the growing number of students with learning difficulties (see boxed text): 'It used to be that there were one or two students per class who'd been diagnosed with ADHD,[1] dyslexia or other learning difficulties; these days, it's more like five or six. For some of my colleagues, almost half the class are under a speech therapist!

In TALIS[2] 2018, Belgian teachers emphasise the growing diversity in their classes, especially the presence of students with special needs. However, on average, they feel less well prepared to cope with these challenges than other teachers in Europe. More than 55% of school principals in Belgium report a shortage of teachers with competence in teaching students with special needs – well below the average figure for the European Union (EU) of 37.8%.

Frustration and disengagement in class among some pupils leads to impossible situations involving even eight- or nine-year-olds. Compared to 10 years ago, Patrick feels caught between two types of parents: those whose children succeed and expect an education based on excellence, and those whose children have difficulties and want more tailored, sympathetic support.

The resulting conflict and behavioural problems get in the way of smooth lesson delivery and affect his mental health. 'This year, I've had to reinstate student report cards to record bad attitude and dock their points, but it's draining and, quite frankly, irritating. I lose some of my joy in living and teaching when I do it.' He knows that, in order to continue in the profession, he'll have to toughen up and water down his ideals for positive education by adopting a stricter, more top-down approach. Given the shortage of resources to support students with difficulties, his view is that these changes are now vital in order to ensure that teaching conditions are more or less viable.

1. Attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
2. Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) OECD.

The teaching profession is as vital to our societies as it is to our democracies and needs recognition and respect.

↴ **At the Lycée Français de Bruxelles, as in many schools across Belgium and other parts of Europe, there is a growing perception that parental involvement can sometimes have a negative impact on the relationship between teachers and students. There is also a sense that teachers could benefit from greater support from the school administration.** Photo: © Nicolas Landemard

School as a mirror of society

Around 50% of teachers in the EU state that they are under severe stress at work. The world of education is teetering on the brink: students are less committed or even violent; parents are stressed out and inflexible; the workload is crushing, and the management is often out of touch or complicit in parental violence. The danger? A mass exodus of teachers to pursue other careers where the conditions are better.

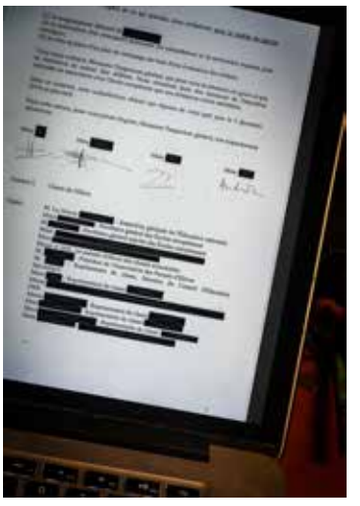
This is one scenario that is put into perspective by Célia Ponce Vicencio, a teacher at the Athénée Royal Victor Horta de Saint-Gilles in Brussels. She teaches in the vocational training stream of a school for newly arrived immigrants located in the area of the city that has the lowest socio-economic index.

She also reports low parental involvement but notes with awe how difficult it is for parents who don't speak the language to provide support with schooling when sometimes they are holding down three jobs to meet their family's needs. She also points to the recognition they give her when she is proactive. 'Follow-up is important when there are concerns, but the responsibilities of everyday life increase social inequality,' she reminds us.

She is a member of the CGSP[3] and does not question the commitment of these families. But she has noted the structural limitations of current support measures: 'Homework clubs are sticking plasters because they'll never have the same impact as an individual lesson delivered to a child in the lovely surroundings of Uccle,' an upmarket municipality in the south of Brussels that is home to the Lycée Français Jean Monnet. Although the Decree on registration introduced parental preferences for schools into francophone education, the social mix in the Brussels region is still poor. In short, as she says, those families who can afford it will always find a way to educate their children outside their own municipality, bypassing the mechanisms meant to ensure greater equity.

According to Statbel, the National Statistics Office of Belgium, 76.6% of the population of Brussels is either foreign or of foreign origin. Given the demographics and the growing inclusion of children with many different backgrounds, origins and needs, it is no longer acceptable for the authorities to leave teachers on their own in classes that are full to bursting with no additional resources, no appropriate support and no proper recognition. The teaching profession, which is essential for the cohesion of our society, is also a pillar of our democracies. It deserves the level of respect, support and reward commensurate with the educational, social and human challenges that it deals with every day. ●

↴ **This screenshot shows parents sharing complaints, often placing teachers and administrators in the crossfire.** Photo: © Nicolas Landemard



3. Centrale générale des services publics (General Federation of Public-Sector Trade Unions).

Are European schools a safe place for LGBTQIA+ teachers?

HesaMag+
This article is available in the original Dutch at:
www.etui.org/Publications

Pien Heuts
Journalist

Insults in the classroom, a lack of support from the school leadership team, pressure from parents... Many LGBTQIA+ teachers say they don't feel at all safe in their schools. This report from the Netherlands, a country known for its progressive attitudes, is about a struggle that extends far beyond Dutch borders.

'I'm used to putting up with a lot, but this time the homophobia of a few pupils and the lack of support from the school leadership team went way too far.' Erwin Kunnen, a secondary school teacher, took sick leave when pupils called him a 'faggot' (see boxed text). He is not the only teacher in the Dutch education system to feel unsafe when standing in front of a class. The position of Dutch LGBTQIA+ teachers has not improved in recent years. Not being equal and safe in the workplace is impacting the job satisfaction of these teachers in primary and secondary education. The percentage who suffer burnout (22%) is significantly higher than among their heterosexual colleagues (12%).

Michiel Odijk has been a trade union volunteer for many years. He is the coordinator of the Diversity and Inclusion Network of the AOb, the largest education union in the Netherlands. As part of its role, this network defends the interests of LGBTQIA+ teachers. He is also the author of a book entitled *LGBTI Trade Union Work: Experiences and Perspectives*. 'In the '80s, I saw teachers being fired for being gay or lesbian,' he says to illustrate that the situation has improved since then. 'We were already very visible back then as an education union with the first gay and lesbian group in the Netherlands. On an international level, we joined ILGA, the international association for lesbian, gay, trans, intersex and cis-heterosexual people in which 170 countries are represented. In 1998, we organised a large international trade union conference in Amsterdam in conjunction with the Gay Games.'

Diversity checklist for CLAs

Now, many conferences and trade union activities later, Odijk has to conclude that a truly safe, inclusive working environment is far from being a reality. That's despite an Equal Treatment Act, a Working Conditions Act, codes of conduct and diversity charters. One of the more recent ways of combating discrimination and exclusion for workers within the education sector in 2025 is the diversity checklist for collective labour agreements (CLAs) that was developed by the AOb network at the end of 2024. This checklist offers guidance on how to formulate employment contracts (and pension schemes) in a way that protects workers with different ages, religions or beliefs, cultural or ethnic backgrounds, lifestyles, relationships, and gender identities or expressions and treats them equally. 'In some areas, such as leave arrangements, CLAs are still based on white, cisgender, straight, male workers,' explains Odijk. 'The checklist also seeks to contribute to a safer working climate. An unsafe workplace has a huge impact on your performance. I think

↴ Michiel Odijk.

that trade unions have a lot more work to do in this regard. It's important that you make it clear in employment conditions that workers from diverse backgrounds must be respected. Some school boards these days are more concerned about pupil numbers and counting their pennies than they are about the welfare of their teachers – they think a diversity policy is too "woke".'

Entrenched heterosexual norm

Musa van Maaren, a teacher who is also an active member of the AOb's Diversity and Inclusion Network, felt that the wait for a more inclusive climate within the education sector would take too long. For 20 years now, he has been visiting schools, giving lessons in cultural, religious and sexual diversity. Growing up Catholic, he used to think that homosexuality was a sin. As someone who 'couldn't be more gay', he tried to become straight. Now, having converted to Islam, he goes around talking to students about all kinds of prejudice. A documentary about his work, *Ik zeg je eerlijk*, known in English as *I'm Telling You Honestly*, received awards at several international film festivals last year. 'As an LGBTQIA+ teacher or pupil, you can suffer a lot at the hands of colleagues or fellow pupils. You get talked about in the corridor; men especially enforce that entrenched heterosexual norm. I've rarely worked in a safe school.'

During the lessons and workshops (also courses for teachers) that van Maaren gives all over the Netherlands, he notices that pupils – often those from a non-western background – get stressed when the conversation starts. But gradually an open atmosphere emerges. 'Everything is up for discussion; I have thick skin. Young people are honest. I don't walk away when someone calls me a dirty fag or wants to kill me – I engage with them. In the mosque too. To me, being gay is not a sin; it's my identity. I try to get that across. I fight from the heart. We should all be free to be ourselves.' ●

'Most school boards are often afraid of parents and declining pupil numbers.' Michiel Odijk

Erwin Kunnen, secondary school teacher:

'She called me a faggot'

When Erwin Kunnen applied for his first job in secondary education in 1988 after completing his studies in physics, he also immediately joined a trade union. 'Because of my homosexuality, I wanted to feel supported,' he says. He did not suspect that, after a long career in teaching at various secondary schools, he would need to call on the lawyers of the education union AOb. 'I'm used to putting up with a lot, but this time the homophobia of a few pupils and the lack of support from the board went way too far.' The secondary school where Kunnen teaches philosophy of science seemed very inclusive. The school is proud of its Gay Straight Alliance, a group of students and staff who advocate that everyone should be free to be who they are without having to feel ashamed or to justify themselves. And, every year, it celebrates Purple Friday, a day when schools pay positive attention to sexual diversity and gender diversity. 'I was the only teacher at school who was openly gay. Pupils could ask questions about this,' says Kunnen. 'I had two Muslim girls in the class who had long since stopped accepting my authority. One day, they behaved disrespectfully again and refused to do as they were told. As they were being made to leave the lesson, one of the two repeatedly called me a faggot. In front of the entire class.' Kunnen was shocked, especially when a pen was also then hurled at his head in the classroom. He placed the matter in the hands of the school leadership team, assuming that they would take action against this homophobia. One of the two was suspended for just one day. Kunnen: 'The school leadership team felt that it was my issue if I no longer felt safe. Homophobia couldn't be proven. I took sick leave. I can't stand in front of a class feeling unsafe.'

Jet Valk, secondary special educational needs teacher:

'Everyone can be who they want to be here'

Photo: © Alice Wessels

There's no better job than to be a special educational needs teacher, according to Jet Valk, who teaches technology and creative subjects. Her pupils have social and emotional developmental challenges. 'You will find Rotterdam street culture here in all its glory: big mouths and no respect for anyone. When it gets too much, I chuck them out. I'm very open about being a lesbian. New pupils, say from Syria or Afghanistan, can find that scary. It's very important that they see that I'm not a monster. That's when good conversations then happen.' The school that Valk teaches at now feels like a warm blanket. 'Everyone really can be who they want to be. Devout Muslim colleagues embrace me as a lesbian. There's a sense of togetherness. Outside the auditorium, there's a poster that says that insults aimed at gays and lesbians are not tolerated here. Purple Friday is celebrated.' It was a completely different story at her previous school. Collegiality was hard to find. Worse still, other teachers were anti-LGBTQI+. 'A Turkish pupil was simply told that she could not be a lesbian because that went against her faith. I too suffered discrimination. Male colleagues made "jokes". Disgusting ones. I never felt safe there. After a while, I quit.' Whether her pupils accept LGBTQIA+ people, Valk really can't say. In her view, what's most important is that they know about them. 'That's why the presentations given by the advocacy group COC at school here are also valuable. Starting discussions with pupils about diversity and inclusivity is so important. Working on that sense of togetherness is the basis for acceptance.'

Mats Bergman-de Zwart, teacher at a Waldorf primary school:

‘So much ignorance, so many prejudices’

‘Sir, my mum says you’re going to hell.’ In his previous job at a Montessori primary school, comments like this did not come as a shock to Mats Bergman. During the celebration of the annual Purple Friday, around 30% of the pupils would be off sick. Bergman suffered most at the hands of the parents, who wanted nothing to do with homosexuality. ‘It’s a difficult subject, especially for people with a multicultural background. Homosexuality should be kept behind closed doors, in their view. But knowing about sexual diversity and showing respect for everyone are part of civic education.’ Bergman, who is also secretary of the board of COC Netherlands, devotes at least an extra half an hour a week to answering everything his pupils (10+) want to know – from Palestine to how he and his husband got their daughter. ‘I’m easy to talk to; they can ask me anything, and I will answer as well as I can.’ According to Bergman, not every colleague understands how important it is to make the conversation around LGBTQIA+ matters accessible to everyone. Sometimes, that also has to do with a lack of knowledge. ‘I find it very strange that no attention is given to sexuality and inclusion in primary teacher training.’ The government should play a leading role in the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ lessons in the curriculum for both students and teachers, in Bergman’s opinion. ‘Right now, it all relies far too much on a school’s goodwill. So much ignorance, so many prejudices. As teachers, we need to do something about the negative image of gay people on social media. It’s so important to educate early so that children from the age of about six can identify or recognise themselves within the LGBTQIA+ community.’

‘I don’t walk away when someone calls me a dirty fag.’

Musa van Maaren

Photo: © Rob Godfried

Ik zeg je eerlijk

In the nationally and internationally awarded Dutch documentary *I’m Telling You Honestly* (2024), Musa van Maaren, openly gay and converted to Islam, engages in conversations with students about sexual and religious diversity at schools. Van Maaren: ‘There is a lot of fear among teachers. They don’t know how to address this topic with students from a bi-cultural background, so the topic is often completely avoided.’

Teaching in the age of climate change: health risks in Europe's energy-inefficient schools

Climate change is increasingly testing the resilience of Europe's education sector. Primary and secondary school teachers find themselves on the front lines of this crisis, coping with classrooms that overheat during the summer and are cold and poorly ventilated in the winter. In many European countries, school buildings are ageing, energy-inefficient and ill-equipped to cope with the new climate reality.

Andreas Flouris
Professor of Physiology,
University of Thessaly

In an effort to beat the summer heat, a number of school playground greening measures have been proposed. At Anatole France secondary school in Toulouse, a layer of wood chips has been used to surface the children's play area. Photo: © Belga

↑ Photo: © Nicolas Landemard

The scientific consensus is clear: Europe is warming faster than the global average, with heatwaves and other extreme weather events becoming more frequent and intense. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), temperatures are predicted to rise across the whole of Europe over the coming decades, regardless of the emissions scenario, and hot extremes will continue to increase in frequency and intensity. The European Environment Agency and the International Labour Organization report that much of Europe has experienced intense heatwaves since 2000, with impacts on health and productivity. In fact, 23 of the 30 most severe heatwaves recorded in Europe since 1950 have occurred since 2000, with five taking place in the past three or four years alone. In 2023, the WHO Regional Office for Europe declared the climate crisis and related extreme weather events a *public health emergency*, underscoring the urgent need for climate adaptation measures.

The climate science projections are sobering.

Crucially, cities exacerbate the problem. Urban 'heat island' effects can make city centres several degrees warmer than surrounding areas. Nearly 43% of schools in European cities are located in urban heat islands that are at least 2°C hotter than their region's average climate. Even worse, 5% of European schools are located in urban heat islands that are at least 4°C hotter than their region's average climate. During heatwaves, these schools become even hotter, exposing teachers and students to health-threatening temperatures. Dense clusters of buildings surrounded by asphalt trap heat, making the impact of a heatwave in a city far more intense than in nearby rural areas. The combination of rising daily temperatures due to climate change and urban heat islands is a serious concern for anyone working in city schools.

The climate science projections are sobering. If global warming reaches 2°C above pre-industrial levels, some parts of Europe will see many more hot days and tropical nights (when temperatures stay above 20°C). Under a high greenhouse gas emissions scenario, southern Europe could face up to 100 tropical nights per year by 2100. Without strong climate action, the number of very hot days (with temperatures above 30°C) could increase fourfold in Europe by the end of the century. Such projections imply that, without adaptation to climate change, schools that are traditionally designed for a temperate climate will increasingly struggle to provide safe and comfortable learning environments.

Ageing schools and inefficient infrastructure

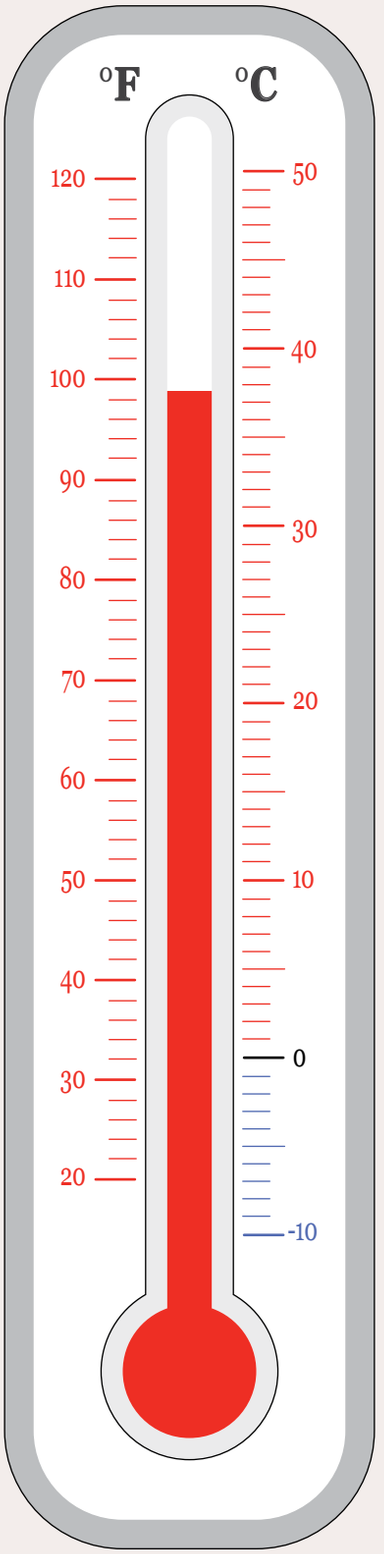
Europe's schools are, on average, decades old; many were built during the post-war era or the suburban expansion of the 1960s-70s. These buildings were not designed for today's climate challenges. In fact, roughly 75% of the EU's overall building stock is energy inefficient, meaning that most buildings (including schools) waste energy and often fail to maintain comfortable indoor temperatures.

Many schools lack not only air conditioning but even an adequate ventilation system. A European Commission study[1] noted that indoor air quality problems are widespread in schools, stemming from factors such as obsolete ventilation and building design. In countries with typically cooler climates – for example, the UK, Norway and Switzerland – schools were traditionally built to retain heat and therefore tended to have small or poorly ventilated classrooms. This can backfire on warm days.

Another challenge is that modern energy-saving refurbishments, if not properly designed, can inadvertently increase the risk of overheating. Highly insulated and air-tight buildings save on heating energy, but, without features such as sunshades, reflective coatings or active cooling, they can trap heat in summer. A recent study[2] of 20,000 school buildings in England highlights this paradox: newer, better-insulated schools are actually *more prone to overheating* than older, draughtier ones, unless they have adequate cooling and ventilation systems. The study found that, at 2°C of global warming, the average English school could exceed the recommended comfort threshold of 26°C for over a third of the school year. In a scenario of 4°C warming, that could rise to half the year – an alarming prospect. Even more extreme, these schools might see indoor temperatures above 35°C (a level with significant health impacts) on multiple days each year under the worst-case scenario. These findings illustrate how energy efficiency must go hand in hand with climate adaptation measures (such as shading and airflow management) to protect occupants.

1. Kephalopoulos S. et al. (2014) Guidelines for healthy environments within European schools, Publications Office of the European Union. https://doi.org/10.2788/89936
2. Dawkins L.C. et al. (2024) Quantifying overheating risk in English schools: a spatially coherent climate risk assessment, Climate Risk Management, 44. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2024.100602

Towards climate-safe schools
Impacts of climate change on schools and responses in selected European countries



European Union (general)

School climate challenges Ageing building stock; 75% of buildings are energy-inefficient; poor insulation and ventilation are common.

Notable facts/ responses The EU's Renovation Wave Initiative aims to double renovation rates, focusing on energy-efficient upgrades and healthier indoor environments.

Unions and policies Unions are urging governments to treat overheated classrooms as a health and safety issue. ETUCE has developed practical guidelines linking education, the environment and social change, but comprehensive sustainability policies and related bargaining strategies remain rare.

United Kingdom

School climate challenges Historically mild climate, so most schools do not have a cooling system; many buildings date from the 20th century, and adaptation of the building design to summer temperatures is minimal.

Notable facts/ responses 2022 saw record 40°C heat, forcing some schools to send students home. With no legal maximum workplace temperature currently in place, unions called for a limit to be introduced. The government have issued heatwave guidelines for schools. Experts warn that, with 2°C global warming, English schools may face overheating (~33% of school year >26°C).

Unions and policies UK teaching unions (NEU, NASUWT) offer heat advice and have called for a legal maximum working temperature. During the July 2022 heatwave, the government issued non-binding guidance, asking schools to stay open but to take measures such as closing blinds, limiting strenuous activities and keeping children hydrated. Unions, however, stressed that, without infrastructure upgrades such as ventilation or cooling, such measures remain insufficient.

France

School climate challenges Increasing heatwaves (23 between 2000 and 2021 vs. 17 between 1947 and 1999); many schools are decades old, and poorly insulated and ventilated.

Notable facts/ responses National exams have been rescheduled due to heat (e.g. brevet in 2019). There is no national plan currently in place to retrofit schools; responsibility for this falls to local authorities. Teachers' unions demand an 'ecological transformation' of schools and climate-proof renovations.

Unions and policies French teacher unions (FSU, CGT, SUD) are calling for a maximum working temperature and urgent school retrofits. After the June 2022 heatwave, they criticized the Education Ministry's lack of preparation. Their demands include heat insulation, sun-shading, trees and cooling systems — highlighting the inequity between air-conditioned offices and overheated classrooms.

Spain (Andalusia)

School climate challenges Long, hot summers; classrooms regularly exceed safe temperatures. ~99% of schools in Andalusia have no air conditioning; some even lack fans.

Notable facts/responses Heatwaves caused fainting spells among students and teachers. A regional 'heat protocol' now allows parents to pick children up at noon on extremely hot days. Andalusia initiated a plan for 'bioclimatic' schools (greener, cooler designs) supported by most political parties.

Unions and policies The grassroots platform 'Escuelas de Calor', backed by teacher unions, was mobilized after repeated summer heatwaves. Their activism (including student strikes and parent protests with slogans such as 'Yes to classrooms, no to saunas!') led to a regional heat protocol and pilot projects for climate-friendly schools.

↑ Photo: © Belga

Heat stress affects not only factory or farm workers, but also school staff.

Sweltering classrooms and teacher health

For teachers, the consequences of these infrastructure and climate realities are tangible. Occupational health risks rise as classroom temperatures climb. Heat stress affects not only factory or farm workers, but also school staff trying to maintain concentration levels and care for students' wellbeing in stifling conditions. Educators report symptoms ranging from headaches, dizziness and dehydration to more serious heat exhaustion. In southern Europe, there have been alarming incidents: during one severe heat spell, students in Andalusia fainted, and a teacher was even admitted to hospital due to classroom heat. A Spanish paediatrician warned that extreme heat 'makes concentration enormously difficult and leads to physical tiredness' in pupils and staff alike. Such conditions clearly jeopardise teachers' ability to do their jobs safely and effectively.

Even in cooler countries, teachers are feeling the strain during unprecedented hot days. Overheated classrooms lead to fatigue and stress. Teachers may struggle to speak for long periods in poorly ventilated, stuffy classrooms. Cognitive performance declines when temperatures rise above comfort thresholds – this is well-documented for students and most likely affects teachers in a similar way. A World Bank analysis conducted across 58 countries[3] confirmed that *extreme heat exposure is linked to poorer learning outcomes*, noting that 'a school day under extreme heat is a day in which some learning is lost'.

If students are lethargic or absent due to heat, teachers face extra pressure to help them catch up on the curriculum they miss. Moreover, extreme heat can exacerbate pre-existing health conditions (such as asthma or cardiovascular disease) for staff. The mental health toll should not be overlooked either: working in uncomfortable conditions day after day can contribute to anxiety, irritability and burnout.

Importantly, unlike industrial workers, teachers cannot easily stop work or modify their environment when it gets too hot. In many cases, there are no air-conditioned places of refuge on school grounds. Teachers often must simply 'push through' a hot afternoon, seeking relief by opening windows (if the air outside is cooler), turning off lights or bringing in plug-in fans. Some schools adjust their schedules, ending the school day earlier, but this can cut into teaching time and increase the burden on teachers who are forced to teach compressed lessons. In essence, extreme heat is undermining teachers' working conditions and wellbeing, which can, in turn, affect the quality of the education being delivered.

There are also legal and regulatory gaps related to thermal conditions in schools. Very few European countries have explicit occupational health regulations in place that establish a maximum allowable temperature in classrooms. ●

3. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099043024150036726

Asbestos in schools: an invisible scourge for teachers and pupils alike

Every day, hundreds of thousands of pupils and teachers across Europe are attending schools that may be contaminated with asbestos. And yet, this risk of passive exposure resulting in a serious impact on health is still substantially downplayed. To address this invisible threat, urgent action is needed to identify the schools affected and to schedule works for removing the asbestos from their buildings.

Tony Musu
Senior researcher, ETUI

↳ **Caption.** Photo: © Martine Zunini

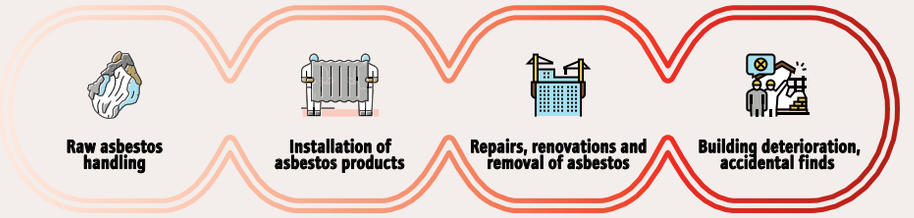
A significant number of buildings throughout the European Union (EU) still contain asbestos-based materials. Widely used by the construction sector to insulate, fireproof and soundproof buildings, especially between the 1950s and the 1990s, these materials have since begun to be prohibited on account of their hazardous composition.

We should bear in mind that anyone breathing in asbestos fibres is at risk of developing chronic conditions, such as mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis. There is no exposure level below which this carcinogen does not exhibit adverse effects. Each individual exposure, however minimal, carries a risk of developing cancer. The greater the exposure, the greater the risk.

Asbestos-related diseases tend to develop over a number of decades, still killing some 90,000 people each year in the EU. These victims have been exposed primarily when carrying out their work, and as many as 78% of the occupational cancers recognised in the Member States are related to asbestos.

At Community level, the ban on asbestos dates back to 2005. This means that all buildings erected before that date (or before the date of the national ban) are likely to contain asbestos. Given that millions of these buildings are still standing in Europe, the necessary asbestos removal measures and the buildings' subsequent demolition or renovation will be ongoing decades down the line.

Figure 1 **The four waves of asbestos exposure**



Source Adapted from DOI: 10.3390/ijerph19074031

There are four waves of asbestos exposure in Europe: the first wave consists of miners and asbestos industry workers; the second wave is made up of carpenters, plumbers, electricians and mechanics who have worked with asbestos-containing materials; the third wave comprises workers involved in repairs, renovations and asbestos removal; and the fourth wave involves individuals exposed in buildings where they work or live. Due to the long latency period of asbestos-related diseases, these waves overlap, making it difficult to estimate the number of deaths associated with each wave.

Passive and cumulative exposure

Construction workers are not the only people exposed to asbestos. Over time, asbestos-based materials can be damaged, or they can degrade, releasing into the air microscopic fibres which can then be inhaled by any unsuspecting soul. Such 'passive' exposure has the potential to affect millions of people across Europe.

Teaching and support staff in schools or even clinical staff in hospitals are particularly at risk because they often work in old buildings contaminated with asbestos and, throughout their careers, they have been exposed both passively and cumulatively to these deadly fibres.

Unfortunately, since there is, as yet, no EU-level inventory or system for collecting data on buildings containing asbestos, it is difficult to determine the extent of the problem with any accuracy. However, some countries have produced estimated figures for their school buildings.

In France, approximately 80% of the schools built prior to 1997 (the year when asbestos was banned) might still contain asbestos. According to the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), one in three schools in Germany is still considered to be contaminated with asbestos, while up to 50,000 education workers and 360,000 students in some 3,000 educational establishments in Italy are concerned by the presence of asbestos in their schools; moreover, in the United Kingdom, over 400 teachers have died from mesothelioma since 1980, and some 300 asbestos-related deaths have been recorded since 2001.

Legislation slowly coming up to speed

The asbestos risk returned to the European agenda in 2021 following the adoption by the European Parliament of a resolution with recommendations to the Commission on protecting workers from asbestos.

This resolution led to the revision of the Asbestos at Work Directive which defines the measures to be taken by employers to prevent work-related diseases attributable to

Further reading

Read our special report entitled Time to act on asbestos, which appeared in HesaMag #27 (https://www.etui.org/publications/time-act-asbestos)

Construction workers are not the only people exposed to asbestos.

this carcinogen.

Adopted in 1983, the Asbestos at Work Directive was amended in 2003 and remained unchanged for 20 years before finally being updated in 2023. In addition to the introduction of a lower binding occupational exposure limit value (OELV) and of even more stringent preventive measures applying to those working in construction and asbestos removal, the main improvement to the text is the recognition of the issue of passive exposure.

We should not overlook the fact that this legislation was conceived in the early 1980s to address situations where workers were handling asbestos-based materials. It was only once the realisation had dawned that increasing numbers of asbestos victims were being identified in occupations which, theoretically, had no direct link with asbestos that evidence emerged to support the possibility of exposure associated with the gradual deterioration of existing materials.

Potential solutions: asbestos identification and removal

Today, the directive's scope has been clarified as encompassing every single person exposed to asbestos at work, including those subjected to passive exposure. The total number of workers exposed to asbestos in the EU, irrespective of the exposure situation, could be in excess of 7 million (see Table 1).

The European Commission is also preparing to update the existing guidance with a view to assisting employers to meet their obligations under the Asbestos at Work Directive. One key chapter of this guidance document, which will be published in Autumn 2025, will address the preventive measures to be implemented in the event of passive exposure to asbestos in the workplace.

Various experts share the prediction that, following on from the workers who mined asbestos and those who manufactured, fitted or repaired asbestos-based materials, the nextwave of asbestos victims in the EU will predominantly be made up of those who, often without their knowledge, are exposed passively to the asbestos deteriorating in the buildings where they live or work.

And so it is high time that these workers developed an awareness of the risks they are facing and put pressure on their employers to ensure that European law is complied with and appropriate measures are implemented to prevent such avoidable deaths. ●

Unfortunately, there is, as yet, no EU-level inventory or system for collecting data on buildings containing asbestos.

Table 1 **Estimated total EU workforce exposed to asbestos by exposure situation**

Exposure situation	Estimated number of exposed workers
Building and construction	3,800,000-6,000,000
Building and construction — passive exposure in buildings	200,000-1,000,000 Potentially millions
Exposure to asbestos in vessels, trains, aircraft, vehicles and other means of transport	5,000-25,000
Waste management	50,000-200,000
Mining and quarrying — naturally occurring asbestos	5,000-20,000
Tunnel excavation	500-5,000
Road construction and maintenance	10,000-50,000
Sampling and analysis	10,000-25,000
Total (rounded)	**4,100,000-7,300,000**

Source Adapted from https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/45581742-5e23-11ec-9c6c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

Can teachers' careers be lengthened without addressing their working conditions?

Making careers longer means that teachers are struggling to 'hold on' in an ever-more demanding profession. Administrative overload, continuous reform and loss of status are driving professional burnout, threatening teachers' health and commitment.

Dominique Cau-Bareille
Professor of Ergonomics at the Institute for Labour Studies, Lyon (Institut d'études du travail de Lyon), University of Lyon 2; Research Laboratory on Education, Culture and Politics (Laboratoire de recherche Education, Cultures et Politiques)

The statutory retirement age in Europe is around 65, with some countries, including Germany, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands, setting it at 67. In 2023, France opted to extend working life from 62 to 64 years of age from 2027, sparking major social unrest. That decision is of great concern to researchers interested in occupational health and safety because of the direct physical and mental consequences of a longer working life. 'Lengthening working lives with no regard for the realities of working conditions may expose older workers to higher health risks, greater constraints and cumulative occupational risk,' states Dimitra Theodori of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI).

Understanding the specific issues encountered by the oldest workers entails an analysis of evolutions in working conditions, the changes that have had an impact on jobs and cumulative exposure over the course of a career and requires an interdisciplinary approach to workers' health and experience in the light of health challenges and the meaning of work. French and European surveys of working conditions alike have noted a worrying deterioration in working conditions over several decades for all workers. The French working conditions survey of 2019 highlighted that 37% of working men and 41% of working women regard their work as 'unsustainable' given the greater constraints [in France] than in other European countries across a range of criteria such as workload, lack of autonomy and the absence of involvement in decisions that determine their working conditions.

The teaching environment is no exception to this reality, and it is increasingly difficult to 'last' in the teaching profession, given a whole range of factors which cannot be reduced to issues of ageing at work, commitment fatigue of doing the work, and wear and tear on the body over time. That much is clear both from the interviews that I conducted during research for the Conseil d'Orientation des Retraites (Retirement Guidance Council) on the oldest age group of teachers and from the workshops I have held as part of trade union courses on 'Staying in the teaching profession' at the request of several union branch offices. To illustrate my argument, I shall draw on the statements given by teachers during my research.

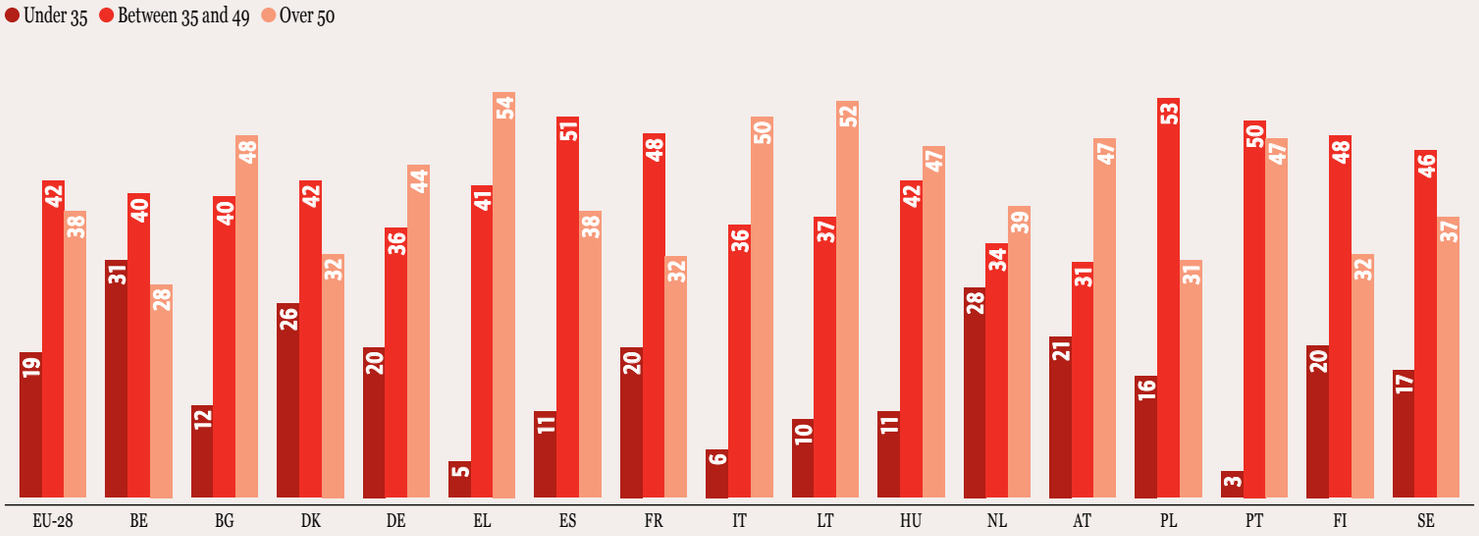
Growing fragility generated by the system

The desire to leave the profession among the oldest age group – a situation that is becoming more common among younger teachers – stems above all from organisational fatigue associated with the frequency and scope of reforms introduced by Ministers of National Education that are often out of touch with the reality on the ground and the diversity of students, leading to a loss of meaning in the work. 'There's a loss of purpose in what we do; we don't know what our jobs will look like even one year from now.' More administrative tasks and assessments have increased the workload. Teachers find themselves in a situation of hindered work even though they are aware of how important schooling is for young students. 'I'm dealing with a growing list of procedures that take us away from the essence of the profession. We're not doing our core job, and that creates inner conflicts.'

The French Government has also chosen the route of greater inclusivity for disabled children but does not have the human resources its policy requires (large class sizes, serious shortages of teaching assistants for disabled pupils, lack of training on how to accommodate disabled students), sometimes putting even very experienced teachers in an untenable position.

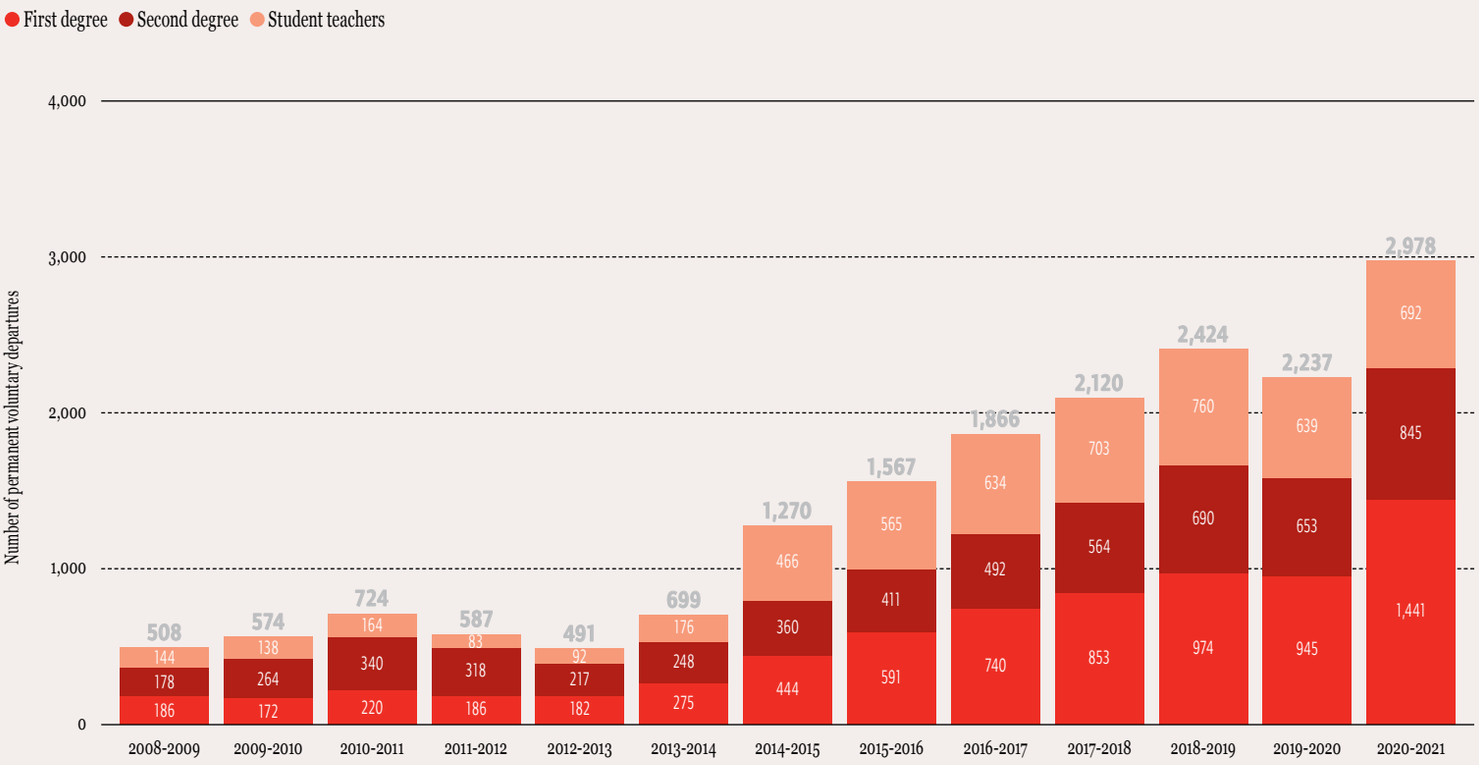
They feel a growing sense of mistrust on the part of parents, students and even the establishment, which contributes to a feeling of non-recognition of their skills and professionalism. The increasingly palpable lack of security on school premises (including verbal and/or physical assaults from parents and students and unauthorised recording during lessons) is undermining the relationship with work – an issue that is seldom discussed in schools or by the establishment.

Figure 1 **Distribution of teachers by age group in the EU**



Source Finance Committee according to the OECD, https://www.senat.fr/rap/r21-649/r21-6493.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Figure 2 **Trend in permanent voluntary departures at the beginning of the academic years for state school teachers employed by Education Nationale (National Education) between the academic years 2008/2009 and 2020/2021 by level of education**



At the beginning of the academic year 2020/21, around 3,000 public-sector teachers employed by the state chose to leave the system. This is 741 teachers more than the previous year, and more than six times higher than the figure for 2012/13. Although the number is small as a proportion of all teachers (800,000), it is growing each year.

Source https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/1462903/demissions-enseignants-education-nationale-france/#statisticContainer

↑ **Restoring some agency is essential for teacher retention.** Photo: © Martine Zunini

Further reading

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Cau-Bareille D. (2014) Les difficultés des enseignants en fin de carrière : des révélateurs des formes de pénibilité du travail, Management & Avenir, 73 (7), 149-170. https://doi.org/10.3917/mav.073.0149

Cau-Bareille D. (2016) Aging at work in the teaching profession: an analysis involving the ergonomic model and the activities system model, Nouvelle revue de psychosociologie, 22 (2), 125-142.

The issue is organisational

Teachers do not feel heard on these difficulties and are finding increasing dissonance between their idea of a 'good job', namely a high-quality job built on experience, and what they are asked to do. This has an impact on their health and their desire to stay in the profession. 'The system is crushing me; it's a steamroller! We're constantly stopped from getting on with the job, we're bombarded with pointless tasks, it's completely mad. I don't want to do it any more… Even though I love my job, at some point that's enough! I don't want it to consume my mental and physical health because, after a while, you feel burnt out, exhausted, you just can't take it any more!' They feel they have no agency over the factors that determine what they do, the requirements placed upon them, or a say on the future of their profession. Of course, they 'muddle through' in the confines of the classroom and try to do their best in the circumstances, but that becomes very wearing over time and cannot bring about change.

Hence the desire to jump ship as soon as possible: 'I don't have the strength to hold out. It will bleed me dry.' In the absence of a collective response to the barriers to their work, everyone retreats into individual solutions, trying to leave a profession that they no longer recognise. 'I'm not abandoning the profession, the profession's abandoning me,' said one teacher in the oldest age group.

In view of this, restoring some agency is essential for teacher retention. This could involve developing critical appraisal of institutional injunctions and creating opportunities for teachers to make their own choices drawn from lived experience on the job; and developing strong labour associations and work collectives within schools that take the time to analyse and develop work prescriptions. Such a paradigm shift would require a genuine effort to reflect on actual work practices and a strong collective dynamic within schools that is not yet in place.

End-of-career problems are primarily about working conditions, occupational health and the life-long sustainability of working in a continuously changing environment. Otherwise, it is more than likely that 'holding on until retirement' will mean more distress, more physical and mental health problems and early departures from the labour market regardless of any penalty measures. ●

The desire to leave the profession stems above all from organisational fatigue.

How to achieve longevity in the teaching profession

These courses, initiated by the departmental union sections, aim, through the discussions generated by the work done during the workshop, to enable teachers who wish to do so (between 50 and 100 participants per course), whether union members or not, to put into words the professional challenges they face and identify the factors that cause them workplace stress in order to identify the source of suffering but also of pleasure they get from their work, what sometimes makes them want to leave the profession, and to restore their collective agency. These days of reflection 'outside school hours and premises' provide an opportunity to raise awareness that the issues they experience on a daily basis are widely shared, and that teachers are not fragile as the provision of helpline numbers offering individual psychological support to teachers experiencing difficulties would suggest, but that the teaching profession is in crisis and must be treated appropriately. Regaining the power to act therefore involves collective trade-union work on work prescriptions and working arrangements, allowing teachers to be active participants in their own future.

Valencia teachers hit hard by the aftermath of historic and tragic floods

HesaMag+
This article is available in the original Spanish at:
www.etui.org/Publications

Raquel Andres
Journalist
Tania Castro
Photographer

An unprecedented state of emergency has seen Valencia teachers compelled to extend their working hours, spend money out of their own pocket to cover teaching expenses, and even take on cleaning duties at schools themselves due to the public administration's failure to act. Many have also been personally affected by the floods, or have experienced significant emotional distress after hearing the accounts of students and their families.

↴ Photo: © Tania Castro

↑ Photo: © Tania Castro

No one in Valencia will ever forget Tuesday 29 October 2024. A *'Depresión Aislada en Niveles Altos'* (DANA) or cold drop event led to torrential rainfall at the headwaters of rivers, and the ravines of these rivers subsequently overflowed, with knock-on effects on a large number of municipalities. By 11 in the morning, towns such as Rafelguaraf were completely under water, but the lower areas of the ravine received only minimal rainfall, allowing daily activities to proceed without interruption. As the day progressed, however, the situation took a dramatic turn. Late in the afternoon, a sudden surge of water, mud, reeds and debris engulfed the area, necessitating an evacuation of the IES Enric Valor Secondary School in Picanya. Consuelo de la Rubia, a teacher who was teaching at the time, described the chaos that ensued. 'We weren't told that we needed to evacuate the building, and so it was complete chaos. We weren't aware how bad things had got because there had been no rain, and the rapid arrival of the floodwaters caught us by surprise. The cleaners were trapped in the upper part of the building because they left it too long to get out.'

The Spanish Meteorological Agency (AEMET) had been talking for days about the potential effects of the worrying cold spell, and had issued an amber warning the day before. The University of Valencia had decided to shut the campus, but Carlos Mazón, President of the Generalitat Valenciana (local government) and in charge of dealing with the floods, described this decision as an 'overreaction'. At 7.36 on Tuesday morning, AEMET raised the warning level to red, prompting town councils such as Utiel to shut all schools. So although what transpired was unprecedented, it was nevertheless known that the day was going to be historic in climatological terms, and the corresponding warnings had been issued.

Yet the heads of the emergency services did not meet to discuss the situation until 5 in the afternoon that day. President Mazón did not arrive until 7, because he was having lunch with a journalist with a view to offering her the directorship of Valencian Public Television (which by law belongs to

The Spanish trade union STEPV-PV estimates that around 5,000 teachers were affected by the tragedy in Valencia.

↴ Photos: © Tania Castro

the organisation's Board of Directors rather than to him). These delays meant that the local population did not receive an alert via the Spanish public alert system (ES-Alert) until 8.11 that evening. By that point in time, people had already died and hundreds of others were fighting for their lives. The political decision came far too late, with lethal consequences, and the Regional Department of Education did not order schools to close.

Impacts on teachers

The cold drop event was devastating because of the large area (55,845 hectares or 550 km2), the many municipalities (84 to a greater or lesser extent, 16 of which were categorised as 'ground zero') and the enormous number of people (845,000) it affected, as well as the residential buildings it damaged (92,748, including houses, garages and outbuildings) and the schools and institutions it destroyed (92 in total). According to UNICEF, some 40,000 students had their education disrupted by the emergency, and more than 24,000 were moved to other schools or temporary venues such as local barracks. A month later, 16,000 children were still out of school.

On 30 October, the day after the cold drop event, people in the areas hit hardest woke to an apocalyptic scene. Thick layers of mud coated their homes and the streets, piles of cars made the roads and pavements impassable, the doors and windows of shops had been smashed in and the bodies of the deceased had not yet been taken away (at the time of going to press, the floods had claimed 224 lives, with three people still missing). One of the victims was José Martínez Toral, the headmaster of the secondary school in Cheste, who was trapped in his car on his way home from school.

Many teachers have experienced loss and have had to listen to the heartbreaking stories of their pupils.

Photo: © Tania Castro

Night of terror for a Catarroja teacher

'It was a terrible night.' This is how Patricia Estruch, a teacher at the Berenguer Dalmau Secondary School in Catarroja who also lives in the same town, recalls the events: 'The waters rose to 2.20 metres in my street. I was together with my daughters, and some of the things we saw were horrifying. Cars were swept away by the waters, as well as two people. It's not something that anyone should have to see.' Her partner was one of many who tried to save their vehicles, but fortunately he survived by spending five hours on the roof of a van. This five hours seemed like an eternity for his family awaiting his return at home, because all lines of communication were down. 'The power went off, and there was no signal. We had no idea where he was or what he was doing,' recalls Estruch with a shudder. She says that the experience has affected them personally and professionally: 'We have problems sleeping, we can't concentrate, and we struggle to deal with even the tiniest of problems. It's exactly the same in the classroom. What makes it worse is that the pupils have gone through the same thing, so we're all in the same situation. It's an absolute nightmare. It's just like the mud, it never ends.'

There was no question of going to school in such a situation, even though it was a school day. Everyone was digging mud out of their home, helping others or simply trying to recover from the shock. The trade union STEPV-PV estimates that around 5,000 teachers were affected by the floods; teaching resumed on 11 November (online for the most part), but the lasting impacts have been varied and manifold.

Firstly, teachers suffered the emotional impact of what they had experienced first-hand. Many experienced loss and also had to listen to the heartbreaking stories of pupils and their families, whom they contacted individually to check on their wellbeing; most of the time, these wellbeing checks were carried out voluntarily, adding to teachers' workload and emotional burden. The Department for Education announced that 56 psychologists would be made available to schools, but only for pupils.

Teachers have also had to work long hours for no extra pay; some have been obliged to teach online classes in the morning and then in-person classes in the afternoon, prioritising final-year students sitting university entrance exams, while others have had to travel to as many as three different teaching venues on the same day. Commuting times have also increased, in some cases because those living in the affected areas lost their cars, and in other cases because those living outside the affected areas have had to contend with daily traffic jams due to blocked roads. In practice, this has meant very long working days with very few breaks.

Online classes have also been poorly attended, sometimes because both teachers and students have struggled with poor connections or a lack of IT equipment as a direct result of the floods. In addition, a phenomenon

Families expect them to be a teacher 24 hours a day.

observed during the Covid era reemerged; teachers had the mental burden of being online all day because 'Families expect you to be a teacher 24 hours a day,' as María Martínez of the IES Albal secondary school observes.

It was not until 4 February 2025, over three months after the floods, that the Ministry of Education announced measures aimed at the 'emergency procurement of school equipment' for the schools that had been affected. Up until then, it had been up to teachers, families and volunteers to buy what was needed with money out of their own pockets. 'Those of us who are lucky enough to have a car still have been using it to collect and distribute materials,' says Datxu Peris, a teacher at Berenger Dalmau Secondary School in Catarroja.

Given the failure of the authorities to take action, they were also responsible for cleaning the schools. Guillem Estruch, a teacher at the IES Albal Secondary School, provides more details: 'We put together a team of volunteers and cleaned every morning, every evening and every weekend, without mains electricity – instead we had to use generators loaned by generous individuals. The unit sent out by the Conselleria (local ministry) arrived a few days later, but there were only eight of them, and all they had were some cloths, a few hoses and the torches on their smartphones. Would they really have been able to clean a 1,000-pupil school on their own, with only the equipment they brought? How long would it have taken them to clean it without us?'

What is more, the schools played a 'very important social role' during the emergency, according to Natividad Fajardo, a teacher at CEIP Orba Primary School in Alfafar. They distributed donated clothes to pupils and served as logistical hubs for sharing equipment and food with the local population that had been affected. Many also served as accommodation for the special army units that were sent out.

Failures by policymakers

The first circular from the Generalitat Valenciana's Department of Education, which is responsible for school infrastructure and staffing, arrived at 4.26 in the afternoon of 31 October – two days after the tragedy and the day before a public holiday (All Saints'

↑ Photo: © Tania Castro

Pupils with SEND hit particularly hard

Although the impacts of the cold drop event and the lack of action by politicians have been challenging for all teachers and pupils, they have been 10 times worse for the most vulnerable. Ana Selfa, a teacher at the La Encarnación Special Education Centre in Torrent, explains that many of her pupils are unable to attend because they use wheelchairs: 'They can't leave the house if the street is coated in mud. Their wheelchairs get stuck and stop working.' One of the reasons why it has taken longer to get pupils with SEND back into the classroom is because these pupils are physically unable to get there, since the authorities have ignored the fact that the bus routes aren't working properly.

'There's not much point in being entitled to education if you can't get to where you need to go in order to be taught.' Ana Selfa has found this situation a real struggle: 'I need them in my classroom so that I can give them a hug and make sure that they're ok, and so that they can get used to a new normal and hang out with their classmates again. I carry the emotional burden of knowing that my pupils can't do that, and that we can't get hold of the resources to allow them to do it.' Her aim in giving this interview was to allow her pupils to be heard: 'We are their hands and their voices. We must fight for them, stand up for them and do everything we can for them.'

Photo : © Tania Castro


G-R-G

↑ Photo: © Tania Castro

Day) – and was signed by the Regional Secretary, Daniel McEvoy. It stated that schools would be closed in the municipalities affected between 4 and 8 November, and asked teachers who lived in these areas and were unable to travel to areas that had not been affected to inform their headteachers. The second circular, which was dated 3 November, extended this requirement to the employees of 'any publicly funded educational facility' in the area. This was an administrative requirement that caused a considerable amount of distress for many, as Mireia Ruiz of the IES Albal Secondary School explains: 'Having to justify that you can't go to work because you don't have a car or a house is an additional psychological burden.'

The main criticism voiced by all of the teachers interviewed for this article, and the reason why they felt 'abandoned', is the delay in decision-making by the Regional Ministry of Education or, more accurately, the latter's inaction and absence. The head of this government department, José Antonio Rovira, only appeared in the media on 24 November, a whole month later, in response to a tragedy involving the death of a worker from the public company Tragsa while cleaning the Lluís Vives school in Massanassa. José Antonio Rovira's public appearances have been few and far between, and he had not visited a single one of the schools in the affected area at the time of going to press. After the tragic accident, teachers at the IES 25 d'Abril Secondary School in Alfafar went so far as to hold protests outside the Ministry of Education, demanding a certificate of structural stability before the school was reopened. Pilar Pina, a teacher at the school, criticised the 'threats' that had been voiced and 'the enormous pressure' put on the school's SLT to get pupils back into the classrooms. Teaching eventually resumed, but even in February, three months later, there was still no written guarantee that the building was safe.

The lack of information or contradictory information has created uncertainty among teachers, as pointed out by Agustín Andrés, a teacher at the Berenguer Dalmau Secondary School in Catarroja. After spending

weeks not knowing what was going to happen to their school, which was badly affected, they found out through the press that they had been moved to Picassent, which would mean a journey of 9 kilometres through road closures and landslides. The plan was to send all 500 pupils home in 25 separate busloads, meaning that some of them would not be dropped off until 9 in the evening, at which point they would have to walk the final stretch home along unlit roads that were covered in mud. Their case was reported on in the press, and places were found for the pupils at a private school in the same municipality; at the same time, however, some pupils regrettably left education because the extra time needed to get to school was incompatible with their sporting or musical commitments.

'The Ministry of Education has only taken action in order to be able to say that it has done something. Communication has all been one-way and in the form of circulars, and the damage to infrastructure has still not been repaired, even three months after the disaster. Teachers feel abandoned,' says Xelo Valls, General Secretary of the Education Federation of the trade union CCOO-PV. In February 2025, the trade union STEPV published a report on the state of the schools affected by the cold drop event, and criticised the Ministry of Education's information blackout. Its coordinator, Marc Candela, said that there were still 'major shortcomings', that the progress of building repairs was 'very slow' and that the authorities had failed to make use of the Christmas holidays as an opportunity to complete these repairs. ●

Teachers felt 'abandoned'.

↴ Photo: © Tania Castro

When teachers' voices are silenced

Théophile Simon
Journalist

Around half of teachers experience vocal fatigue at some point during their careers, sometimes to the extent of having to change profession. Although some countries are more seriously affected than others, the unions agree that there is an urgent need to increase awareness of the issue.

For Sophie Defour, teaching literature was a dream. And a personal triumph to boot. She is from a modest background, grew up in a popular area of Saint-Étienne (central-eastern France) and fell in love with literature in her first year of secondary school. Despite her good grades, her parents didn't encourage her to go to university: in their eyes, finding a job at the earliest opportunity was the way to go. But Sophie Defour stuck to her guns, insisted on going to uni and worked for seven years to finance her studies, passing her *Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement du Second degré* (CAPES – teaching qualification) at the first attempt. 'I was very proud of what I'd achieved,' she remembers with a smile, 18 years after the event, in her apartment in Saint-Étienne.

Her celebrations were short-lived. Like many teachers in the early stages of their careers, she was posted to a difficult school in the Saint-Étienne area. She was there for seven years. 'It was an area of great social deprivation; many of the pupils spoke French as a second language. One of them had burns on her feet because she used to ferry hot water to her house. I spent three years shouting to assert my authority, to no avail. Then, one fine day, I simply lost my voice,' she says.

A short rest changed nothing. It's 2010 and Sophie Defour, now 29 years old, still has no voice. She is soon diagnosed with stretched vocal cords. The injuries are significant. Although she ultimately regains her voice, her vocal cords will remain fragile for the rest of her life. The main tool of her job has been permanently damaged.

Around half of teachers affected

Like her, several million teachers in Europe experience voice-related issues. National-level scientific studies paint a similar picture across the continent. In France, the teaching union UNSA estimated in 2018 that around half of all teachers regularly experience voice-related problems. A similar proportion was recorded in the Netherlands in 2006, in Italy in 2009, Spain in 2010 and Finland in 2017. In 2019, the French foundation MGEN suggested that 16% of teachers were unable to conduct lessons because of a voice-related issue during the school year. Vocal fatigue had already prompted a quarter of them to see a specialist. Teachers are two to three times more likely to experience voice problems than the general public.

'It's a significant public health challenge that's elevated by a number of risk factors,' says Angélique Remacle, a speech therapy researcher at the University of Liège, who conducted a study measuring the voice usage of around a hundred Belgian teachers in different types of school. 'The first issue is gender-based: women's vocal cords vibrate at twice the rate of men's, making them more vulnerable to vocal fatigue. This is a key point given that women teachers are over-represented in the earlier stages of education where teachers use their voices more.'

↑ **Sophie Defour, a secondary school literature teacher, at home in Saint-Étienne on 31 January 2025. 'I spent three years shouting to assert my authority. Then, one fine day, I simply lost my voice.'** Photo: © Théophile Simon

Around half of all teachers regularly experience voice-related problems.

In addition to allergies and acid reflux, which can affect the vocal cords, she notes two other key factors: the length of time the voice is used and the intensity of its use. 'A teacher may have learned to project his or her voice effectively, but speaking too loudly or for excessively long periods doesn't give it time to recover. This is particularly true in classes of young children where the ambient noise is often greater. The natural human reaction in a noisy environment is to raise your voice, making the problem worse,' she continues.

The consequences are not restricted to teacher wellbeing. 'Teachers' vocal problems have a negative impact on pupils' learning because they have to put more effort in to hear and understand a damaged voice,' points out Angélique Remacle. 'This is another argument in favour of doing more preventive work with teachers in the early stages of their careers and providing better support to those who already have vocal problems.'

Lack of support

Such preventive and supportive measures are still too few and far between. Sophie Defour can attest to this. Once her injuries were diagnosed, she felt abandoned on all sides. 'No one offered any solution. My superiors initially refused to change my timetable. My surgeon and colleagues advised me to change careers,' she remembers. 'But abandoning the job of my dreams was out of the question. I searched the internet for alternative ways forward, so that I could use my voice as little as possible. I came across the history of education and realised that the "bus-driver" style where the teacher is the only person steering the class is not the only model.'

'Flipped classroom teaching', very much in vogue in the Nordic countries, is of particular interest to her. In this method, pupils learn new content at home, discuss it in class and become active participants through various forms of engagement. Like the conductor of an orchestra, the teacher merely

guides the progress of group work. And thus puts less strain on the voice. 'I've adopted flipped teaching with great success, supported by new technologies,' she notes. 'I could have carried on much longer with a lighter workload. But, after five years, management finally turned me down. The consequence? My injuries worsened.'

After more than 10 years fighting on her own, discouraged by soul-destroying red tape, Sophie Defour has now decided to abandon the vocation that she strove so hard to pursue. It's a real rift for her. 'I would like teachers affected by vocal fatigue to know that they are not alone; there are solutions, and they don't have to throw in the towel. The establishment must provide better support,' she concludes bitterly.

And yet the issue was identified long ago by Éducation Nationale (the French education authority). A hundred years ago, the education ministry cited vocal health as one of the prerequisites for becoming a teacher, and, since 2003, the voice has been classed as one of three occupational hazards for teachers alongside musculoskeletal and psychosocial disorders. 'Things have fallen way short on the ground though. During their initial training, student teachers are given patchy instruction through modules on "body and voice" over 12 or 18 hours depending on the region. There are measures in place in terms of in-service training, but they are much too few and far between. The policy on prevention still falls short. We need a clear, uniform national programme on this issue,' says Corinne Loie, the speech and language therapist with responsibility for prevention, who for 25 years has been working to improve awareness-raising measures across the country at MGEN – the organisation that provides social protection to public-sector education workers in France.

Women's vocal cords vibrate at twice the rate of men's, making them more vulnerable to vocal fatigue.

In Germany and Austria, vocal fatigue is less of a concern, partly due to the smaller class size and the tendency to move away from the traditional classroom layout. Simple solutions, such as placing tennis balls on chair legs, help reduce noise and promote a healthier teaching environment. Photo: © Belga

'It's not an issue in Germany'

France is not alone in this area. On the other side of the English Channel, Wayne Bates of the NASUWT, one of the main teachers' unions in the UK, responds to Corinne Loie. 'There is no mechanism at national level during initial or in-service teacher training,' he says with regret, speaking in Birmingham. 'As a result, teachers are left to themselves and tend to link their concerns about their voices with students' bad behaviour. And vocal fatigue is more than simply a discipline issue.'

Ireland is behind the curve as well. 'I'm not aware of any public policy to protect teachers' voices,' notes David Duffy of the TUI union. 'So, by the time a teacher approaches us for advice about vocal fatigue, it's often too late. They're on the point of giving up their careers to protect what's left of their voices.'

In the absence of any public policy, the unions find themselves on the front line. The NASUWT and the TUI are using what means they have to organise training for young teachers at the start of their careers. In Portugal, the FNE union conducted two major national campaigns on the issue in 2014 and 2015 by hosting seminars in schools, distributing tens of thousands of leaflets and holding discussions. It then submitted a list of recommendations to government.

By contrast, in Germany and Austria, vocal fatigue is not really a reason for concern. 'It's not an issue in Germany,' Maike Finners, the Chair of the largest German teaching union the GEW, tells us. 'I think there are two main reasons why. First, voice training is provided as a matter of course to young teachers during their initial training. And, second, classes in Germany do not follow the "bus-driver" format. Pupils work in small groups, and teachers are often supported by assistants who have responsibility for special needs children.'

Barbara Schweighofer from the Austrian union GÖD-Lehrer agrees. 'The format of classes means that Austrian teachers do not have to talk all day long. Our concerns are more in relation to teachers' hearing and mental health,' she explains. 'Having said that, it may be that we don't get to hear about it as an issue because of associated taboos. Some teachers regard problems with their voices as shameful.'

From Dublin to Birmingham via Vienna, the unions agree on one point: vocal fatigue among teachers is something that isn't talked about enough. 'No one knows the real extent of the problem,' David Duffy concludes. 'It's very difficult to mobilise and raise awareness of it as an issue. There is an urgent need to step up work to raise awareness among teachers.' ●

Prevention for better teaching: ergonomics at the service of education

Tim Huygevoort
Ergonomist

While musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are less prevalent in the teaching profession than in industry or the building trade, their impact on teacher-pupil interaction and on teachers' wellbeing is far from negligible. Numerous studies confirm that a teacher in good health creates a more effective and sustainable learning environment.

According to the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) of 2015, the prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) among teachers varies considerably from one country to another. This variation is down to differences in work organisation, teaching practices, levels of professional support and prevention policies between national education systems. Although they vary, the conditions affecting teachers' physical health do centre on a number of recurring pain sites. Almost half of the surveyed teachers (47%), for example, report neck pain, which is chiefly attributable to the forward head posture adopted when marking pupils' work or when making prolonged use of information technology. An identical percentage of teachers suffer from lumbar pain, a condition frequently associated with working in a standing position for long periods of time and with the repetitive trunk flexions associated with the teaching profession. Shoulder and knee pains complete this worrying picture, affecting 44% and 35% of the surveyed teachers respectively.

Specific physical constraints to be analysed

An ergonomic analysis of the work of teachers highlights challenges that are specific to each discipline. There are significant differences between the types of complaint to which maths or English teachers, teachers of physical education and nursery teachers are prone and their causes. PE teachers, for example, constitute an especially vulnerable group. Their musculoskeletal injuries mainly affect the knees and back and are often compounded by old sports injuries and physical overload at work. To these causes may be added the handling of apparatus and demonstrations of physical exercises, sometimes in inadequate facilities or out of doors.

In nursery schools, the situation is no less worrying, but the nature of the strains is different. There, teachers are faced with the use of low furniture and frequent interactions with young children, for example when removing or putting on coats, hats, scarves and satchels. These activities put a heavy strain on backs and knees.

Age is not an ally anyway, and longer working lives exacerbate ergonomic issues. Teachers nearing retirement, whatever subject and age group they teach, show greater susceptibility to MSDs, with increased risks of wrist, hand, knee and ankle pain.

Impact on teaching quality

Teacher presenteeism – teachers being physically present but unwell – is a key factor in teaching quality. Such a teacher will be less dependable. Fatigue and chronic physical pain reduce teachers' capacity to hold pupils' attention, to interact dynamically and to establish a good learning environment in class. Conversely, teachers in the best of health are more likely to adopt a more dynamic posture in class, which enhances their body language and their ability to command pupils' attention.

There are significant differences between the types of complaint to which English teachers and nursery teachers are prone.

↑ **PE teachers, along with nursery school teachers, face specific ergonomic challenges that put them at higher risk of musculoskeletal injuries.** Photo: © Belga

Presenteeism – a key factor in teaching quality.

Teachers' wellbeing is linked with pupil performance by promoting uninterrupted education and reducing pupils' psychological distress, as is indicated by a research study[1] conducted in England and Wales by Harding et al. in 2019. Teachers, moreover, can also serve as role models. Those who adopt good health and prevention practices indirectly encourage their pupils to do likewise. Following the example of Schools4Health, the European Network Education and Training in Occupational Safety and Health (ENETOSH) prioritised MSD prevention in schools in recent years as part of a campaign, which ran from 2020 to 2022, entitled *Healthy Workplaces – Lighten the Load*.

Mens sana in corpore sano

In point of fact, there is no shortage of specific solutions, whether it be adapting workspaces, installing adjustable furniture, laying anti-fatigue mats or providing for rest areas. While PE teachers possess theoretical knowledge of MSD prevention, its application in practice leaves room for improvement. More sharply focused training would enable those teachers to play an active part in preventing such disorders. Rolling out such programmes to the entire teaching profession would be a major advance. Training courses could include special posture management techniques for each discipline, targeted muscle strengthening to limit fatigue and alleviate pain as well as strategies for recuperation between classes to prevent the build-up of tension.

Nevertheless, awareness does seem to be growing nationally and in other European countries through new legislative instruments. In May 2024, for example, Belgium reinforced its regulatory framework, bringing it into line with those of France and Czechia; each teaching post is now the subject of an individual appraisal. Several EU initiatives are also being launched, such as application of the 'Goldilocks principle', tested in various countries. That scheme comprises three stages, beginning with the organisation of hands-on workshops for the purpose of designing special physical activities for teachers. These activities are then integrated into teachers' working days. Finally, regular monitoring ensures that adjustments can be made on the basis of feedback from the field.

Trade union organisations have a key role to play in all of this drive. They can negotiate collective agreements that incorporate prevention measures and involve themselves actively in the European social dialogue in order to promote best practices as well as cooperating with specialised networks such as ENETOSH and EU-OSHA with a view to drawing inspiration from successful experiments conducted in other countries. ●

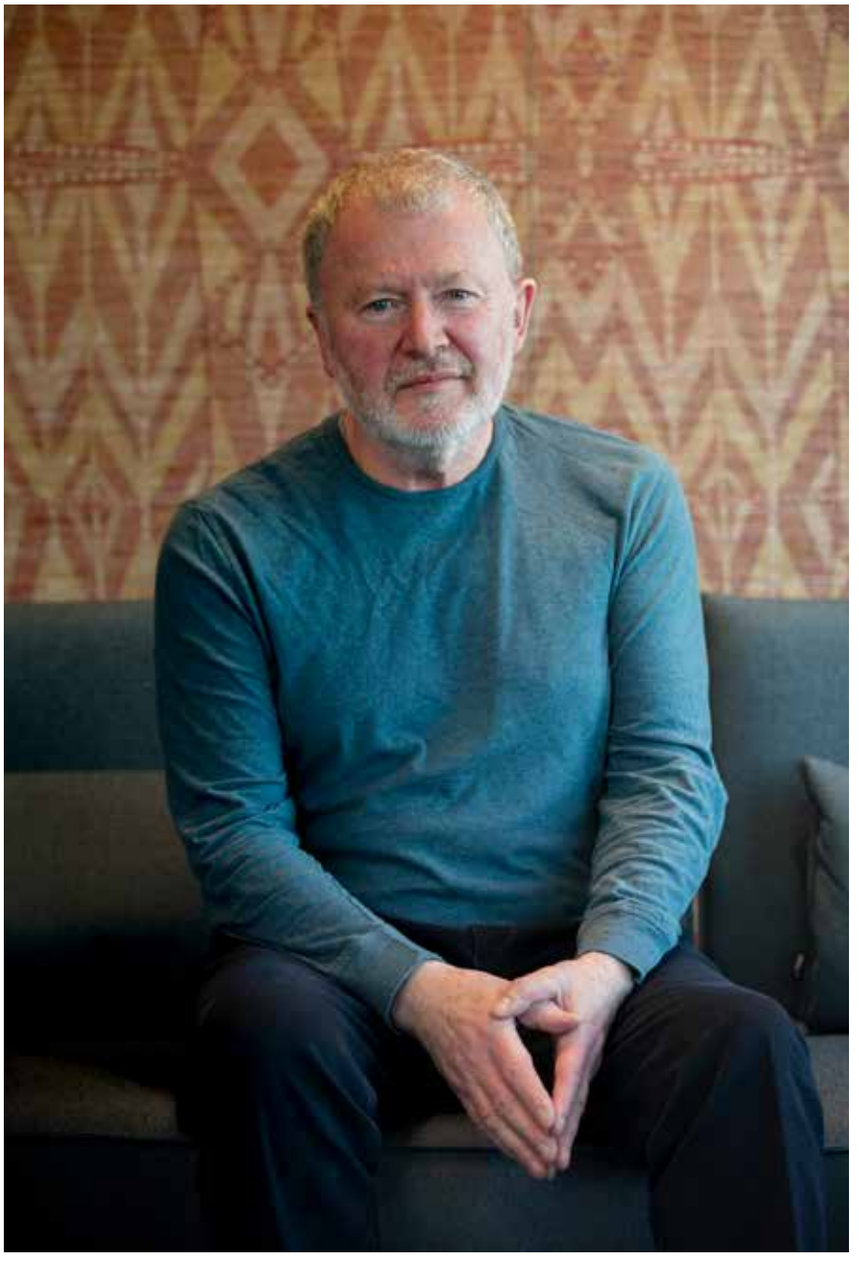
1. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30189355/

Interview

John MacGabhann

‘Teachers’ health is significantly worse than it used to be’

Interview by
Alain Bloëdt
Managing Editor



John MacGabhann, President of the European Trade Union Committee for Education Photo: © Nicolas Landemard

John MacGabhann, newly appointed President of the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), shares his frank and incisive view of the challenges facing the teaching profession in Europe. From the increasing bureaucratisation of the teaching profession to salary stagnation, declining wellbeing and digital threats, he offers a systemic yet grounded analysis, insisting on the need for genuine dialogue and collective responsibility. Speaking from the perspective of a lifelong trade unionist and teacher, he does not shy away from uncomfortable truths – nor from imagining alternative pathways.

↪ In the light of the 'whatever it takes' approach adopted by Chancellor Merz and President Macron, could you imagine a similar commitment made towards education, given its growing challenges and long-term impact on society?

JOHN MACGABHANN I can imagine them saying it. I cannot imagine leaders, individually or collectively, giving effect to some slogan of that nature.

↪ Why?

Because education eventually is seen by an awful lot of them, no matter what they say publicly, as a requirement only to the extent of equipping young people with basic skills. And their view of what those skills entail is indeed very basic.

↪ You don't believe in slogans any more, such as 'No child left behind'?

In most countries, at best, the proportion of GDP spent on education is static. In others – including my own, Ireland, it is actually falling. The recovery, since the financial crash of 2008-2009, was meant to lift all boats, but the ship of education is almost submerged. There's been no real effort to build the system. Objectively speaking, governments have failed to address the teacher supply crisis. In some cases, they've failed even to get started – and the starting block is a competitive salary, comparable to other graduate-entry professions.

If you deny decent pay and full-time work to new teachers, you deny them access to housing, family life and stability.

↪ Is delivering decent competitive salaries the key measure of the ETUCE campaign 'Make teaching attractive'?

The question is: Why would anyone enter a profession that promises precarity, low pay and no creditworthiness? People make rational decisions. If you deny decent pay and full-time work to new teachers, you deny them access to housing, family life and stability. And those basic life choices – starting a family, buying a home – get postponed indefinitely.

↪ What can be done in the short term?

There are cost-neutral measures that can be implemented almost immediately, in every country. Take job security: if teachers are in non-permanent roles, they cannot fully invest in their work. Giving them permanent contracts doesn't cost the taxpayer more – and it's especially urgent in early childhood education, where instability is high and the need for well-trained staff is greatest.

↪ Teachers speak a lot about an increase in bureaucracy. How is that affecting them?

Teachers increasingly tell us, across all jurisdictions, that they are being deflected from the core function of teaching and learning to provide data opportunities for others. They're asked to generate data so that those who don't understand the dynamic of a school can pretend to, based on data analysis.

↪ How much time does this take up?

Providing data has now become the weekend work of teachers, and I'm telling you the literal truth. People work as teachers; they enjoy it, and they are qualified to do it. From Monday to Friday, they teach. Of course, even before, during the week and into weekends, there was always some necessary work: marking, preparation, reflection. But now, teachers are being bureaucratised into the weekend.

↪ What kind of data are they being asked to provide?

As you know, schools are gradually evolving. They're becoming more welcoming, more human, and teachers play a huge role in that transformation. At the same time, teachers develop pedagogy that suits their pupils, offering all kinds of co-curricular activities, engaging with students outside the classroom… but they're now being asked to justify everything. 'Write us a report about what you did', 'Tell us how much time you spent doing it', 'How many students took part?', 'How engaged was each one?' And who are they telling this to? To people who, with the greatest respect, have no idea what it means to stand in front of a class and create a meaningful learning environment.

↪ Why this obsession with data?

There's a voracious appetite for it – it's a booming industry. But gathering data takes time teachers don't have. And many are leaving the profession because they didn't sign up to be data providers.

↪ How would you describe the overall health of the profession today?

Significantly worse than it used to be. To be fair, I could say the same if I were a police officer, firefighter or nurse. Broadly speaking, everyone's time is more colonised by work. People's time is under pressure generally, so, again, I don't want to claim absolute exceptionality for teachers. But the pressures on teachers are distinct and very real.

↪ Such as?

Today's school environments are more democratic, and rightly so. Parents and students have more a say than they did previously, which is positive. But it also means the traditional model of absolute authority is gone. Teachers must adjust professionally, and that transition has unmoored some – especially those with more traditional expectations or teaching styles.

↪ Is ageing taken seriously in the education system?

Teaching isn't just an intellectual exercise, it's very much a physical one too. You're constantly physically present in front of a group, whatever the number. There is a performance element to the job. That performance may vary in terms of your pedagogy, but society expects teachers to perform consistently, whether you are 25 or 65.

↪ Is there evidence that this is taking a toll?

Yes. We have seen evidence from various affiliates of a very high incidence of stress, hypertension, cardiovascular problems. Some stress is good and may be manageable when you're young but becomes harmful later in your career. Consequently, we're also losing experienced teachers prematurely.

↪ Are there physical risks related to the work environment?

There are physical risks linked to outdated infrastructure. That's always been a challenge, but they're even more problematic in today's inclusive classrooms. Teachers are responsible for students with diverse physical and emotional needs. The risk – and the scrutiny – is higher than ever.

↪ Do teachers feel safe in the classroom?

I don't think they feel more secure, but they feel more aware of safety than before. Most schools are more controlled, more alert. Unfortunately, for instance, there is unquestionably a difficulty in that schools are seen by some actors as a marketplace for drug sales. That would not have been the case 30 years ago, so there's a necessary vigilance. But, once you are in there, generally, teachers don't feel unsafe with students. Their biggest concern is the students' safety.

↪ What about online safety?

Teachers are extremely vulnerable to online abuse. Social media platforms have been utterly negligent in their ethical responsibility – not just towards teachers, but towards others as well. A teacher's professional reputation is both fragile and vitally important. If someone maliciously and falsely posts something online – for example, 'Teacher X abuses students' or 'Teacher Y is borderline criminal' — even if it's completely untrue, the damage to that teacher's personal and professional life can be irreversible. And, in small, tight-knit or remote communities, where a teacher's professional identity is deeply tied to their sense of self, such attacks are devastating.

↪ What role can schools play in resisting these pressures?

This is where social dialogue comes in. The people best placed to understand a school's needs are those working within it – not just external authorities. When students, parents, teachers and local community resources are genuinely included, you create a strong internal culture. That kind of local democracy can shield schools from some of the more harmful external pressures.

↪ So social dialogue has to start at the school level?

Absolutely. No matter the national policy or the superstructure, the school is where people live, work, learn and grow. If a school community builds a collective understanding and takes meaningful local decisions, it can thrive. But, if direction comes from an autocratic top-down vision, it won't work. ●

↴ Photo: © Nicolas Landemard

Providing data has now become the weekend work of teachers.

A profession under pressure: the long-lasting impact of a global crisis

Aleksandra Morozovaité
Researcher at Visionary Analytics

Exclusive contribution from the 'APRES COVID' project, initiated by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE), which examines workplace wellbeing in European education systems and the long-term impact of Covid-19 on psychosocial risks (https://www.csee-etuce.org/en/projects/apres-covid/5410-context).

The Covid-19 crisis has amplified long-standing structural challenges in education systems across Europe. Addressing psychosocial risks, improving working conditions and supporting teachers' wellbeing are now critical to securing a resilient and effective education workforce.

Europe's education sector felt the impact of the Covid-19 crisis acutely: schools shut down overnight, moving all teaching activities online. This meant adopting new digital tools and communication systems for many educators for the very first time. Work and learning environments blurred as educators invited virtually their entire classes into their homes. Even once schools reopened, the challenges persisted: from hybrid learning and significant learning gaps to increased behavioural issues among students.

Although the global crisis placed immense pressure on the sector, Europe's education systems have been under multiple sources of pressure for a long time. This reality is reflected in a Europe-wide teacher shortage, with 24 out of 27 European Union (EU) Member States reporting significant staff shortages that have been largely attributed to low wages, unmanageable workloads and an ageing workforce. High stress levels and burnout are increasingly named as primary factors influencing teachers' decisions to leave the profession, contributing to the core challenge facing education: attracting new people into the profession and ensuring that the current workforce remains.

Extended working time

A career in education is often driven by an intrinsic motivation, or a 'calling', to educate future generations. Yet, external rewards like compensation and career advancement have long fallen short in sufficiently offsetting the worsening working conditions and significant effort required.

A major factor contributing to work-related stress in education across all levels is the combination of heavy workloads and persistent time pressure, conditions observed both before and after the pandemic. While on paper, the education sector may log fewer official working hours than other sectors in Europe, the reality is that many educators spend their evenings and weekends on lesson preparation, grading or administrative tasks they cannot complete during dedicated working time.

The boundary between work and personal life blurred during the pandemic. Digital tools that enabled remote instruction and communication also made it more difficult to switch off. Although the pandemic may be over, emails and messages continue to arrive around the clock, and many educators struggle to set clear boundaries, risking prolonged physiological activation that affects rest and health. This is a particular threat to early-career educators, who are more likely to leave the profession due to an unsustainable work culture.

↑ **Even before Covid-19, education ranked among the most stressful professions.** Photo: © Belga

Prevalence of psychosocial risks and their outcomes

Even before Covid-19, education ranked among the most stressful professions. Today, workloads continue to climb as educators juggle multiple roles – subject expert, administrator, counsellor. In some EU countries, more than 80% of educators report feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

Chronic stress, when sustained for extended periods, can lead to serious health issues such as chronic fatigue and burnout. Evidence suggests that the prevalence of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, stress and burnout, in education has persisted and, in some cases, worsened since Covid19. The root causes have been attributed to a combination of the volume and complexity of work, extended working time, and differential support and resource availability.

The day-to-day work environment also affects educators. Reports of violence or aggression involving students have worryingly increased since the pandemic, impacting the mental health of those who experience such behaviour. This troubling trend has implications both for individual educators and the broader education system. It can trigger absenteeism, long-term health problems and the need for medical leave.

Research consistently highlights organisational aspects, such as leadership support, school climate and manageable workloads, as critical to workplace wellbeing. Teachers report significantly lower stress levels when they work in collaborative school environments with collegial relationships and supportive leadership.

What's next for education?

Despite many sources of pressure, educators continue to show elevated job satisfaction, driven by a fundamental sense of purpose. Nevertheless, dedication alone cannot sustain a workforce that is chronically stressed and underpaid, while still being expected to multitask beyond reasonable limits. Quality education relies on more than knowledge delivery, requiring emotional resilience, thoughtful guidance and genuine human connection.

The current trend of worsening working conditions is widely recognised as a central issue impeding the recruitment and retention of qualified educators across Europe. If European education systems are to thrive in a post-pandemic world, providing genuine support, financial investment and recognition of educators' work is the place to start. ●

The in-depth interview

Roxana Mînzatu

‘The competitiveness objectives depend on the good working conditions of the Europeans’

Interview by
Alain Bloëdt
Managing Editor

In this exclusive interview with *HesaMag*, the European Commission’s Executive Vice-President for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness, Roxana Mînzatu, outlines her social roadmap: improving working conditions for teachers, addressing psychosocial risks, adapting to climate change and integrating a gender perspective into occupational health policies. A vision that sees job quality as a key driver of both competitiveness and social cohesion in Europe.

↪ **You recently stressed at the European Parliament that, ‘without well-trained and well-paid teachers, it will be impossible to achieve our skills goals’. In the light of the Union of Skills strategy you presented in March, how will your upcoming Teachers Agenda tackle their working conditions, beyond training alone?**

ROXANA MÎNZATU If we do not address teachers’ needs and provide a complete and strong response, we risk undermining not just our skills strategy, but also Europe’s competitiveness. Everything depends on the quality of our education – and that, in turn, depends on how many teachers we have, how motivated, prepared and well-trained they are, how long they stay in the profession, and how satisfied they are with their work. So yes, the quality of teachers’ working conditions – in the classroom, online or offline – is essential to nearly all the goals of the European Union.

↪ **Teachers don’t often come to mind when we talk about competitiveness or even security. Should they?**

It’s true that teachers don’t come to mind immediately – but they should. Once you start identifying the root causes of societal challenges, you realise how essential good education and good teachers are. That’s why, in the Union of Skills strategy, we included a Teachers and Trainers Agenda. It’s a very specific and ambitious policy, developed in partnership with the Member States, to address all critical aspects of the profession: working conditions, salaries, prestige, connections with parents and the learning environment.

↪ **Competitiveness is a big theme – but what about teachers’ health and safety? What can Europe do specifically for them?**

By the end of the year, we will present the Quality Jobs Roadmap, which will include occupational health and safety as a key dimension – not only for teachers, but for all professions. Europe has set high standards for workplace safety, and we want to maintain them. Competitiveness without investing in job quality is a losing game.

↪ Burnout and stress among teachers are not just individual issues – they are signals of a wider social malaise. Given their impact on the education system and society at large, could this prompt the Commission to move beyond guidance and propose binding legislation, such as a directive on psychosocial risks at work?

We are currently reviewing existing directives to assess whether they still meet today's needs. I've received numerous calls for a specific directive on psychosocial risks. For now, I'm not saying whether it will be a directive or not, but it is part of the Quality Jobs discussion. First, we will have a roadmap, and then this will be followed by targeted initiatives. Whether these will take the form of a directive, legislation or another type of policy, I cannot say yet, because we also want to leave space for our social partners and the Member States.

↪ Your term of office is short. Can we expect something to be in place before 2029?

Everything we're discussing is meant to be delivered during the current term of office. The Quality Jobs Roadmap will be completed this year. It will define our priorities and actions on employment, working conditions and social issues, because I really think that the EU's competitiveness objectives depend on the good working conditions of European citizens. Of course, any legislative initiative must follow due process – including impact assessments and consultations – but we aim to move as fast as possible. We also need to enforce existing legislation and make better use of current tools and funding. Erasmus, for instance, supports many projects that can directly improve teachers' working conditions. On mental health, the Commission is implementing a 1.2-billion-euro flagship initiative, drawing from various funding sources.

↪ You've said that the Commission aims to deliver tangible progress on working conditions during the current term of office. Yet musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) remain the most common work-related illness in Europe – especially in care and domestic work, where women are overrepresented and still not fully protected. The Care Strategy sets important goals around dignity and decent work, but, without binding rules on key risks such as heavy lifting or lack of rest, how can these commitments be realised?

MSDs are a serious issue, and the EU already has strong rules in place: employers are legally required to assess all workplace risks and take steps to prevent them. That includes risks such as heavy lifting, which are common in care jobs. Our current review of workplace safety rules will look at ergonomic and psychosocial risks, including those linked to digital work. But it's not just about rules and legislation. We also offer practical tools and support. Through EU-OSHA, we provide guidance and tools tailored to care and domestic workers. We've invested in awareness campaigns and research to improve safety in these sectors – most of which are still dominated by women.

The quality of teachers' working conditions is essential to nearly all the goals of the European Union.

↰ **Roxana Mînzatu.**
Photo: © Lukasz Kobus

Competitiveness without investing in job quality is a losing game.

↪ **As you know, the workplace is a dynamic environment where safety and wellbeing should be prioritised for all individuals, regardless of gender. Yet, OSH has long followed a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, often overlooking critical gender-specific risks and needs. As you and the Commission President are both women, do you see this as a chance to push for change?**

I hadn't thought about it that way, but yes – we need symbols for the future. Historically, many policies have ignored women's specific rhythms, vulnerabilities and strengths. The EU must set the standard, especially in sectors where women are highly represented, such as education and healthcare – professions that face high levels of stress, violence and psychosocial risks. That's why gender will be a clear dimension in the Union of Skills strategy, in the Quality Jobs agenda and in OSH policy.

↪ **As a woman leading EU employment policy, do you feel a special responsibility to ensure that gender is no longer an afterthought – especially in fields such as OSH?**

Absolutely. We need to embed gender into all our policies – not as an afterthought, but from the outset. Whether we're talking about fair access to jobs, AI and automation, or climate-related health risks, we must recognise that women are often impacted differently. That's why we support more women in STEM, more inclusive clinical research, and policies that reflect how men and women experience work and risk differently. It's not just about health and safety or job quality – it's about every sector. And, while it's not yet a reflex everywhere, we must make it one.

↪ **As a specific example, does the Commission plan to follow Belgium's lead and extend the scope of the Carcinogens, Mutagens and Reprotoxic Substances Directive (CMRD) to include endocrine disruptors?**

Endocrine disruptors are a growing concern, and the Commission is taking steps to assess how best to protect workers. This year, new EU rules came into force, updating protections under the Carcinogens, Mutagens and Reprotoxic Substances Directive – including stricter limits for lead and new rules for diisocyanatos. Member States now have two years to implement these changes. The directive already mentions endocrine disruptors. The question now is whether this topic should be included in the directive in the future. The European Chemicals Agency will prepare a scientific assessment of endocrine disruptors that can affect the health and safety of workers, together with the tripartite Working Party on Chemicals.

↪ **These substances are already classified as hazardous under market regulations. Isn't it inconsistent that workers remain unprotected under EU OSH legislation?**

Endocrine disruptors are already regulated in several areas, such as chemicals, pesticides, cosmetics and water. But workers also need protection from these substances, especially when exposure happens on the job. That's why we are now looking into whether EU occupational safety and health rules should be strengthened too. The first step is a scientific assessment led by the European Chemicals Agency. This will help us understand the risks and decide what action is needed to ensure better protection for workers.

↪ **Beyond long-standing risks such as MSDs and exposure to hazardous substances, new threats are emerging – especially those linked to climate change. Spain recently included heat-related risks in its labour law. Is the Commission considering similar measures at EU level – for instance, integrating climate risks more explicitly into OSH legislation or strategies?**

Climate-related risks such as extreme heat are a growing concern, and we are taking them very seriously. Workers have a right to a safe and healthy working environment, and that includes protection from rising temperatures. EU law already requires employers to assess and manage risks in the workplace – including heat. Specific rules also exist for sectors such as construction, fishing and mining. But we know that the climate crisis is changing the game. That's why the EU's current health and safety strategy (20212027) specifically highlights climate risks – such as heatwaves and air pollution – as key priorities. As a result, we are looking at how to ensure that we have better protections in place and that EU rules remain fit for purpose in a warming world. ●

Carte blanche

Say it with flowers ...

Laurent Vogel

In most cultures, giving flowers is a gesture of love, friendship or respect. According to British anthropologist Jack Goody, ornamental horticulture, which dates back to Ancient Egypt, serves two functions, namely, for worshipping gods and as a mark of distinction in a hierarchically organised society.

Nowadays, the trade in cut flowers represents a 31.2 billion dollar market providing opportunities for rapid growth. Sales in the sector are expected to reach the 56-billion-dollar mark in 10 years' time. Within this highly concentrated market, the Netherlands is the largest grower and exporter. It accounts for 60% of the global market in flowers. Supplied by national growers and large-scale importers and operating under the auction principle, Aalsmeer's giant hub processes millions of bouquets every day. As the second largest global producer, Colombia benefits from climate diversity, its lands extending from the tropical zones to the high plateaus of the Andes, thus allowing it to produce a wide variety of flowers all year round. Kenya has become the third largest global producer, followed by Ethiopia in fourth place. Over recent years, East African growers in Uganda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe have emerged onto the market. In the international production and distribution chain, growers from Latin America and Africa have often had to use intermediaries, like the Netherlands, which then redistribute the flowers to other markets. Floriculture is a highly feminised activity. Wages are low and the repetitive work is gruelling. The activity comes at a significant environmental cost on account of pesticides use, transportation and water consumption. To ensure that cut flowers are still at their best at the point of delivery, their journey is predominantly by air freight.

When you go into a florist's, you stand at the end point of a complex journey, and only a minimal proportion of the bouquet price finds its way into the pay packets of the women working in this sector. However, in addition to impacting the level of pay received, the business operation also takes its toll on the body. By focusing on one individual's story, we can gain a clearer insight into the health-related challenges of working in floriculture.

A blossoming market, but at what price?

On 22 March 2022, Emmy, an 11-year-old French girl, died after a seven-year battle with leukaemia. She had been diagnosed with the disease in 2015. In her final seven years, she experienced one period of remission, suffered three relapses, spent 468 days in hospital and underwent multiple treatments, chemotherapies and surgical procedures. While pregnant with Emmy, her mother, Laure Marivain, had worked for a wholesale business as a flower sales agent. She recalls, 'When Emmy was born, she wasn't crying. Her skin was all purple. The anaesthetist told us that there was a problem with the placenta, that it was all black with carbon particles. And, on top of that, her newborn assessment scores were low. One midwife even asked me if I had taken drugs during my pregnancy.' In actual fact, Laure has never smoked, never taken drugs and does not drink alcohol ... but for years she came into direct contact with the

In grower countries, women in their millions are exposed to pesticides in far higher concentrations than are found in a florist's shop.

cut flowers she sold as part of her job. After Emmy died, Laure decided to start a campaign to prevent further deaths and to call out the lack of regulation in this area. She was keeping a promise she had made to her daughter, explaining that 'She (Emmy) had told me: "Mummy, you have to fight, because nobody has the right to do this to children. Nobody has the right to poison them." And so I promised her that I would do everything in my power to prove that there was a link between her illness and my job as a florist.' That link was acknowledged by France's Pesticide Victims Compensation Fund (FIVP). It was clear that this mother's occupational activity had exposed her foetus to the toxic effects of pesticides even though, as the law currently stands, it is impossible to establish traceability for the products at issue. Laure Marivain's long battle led to a 25,000-euro compensation payment for each of Emmy's parents, the maximum payment awarded in France by the FIVP. No other judicial remedy has resulted in a better outcome.

Flowers and pesticides: a bouquet of invisible risks

Emmy's fate is not unusual. In grower countries, women in their millions are exposed to pesticides in far higher concentrations than are found in a florist's shop. Negligible epidemiological research has been conducted in this sector. It took Emmy's death for France's National Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health Safety (ANSES) to be commissioned to conduct an expert study on the toxic risks of pesticides for florists.

The entire production and sale chain should be subject to stricter regulation. In 2016, Khaoula Touma, who was studying at the time for her PhD at the University of Liège (Belgium), had published the results of one study. She had carried out tests on the most popular 90 bouquets of flowers sold in Belgium (roses, gerberas and chrysanthemums). She had also monitored activity at 25 florist businesses over three peak sales periods (Valentine's Day, Mother's Day and All Saints' Day). Dermal exposure to pesticides could be assessed by analysing cotton gloves. Tests had identified 111 pesticide residues on florists' hands and 70 residues in their urine.

Although there are rules in place for food products, flowers are languishing in a legislative blind spot.

Exposure prevention is practically non-existent along the entire production and distribution chain. In one study, published in 1979, on the pesticides exposure suffered by Miami's Customs officers and florists handling imported flowers, its authors were already emphasising the need to introduce preventive legislation. Other studies highlighted the miscarriages and birth defects associated with working in Colombia's flower plantations.

At European Union level, no measures have been undertaken thus far to tackle this problem. Although there are rules in place for food products, flowers are languishing in a legislative blind spot. The various strategies adopted by the European Union with a view to reducing the burden of toxic substances have never taken this matter into account, and the risk assessments that manufacturers submit to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) are not required to address the harmful effects on human health of pesticides used in flower production. Over 45 years have passed since researchers warned of the exposure affecting Miami's Customs officers and florists, and yet the situation has barely improved either in Europe or the rest of the world. In the run-up to Valentine's Day 2025, Pesticide Action Network Netherlands (PAN-NL) tested 13 bouquets. Of the 71 pesticides identified, 28 were found to be prohibited in the European Union. PAN-NL President Margriet Mantingh found herself having to reiterate her sad advice for consumers: 'For years, the slogan was "Flowers love people; bring them into your home", but we advise not giving a poisoned bouquet to someone you love on Valentine's Day.'

↳ Photo: © Belga

Review

TV series

A haunting reminder of what happens when health and safety are compromised

Dimitra Theodori,
Editor

Toxic Town

by Jack Thorne with Jodie Whittaker, Robert Carlyle, Brendan Coyle and Aimee Lou Wood

Netflix's *Toxic Town* is so much more than just another TV drama – it's a very powerful and necessary cautionary tale. At its core is the devastating cost of rebuilding work undertaken without care for people or the environment. The programme is a moving tribute to the people of Corby, a once-thriving steel town in Northamptonshire, whose lives were altered by unsafe regeneration. When Corby's steelworks were closed and subsequently demolished in the early 1980s, toxic demolition waste containing heavy metals was mishandled and transported through residential areas, polluting the soil, air and water in its wake. But the danger didn't remain on site. Workers' clothes were heavily impregnated with invisible dust that was carried into their homes and breathed in by their families, including children and pregnant women. Before long, patterns of birth defects began to appear. However, *Toxic Town* isn't just about contamination – it's about courage. A group of mothers realised that something was wrong and demanded answers, standing up to a system that tried to silence them. Their fight led to a landmark 2009 High Court ruling that held Corby Borough Council liable for negligence. It remains one of the UK's most significant environmental justice victories – driven not by officials but by parents who simply wouldn't give up.

Book

The true impact of the green transition on the world of work

Marouane Laabbas-el-Guennouni,
Researcher, ETUI

Green Transition and the Quality of Work. Implications, Linkages and Perspectives

by Edoardo Ales, Tindara Addabbo, Ylenia Curzi, Tommaso Fabbri and Iacopo Senatori
Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 331 pages

The green transition has significant implications for the world of work, and its impact is undeniable, despite resistance from some groups. This book draws on Ulrich Beck's concept of the risk society, examining how the green transition intersects with labour relations and poses potential risks for workers. It goes beyond identifying these risks by encouraging an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating perspectives from the Global South, gender and an 'ecocentric' viewpoint. By doing so, it highlights the complexity of embedding sustainability in everyday workplace realities. The book explores solutions from two angles: leveraging existing legal measures to address challenges, and proposing new tools to integrate the green transition into the workplace more effectively. It critically assesses whether these solutions are possible within the current capitalistic system. Ultimately, the book anticipates challenges that will intensify in the near future, posing risks to society. It calls for a proactive approach, avoiding greenwashing, ensuring clear obligations for companies and establishing clearly defined and enforceable rights for workers.

Documentary

A moving portrait of resilience in the workplace of tomorrow

Alain Bloëdt,
Managing Editor

Favoriten

by Ruth Beckermann

With *Favoriten*, Ruth Beckermann offers more than a documentary — she reveals one of Europe's most familiar yet overlooked workplaces: the classroom. Over three years, she follows a Viennese primary school class, capturing the emotional labour and dedication of a teacher facing linguistic diversity, staff shortages, and her pupils' daily realities. Through quiet moments and vivid encounters, she invites viewers into a fragile yet vibrant ecosystem where learning goes far beyond textbooks. Winner of the Healthy Workplaces Film Award by EU-OSHA, the film explores what a truly healthy workplace means — beyond physical safety: a space of mental well-being, inclusion, and connection. It challenges us to rethink what support and recognition look like in sectors dominated by care, pressure, and emotional exposure. This echoes the focus of this issue's special report on primary and secondary school teachers. As the film unfolds, it's clear the teacher learns as much from her students as they do from her. Together, they build a space where difference becomes strength, and resilience a daily practice. *Favoriten* is a sensitive portrait of care work, belonging, and education under pressure. Beckermann gently reminds us: the classroom is not only a place of learning — it is also a workplace, and it deserves our full attention.

Newsflash

Latest EU-OSHA survey on workplace risks reveals worrying trends

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) has published key findings from its fourth European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2024), highlighting stagnation in addressing psychosocial risks, challenges posed by digitalisation, and declining employee participation. The survey reveals that, while some progress has been made, many critical risks remain unaddressed. Work-related psychosocial risks have seen little change since 2019, with time pressure, long hours and job insecurity continuing to affect workers. A persistent reluctance to discuss mental health and stress in the workplace openly hinders meaningful action. Many organisations still lack awareness and specialist support, making it difficult to implement effective interventions. This hesitation not only delays progress but also exacerbates existing issues, particularly as digitalisation reshapes modern work environments. As compliance with the legislation remains the primary driver of workplace safety initiatives, the findings highlight an urgent need for stronger policies, cultural shifts and greater collaboration to ensure safer, healthier work environments across Europe.

New EU Council presidency programme: what's in store for OSH?

The current trio of six-month rotating presidencies of the EU Council – made up of the presidencies of Poland, Denmark and Cyprus – is structured around three key pillars: security and resilience, economic competitiveness and democracy. These priorities shape policies on workplace safety, labour market inclusion and digital transformation. A central focus is ensuring that the green and digital transitions enhance, rather than compromise, occupational health and safety. Addressing labour shortages through education and training, particularly in high-risk sectors, is also a priority. The trio highlights workplace mental health support and ergonomic improvements as essential for a healthier workforce. Poland, leading the presidency from January to June 2025, is placing an emphasis on employment, social affairs and equality. It aims to protect workers in an increasingly digitalised workplace by focusing on AI regulation, teleworking rights and the right to disconnect. Ensuring that automation does not erode worker protections is a key concern, alongside advancing the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work.

European laws lag behind rising workplace threats against women

The most recent report by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) – published on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women – highlights the widening gap between workplace laws and the growing threats women face at work. It warns that digitalisation, remote work and precarious job conditions are exacerbating gender-based violence, while legal frameworks remain inadequate to address these evolving challenges. Domestic violence, once considered separate from the workplace, is now a pressing issue for remote workers. Many women facing abuse at home struggle to maintain employment, yet this remains largely unrecognised as a workplace concern. Additionally, third-party violence is on the rise, particularly in understaffed front-line sectors such as healthcare, retail and hospitality. Digitalisation has further intensified risks, with remote workers increasingly subjected to cyber harassment, including sexually explicit messages and privacy violations. These growing threats underscore the urgent need for stronger workplace protections. In response, the ETUC is urging European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to introduce a directive specifically addressing workplace violence against women. Such legislation would empower unions to advocate for safer working environments and close the gaps in existing laws.

Reducing safety regulations could be catastrophic for the workforce

Recently, the Dutch House of Representatives passed three motions intended to lessen administrative burdens for employers. Critics believe that these measures could significantly impact worker safety and health. The motions propose eliminating the written Risk Inventory and Evaluation (RI&E) for small employers, removing mandatory external expert assessments and easing regulations on the registration of hazardous substances. In response, Dutch trade unions have condemned the proposals in a joint letter, warning that these changes will lead to an increase in workplace injuries and fatalities. The unions emphasize that the motions violate European occupational safety directives and undermine the core principles of the Dutch Occupational Health and Safety Act. They stress that these changes could derail the Netherlands' goal of eliminating work-related fatalities by 2040. FNV Chair Kitty Jong stated that, 'Annually, 4,100 people die from work-related illnesses, and 200,000 are injured. Rolling back these protections will lead to more fatalities and injuries, all to appease a few business owners.'

The European silica dust limit value fails to protect

The Dutch Expert Committee on Occupational Safety (DECOS) warns that the current European limit for silica dust exposure (0.1 mg/m^3) poses a dangerously high risk of lung cancer for workers. DECOS calculates that a much lower concentration – 0.00038 mg/m^3 – would correspond to a relatively low risk. This stark contrast highlights the urgent need for stricter regulations. Silica, a common mineral found in rocks, sand and soil, becomes hazardous when disturbed through cutting or crushing, releasing a fine dust that, when inhaled, can cause silicosis and lung cancer. Workers in industries such as construction, mining, agriculture and manufacturing are at high risk, with one of the most pressing concerns being the processing of engineered stone. Over the past two decades, there has been a global surge in silicosis cases and lung cancer deaths among workers handling engineered stone, which is a material commonly used for countertops and contains over 93% silica. The nature of this industry, often reliant on casual or self-employed workers, exacerbates the risks due to poor regulation and unsafe working conditions. Given its inherent dangers, policymakers should consider following Australia's example and banning engineered stone in order to protect workers from preventable harm.

AI in the workplace: never losing sight of workers' health and safety

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping workplaces, presenting both opportunities and serious risks for workers. While AI can assist with repetitive tasks and improve efficiency, its integration often leads to increased workloads, stress and safety hazards, particularly observed with AI-based technologies such as collaborative robots and algorithmic management. These systems can intensify surveillance and reduce worker autonomy, affecting mental and physical health. Although EU Directive 89/391/EEC – also known as the OSH 'Framework Directive' – lays down general principles concerning the prevention and protection of workers against occupational accidents and diseases, it does not include specific provisions to regulate AI in the workplace. The new EU Artificial Intelligence Act – enforceable since February 2025 – introduces new obligations for AI system providers and employers. The AI Act classifies AI systems according to their potential risks and the impact they may have on individuals and society, including their impact on the safety and health of workers. Employers must ensure AI literacy among workers in order to raise awareness of AI's benefits and risks. The Act also bans AI software that produces unacceptable risk, such as systems for processing emotion recognition in the workplace, collecting and storing sensitive biometric data, or evaluating and rating employees' performance based on their behaviour.

A call to action on psychosocial risks on Workers' Memorial Day

On 28 April 2025, International Workers' Memorial Day, the ETUI and ETUC highlighted the urgent need to address psychosocial risks (PSR) at work – often the 'invisible' cause of suffering and death. They drew attention to some stark data: nearly one third of EU workers report experiencing stress, anxiety or depression as a result of their jobs, with burnout affecting up to 33% in some countries. In 2015 alone, over 10,000 deaths were linked to work-related cardiovascular disease and depression. The economic burden is immense, with cases of coronary heart disease related to PSR costing the EU up to 14.2 billion euros, and depression up to 103.1 billion euros – 87% of which is borne by employers through absenteeism and sick leave. This event emphasised that preventing PSR is not just an economic or legislative issue, but also a question of dignity and fundamental rights. The message was clear: protecting workers' mental health requires urgent and sustained action.

Look out for our next issue (#31) 'Integrating gender into occupational health and safety'

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