

NETPoste

Transformations and bargaining of work and employment in the European's postal services

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INTRODUCTION

European postal services are going through a period of major economic, organisational and technological changes: liberalisation of postal activities, privatisation of historical operators, decline of postal mail and redeploying workers to parcel distribution, automation of sorting centres, rationalisation of rounds... These in turn lead to considerable changes in working and employment conditions. Although trade union organisations are historically well-established among postal employees, they are being severely tested in terms of their efficiency, demands, strategies and practices.

Embedded in the framework of the European programme to support social dialogue, this research project has set out - in a very unfavourable context - to identify and describe the organisation and redeployment of key trade union conflict and negotiation practices in the field of work and employment in five European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Spain, the United Kingdom). It focuses on two of the main activities, mail and parcel post, and the employees who carry them out (mainly postmen and postwomen). One of the ambitions of this project is to help the affected trade union organisations disseminate and build on this experience.

This report presents the main findings of the research, which took place between April 2016 and March 2018, ending by an international conference in Brussels on the 9th March 2018, gathering the research teams and the unions, partners of the project.

A comparative approach is used in the first part of the report. It focuses on a cross-sectional analysis of the socio-economic contexts and the collective labour relations within the historical operators of the countries,. This makes possible to highlight the communalities and the national specificities. Particular attention is given to the modalities of trade union action - between consultation and conflictuality - on the quality of work and employment in the mail and parcel delivery centers where the survey has been conducted.

The second part is dedicated to the main trade union issues. The choice was made to analyze each issue within a specific national framework: the rationalization of postmen's work (Belgium), the problematic quality of work (Bulgaria), changes in working schedules and questions about the trade (France), job insecurity (Spain) and the consideration of health and aging at work (United Kingdom).

1. Cross-cutting lessons

This summary is the outcome of a cross-cutting analysis of research reports about the historical operators in five countries: bpost in Belgium, Bulgarski Poshti in Bulgaria, Correos y Telégrafos in Spain, La Poste in France, and Royal Mail in the United Kingdom.

The focus is on three specific aspects: contextual elements (1), collective labour relations (2) and challenges connected to work, employment and trade union action seen from the "field", i.e. the surveyed delivery centres (3).

The section about contextual elements addresses the issues of the liberalisation and shareholding of historical operators, the activities and results of these operators and, lastly, workers and their working and employment conditions.

The second part offers an insight into three essential aspects of collective labour relations: trade union stakeholders, the organisation of social dialogue and, lastly, remedies and the type of conflicts at play.

The third part reports on labour, employment and trade union activity dynamics in the "field", i.e. the mail delivery centres surveyed in the five countries.

1.1. Socio economic context

As regards the internal situation of the postal sector, it is important to point out that all the surveyed historical operators are old organisations - for example, Royal Mail is almost five hundred years old, the postal service of Correos is more than three hundred years old and Bulgarski Poshti was created in 1879 - and they have a strong legacy. Traditionally part of the public sector, they operated for many years as administrations, then later as public companies, and enjoyed – to different extents – a monopoly situation. Their employees were civil servants and their values were specific to public service. Collective labour relations have existed for a long time and have played a major role in the definition of working and employment conditions. Trade unions were traditionally strong and were able to make their point of view prevail.

Concerning the external environment, the five operators have been working in a particularly challenging - if not hostile - environment since 2000. On one hand, their situation has been deeply marked by the liberalisation policies carried out by the European Commission and, on the other, by the revolutionary developments in information and communication technologies. While liberalisation opened the postal market to competition and the privatisation of the historical operators, the generalisation of the use of the internet led to a dramatic and steady decrease of the volumes of mail to be delivered. By promoting the emergence of new ways of communicating, the internet has attacked the core business of the surveyed historical operators: the postman's trade. Ironically, the internet has also opened up new future prospects by promoting the development of e-commerce with more parcels to be delivered. In a nutshell, the external environment implied two major challenges: securing the sustainability of historical operators and repositioning themselves in activities with a future. These two challenges have strongly contributed to shaping the margin for manoeuvre of the stakeholders of the five surveyed operators.

Although none of the historical operators has managed to avoid these challenges, their responses have not been the same as a result of - among other factors - different societal contexts.

1.1.1. About liberalisation and shareholding

As the flagship of market liberalisation, the United Kingdom was first in totally liberalising the postal market. Liberalisation became effective as early as 2006. In the other four countries, it took place on 1 January 2011. In other words, all the surveyed operators have been working for at least 7 years in a fully competitive environment. If this competition has been effective since the beginning in parcel delivery, it has not been so much the case in mail delivery. Indeed, the sector does not seem very profitable or very promising for the future, and universal service obligations have been obstacles to the entry of new competitors.

With the exception of Royal Mail, totally privatised since 2015, the State retains control of the operators in the other countries: it is still the single owner of the historical operator in Bulgaria, Spain and France, while in Belgium it has been the majority shareholder since 2006. It is important to underline this because of its impact on the roles played by the different stakeholders, the power relations and the strategic vision. However, the presence of the State as single or majority shareholder does not necessarily curb the managerial obsession with financial results or the 'results' culture. The public shareholder rationale for action is not necessarily that of a strong public sector. Sometimes it boils down to making the "bride as pretty as possible" in order to make the most of her at the time of privatisation. In Belgium in recent years, the public shareholder has chiefly supported the plans of corporate management to turn the historical operator into a financially profitable international corporation. With that end in view, the State hired "top managers" from the private sector. The case of Belgium is also interesting because, even though the public shareholder's goal stays the same, different sensitivities have appeared, depending on the political parties in power and the party of the minister responsible for the postal sector. Finally, it should be noted that though the State is bpost's majority shareholder, an Act passed in December 2016 allows the privatisation of the company overnight. In the government's own words, privatisation would only be considered if required by the development plans of the operator and not for budgetary or ideological reasons, a statement rebutted by opposition parties. In Spain, the regulatory framework requires the approval of the Parliament to privatise Correos. In Bulgaria the situation is peculiar insofar as the historical operator is on a list of companies that cannot be privatised. In 2011, members of Parliament tried to get Bulgarski Poshti removed from this list, but they encountered strong trade union and citizen resistance.

At bpost and Royal Mail, the employees own a share of the equity of the company and, albeit this share at bpost is minimal and essentially symbolic - it is limited almost exclusively to senior executives -, the United Kingdom enjoys a substantially different situation as employee share ownership is close to 10%. Nevertheless, it is quite a diffuse shareholding which does not allow shareholders to influence decisions.

The degree of autonomy of management from their shareholders is not identical everywhere. Although in Belgium, France and the United Kingdom the management has a broad strategic and administrative autonomy, in Spain and Bulgaria - two countries where the State is the only shareholder - it seems weak and even non-existent. In the Bulgarian case, the operator is even under strong political influence.

In the five countries surveyed, the historical operators were entrusted with Universal Service (US) for variable periods of time: indefinite in the United Kingdom, 20 years in Bulgaria, 15 years in France and Spain against 5 years in Belgium, for instance. Typically, US implies providing postal services over the whole national territory at a specific level of quality and an affordable price. It also provides for public financial compensation in case of extra-cost incurred by performing its duties. The general framework is identical in all the countries, but implementation modalities differ. The French and British US, for instance, provides collection and delivery services 6 days

out of 7 while in Bulgaria, Belgium and Spain this obligation only applies 5 days out of 7. The attribution of US obligations is important because it provides predictability to historical operators while reducing competition-related risks.

1.1.2. About activities and results of historical operators

The positioning of historical operators in terms of activities is variable. While some of them have opted, in some cases long ago, for a diversification policy, others have remained attached to their core business: mail collection and delivery. While the French La Poste and the Belgian historical operator are also present in the parcels and bank insurance markets, Royal Mail still retains a virtual monopoly of mail collection and delivery while trying to gain new market shares in parcel delivery, whereas Correos y Telégrafos has remained very much focussed on traditional mail as its postal bank – Caja Postal – was privatised in 1991. This segment represents 74% of its turnover in 2014 against only 41% in France. In the Bulgarian case, traditional mail still prevails too. This diversification turns out to be of the utmost importance, as traditional mail is a declining activity, contrary to parcel delivery which is unanimously considered to have a promising future. It is also the most competitive segment with powerful competitors such as TNT, UPS, Fedex, DHL and, more recently, AMAZON.

Beside the diversification of products, a geographical diversification can also be observed. It is the case of bpost or La Poste, which have considerably developed their business abroad, especially in relation to parcel flow.

The economic and financial results of historical operators are key. Indeed, they considerably influence the power relations between management and trade unions. They also play a pivotal role in the development of demands and whether they are realistic or not. In 2015, three operators ended the financial year in profit: bpost, La Poste and Royal Mail. The Spanish and Bulgarian operators made losses. These results confirm a steady trend: the operators who made a profit in 2015 were also profitable in the last 10 financial years, while those who made losses in 2015 are structurally unprofitable.

1.1.3. About staff, working and employment conditions

The five historical operators that were analysed remain important work providers. At one extreme, the French La Poste with 224,000 workers in 2015 and at the other, the Bulgarian operator with 10,500 employees in 2016. Compared to classical employers, it is interesting to note that postal work is still geographically fragmented. Therefore, these historical players offer employment opportunities in regions where these are scarce. Having said that, in all five cases, the trend is to reduce headcount. For instance, Bulgarski Poshti reduced its staff by 36% between 2005 and 2015 and bpost by 30%. La Poste in France and Correos y Telégrafos followed suit with a headcount reduction of 26% and 23% respectively during the same period. These job losses stem from the need to reduce costs. To some extent, they are also the result of lower mail volumes and of the massive automation in mail sorting operations. The headcount reduction

has been a bit less sharp in the United Kingdom in the same period: -18% between 2006 and 2017.

A second prevailing trend is the replacement of statutory staff by private-law employees. The statutory workers seem quite obviously to be what remains of a time when the analysed operators were still fully public administrations and/or public companies. Whereas the change in Belgium, Spain and France was gradual, it happened more suddenly in the UK. Following the change of status of Royal Mail in 1969, the contracts of civil servants were converted into private contracts. Likewise in Bulgaria, where postal agents have become contract employees since the opening of the country to the market. Even though their numbers dwindle, statutory staff are still the majority in Belgium with 58%. However, they have now become the minority in France (45% in 2015) and even more so in Spain (32% in 2015). Finally, the third visible trend is the rise of 'atypical' forms of employment that goes hand in hand with the generalisation of private contracts. These may imply part-time work (maximum observed: 30% in the United Kingdom in 2016), fixed-term contracts (maximum observed: 20% in Spain) or even temp work, not to mention the use of subcontractors, quite frequent in parcel delivery in France but forbidden by the "Agenda for Growth" agreement signed between CWU and Royal Mail at the time of the privatisation of the company.

Among other observable features, let us highlight the following :

- Women are a majority in the French La Poste (52 % of the staff) and in the Bulgarian postal services (83 % of the staff). In the case of Bulgaria, the high number of women is a legacy of the socialist era when the full employment of women was crucial, and they gained social benefits (day-care centres, canteens) that are maintained at present because of the low salaries offered and available working patterns that encourage part-time work. The Spanish postal operator, on the other hand, employs as many women as men. In Belgium, bpost employs 32% of women and in the United Kingdom, Royal Mail employs only 14% of women in mail operations and 16% in total. In Belgium, Spain and France, we can talk about a real feminisation of postal trades, including the "postman". In France, this progressive feminisation has been observed for around four decades.
- A high average age, which has multiple consequences in terms of salary mass, absenteeism, work-related burnout or company culture. In this respect, we should mention the overwhelming majority of active postmen working for the five historical operators who were recruited before 1 January 2011, i.e. the date of total liberalisation of the market in the postal sector. As a result, many of them were socialised when postal services were still part of the public sector, and in certain cases still belonged to the public administration. They experienced the transition from the public sector-based framework, characterised by a service to citizens/ users, to one that is market-driven.
- Relatively low salaries as compared to the national labour market and therefore a lower attractiveness of the profession of postman in regions where unemployment is low in

Belgium, Bulgaria, Spain and France. For instance, in Bulgaria where their salary is close to minimum wages, the postal operator finds it difficult to hire workers in big cities. In the United Kingdom, in contrast, the lowest basic salaries are about 30% higher than the minimum wage, which is £7.83 per hour¹.

- A low level of education. Postal operators mainly employ unskilled staff. At bpost 70% of the staff only has a primary school leaving certificate at the most. In relation to the labour market as a whole, the postman's trade does not require a high level of skills.

Table 1: Employment at the historical operators (full-time equivalent, base 2015)

	Belgium	Bulgaria	Spain	France	United Kingdom
Total Employment	2015 : 24 000 2005 : 34 500	2016 : 10 500 2005 : 16 536	2015 : 50 153 2008 : 66 091	2015 : 224 000 2005 : 303 000	2017: 143 000 2007: 174 202
Evolution	- 31%	- 36%	- 24% in 7 years	- 26%	- 18 %
Employment in mail and parcel activity (% and effective)	76% 17 800	- -	No separation between both activities	70% 157 000	93 % 150 000 (2013)
% of statutory staff and civil servants (operator as a whole)	58%	0	31,8%	45%	0
% fixed-term contracts	2%	0	20,2%	6,7%	+/- 11%
% part time	26 %	28 % (2013)	23%	10 %	+/- 30 % (2016)
% women	32 %	83 % (2016)	50 %	52 %	+/- 16 % (2017)
% aged 50 and older	27,8 %*	27 % (2013)	No data	48%	Ageing workforce

* This percentage is based on the MSO department in charge of the collection, sorting, transport and distribution of letters and parcels, among others.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>

Finally, as regards collective labour relations, the unionisation rate of the staff for the five operators is relatively high as compared to their respective national context. In decreasing order, it reaches 95% in Bulgaria, 80% in Belgium and 70% in Spain. In the UK, it is an estimated 80% at least among employees and more than 70% of local managers. In France, it is estimated to be between 15 and 20%. Trade unions relevance is therefore a well-established reality that is also the legacy of a time when postal employees were employed by the State and the public service and being a member of a trade union was part and parcel of their professional culture. As previously mentioned, postal workers' trade unions are faced with considerable challenges and pressure on employment and working conditions. In Belgium, the fear that the company as such might disappear has played a strong role in the acceptance, with resignation, of projects backed up by management. The trade union challenge is more often than not to safeguard a maximum of so-called "quality jobs" at the cost of both quantitative and qualitative "sacrifices". In Spain, for the same reason, trade union members are currently demanding the implementation of a modernisation and diversification policy within the historical operator. Moreover, concessions were made in a political context that was very much averse to trade unionism. A context that in most European countries was marked by the burden of unemployment and job insecurity, the influence of neo-liberalism, the disintegration of ideologies and/or the electoral collapse of the parties that were traditionally close to trade-unions.

However, the challenges for trade union stakeholders are also part of the diversification process of the professional profile of postmen and other employees in terms, for instance, of age differences (young vs old), gender (men vs women) or even the multiplication of ethnic origins. They will therefore have to identify common denominators that make it possible to reconcile all those diversities, to encourage the emergence of shared demands and of strong union practices. In other words, the challenge is to renew the trade union basis: from statutory workers to a wide range of different wage earners as compared to the past.

1.2. Collective labour relations

1.2.1. About trade union stakeholders

Nowadays, trade union stakeholders are utterly plural. In total, 20 trade union organisations have been identified at the five historical operators (see table below with the names of all the organisations). The French La Poste has the largest number - 8 with a total of 5 getting more than 10% of the votes at the social elections - and Royal Mail has the smallest number - 2 organisations. The identified trade unions are almost systematically affiliated to multi-sectoral organisations. On the whole, the trade unions have members from all the categories of postal employees. The only noticeable exception is the United Kingdom, where one single organisation affiliates the operational staff - CWU - and another one the executives - CMA-UNITE.

Table 2 : The trade union organisations of the five historical operators

Historical operator	Trade union organisations	Representativity ²
bpost (Belgium)	Centrale Générale des Services Publics (CGSP) - Postal sector, affiliated to Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique (FGTB)	4 representatives
	CSC-Transcom- Postal sector, affiliated to Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens (CSC)	3 representatives
	Syndicat Libre de la Fonction Publique (SLFP)- Postal sector affiliated to Centrale Générale des Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique (CGSLB)	2 representatives
Bulgarski Poshti (Bulgaria)	Trade Union Federation of Communications (TUFC), affiliated to the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CITUB)	8 500 members
	Communications Federation (PTTF) Podkrepa, affiliated to the Confederation of Labour Podkrepa (CL Podkrepa)	2 800 members
	Democratic Syndicate of Communications (DSC), affiliée à l'Association of Democratic Trade Unions (ADTU)	240 members
Correos y Telégrafos (Spain)	Confederación Sindical de CCOO (Comisiones Obreras)	34.3 %
	Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT)	21.2 %
	Confederación Sindical Independiente y de Funcionarios (CSI-F)	-
	Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT)	-
	Sindicato Libre (SL) de Correos	-
Las confederaciones sindicales nacionalistas de las comunidades autónomas del País Vasco y Galicia	-	
La Poste (France)	Fédération nationale des salariés du secteur des Activités Postales et de Télécommunications de la Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT)	26 %
	Fédération des syndicats PTT Solidaires Unitaires et Démocratiques (SUD)	20 %
	Fédération syndicaliste Force Ouvrière de la Communication (FO)	19.5 %
	Fédération Communication, Conseil, Culture de la Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT-3C)	22.5 %
	Fédération des Postes et des Télécommunications de la Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC – P/T)	-
	Syndicat national des cadres CFE – CGC de La Poste (CGC)	6.5 %
	Fédération Postes de l'Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes (UNSA)	-
Fédération des Postes et Télécommunications de la Confédération Nationale du Travail (CNT).	-	
Royal Mail (Great Britain)	Communication Workers Unions (CWU)	80%
	Unite the Union (Unite) : CMA-UNITE	70%

² About representativity : In Belgium it is based on the number of seats held by the three trade union organisations represented within the Commission Nationale des Postes. The awarding of seats is based on the count of the members performed every 6 years. In Bulgaria, representativity is based on the number of members declared by the different unions. In Spain and France, it is based on the percentage of members declared by the different trade unions.

This diversity of organisations gives an idea of the variety of possible positions when dealing with the evolution of the postal sector and the measures proposed by the management. In addition, these positions can change through time. Although the ideological dimension and principled positions remain, certain trade unions have (had to) adopt a pragmatic approach and make significant concessions. Often cornered in a defensive posture with their "backs to the wall", they sometimes had no other alternative but to choose between "the plague and cholera". In addition, apart from very few exceptions, these trade unions are competing directly with each other. Their representativeness either depends on a member counting procedure - as in Belgium, Bulgaria and the United Kingdom -, or on elections - as in France and Spain. This competition probably makes them review some of their positions in order to differentiate themselves, but it does not preclude them from occasionally coming together depending on the matters at stake and the interests involved. Finally, strategic positions should also be analysed according to the rules of the game in the different countries. In Belgium for example, a collective labour agreement (CLA) must get 2/3 of the votes in the postal sector joint committee, i.e. at least 12 votes out of 18 to be effective. The management, whose vote is always unanimous, and the trade unions have 9 votes each. As a result, a CLA needs three votes from the trade union bench to become effective. Given the current distribution of seats, either one of the two organisations can cast enough votes to validate the collective agreement: CGSP has 4 seats and CSC has 3.

Two main types of trade union positions seem to emerge. While certain trade unions seem to be more supportive and compromising, others are more confrontational and tension-inducing. These positions sometimes seem to be a legacy of the past and/or the result of a medium- to long-term strategic and tactical reflection about the future of the operator as well as about the competing organisations. The analysis shows that being supportive does not mean avoiding conflicts and never calling for strike actions. This is the case, in particular, in Belgium, where CGSP has adopted an attitude of compromise since around 2005, and in the United Kingdom, where issues of economic performance are taken into account in the negotiations. This does not prevent trade union organisations from these two countries from issuing strike warnings and effectively triggering strikes or, in the United Kingdom, from organising votes in favour of strikes. In these particular cases, going on strike seems to be the last resort intended to bring the adversary to make more concessions in order to reach an agreement. More dissenting trade unions, however, are quicker in calling for strikes, which are intended to create power relations that force more substantial concessions. Of course, the potential collective mobilisation capacity of the workers influences these trade union orientations. Interviews carried out in countries with more dissenting trade unions often converge in underlining the current difficulties involved in mobilising postal workers.

1.2.2. About social dialogue

Beyond national specificities, all the historical operators seem to have well-established and highly codified social dialogue practices based on committees, councils and/or commissions. These bodies are either of general competence, meaning that they address a wide range of

topics or, conversely, are relatively specialised in one specific field or other such as health and safety at work, employment or training, as in Correos y Telégrafos where this kind of specialisation is particularly developed. These bodies are also differentiated according to their geographical coverage. In Belgium, for instance, there is a national joint committee but also regional, area and local committees. These committees fit into each other like Russian dolls.

With the exception of the United Kingdom, it is therefore apparent that the historical operators' social dialogue is structured in a grid or meshing pattern which basically stems from the geographical dispersion of postal activities over quite vast territories. In terms of collective labour relationships, it has at least two sizeable consequences. First, a multiplication of trade union mandates that potentially favours the presence of trade unions at all levels and the existence of what could be called "proximity" trade-unionism, even if it implies a risk, more serious in the United Kingdom, of isolation of the workers' representatives confronting company managers who are often not keen on complying with trade union rights and even tend to suppress trade union activity. Secondly, this architecture potentially allows a reconciling of the centralisation and the decentralisation of social dialogue. In principle, it boosts the responsiveness of local hierarchies when faced with discontent in specific post offices. The aim is to prevent the growth of discontent, something that happened several times in Belgium during the first decade of this century. In parallel, this meshing facilitates the transmission of information from the bottom to the top of the organisation while offering the possibility of adapting decisions made at higher levels, albeit within the limits of the autonomy left to local managers.

At national level, a distinction can be made between what falls within planned social negotiations and unplanned negotiations. In the first case, things are organised around the regular negotiation of collective labour agreements (CLAs) the duration of which can vary slightly from country to country. In Belgium and Bulgaria, they cover a period of two years while only just one in the case of France and the UK. The topics included in planned negotiations are the typical ones of social negotiations and are mentioned in all national reports, among others salaries, employment conditions, end-of-career management, retirements schemes, etc. Some reports highlight slightly more specific issues such as profit sharing, gender equality, disabilities or teleworking in the case of France; individual performance plans and the exercise of trade union activity in Bulgaria; subcontracting and franchising systems in the UK. Unplanned negotiations on the other hand are essentially driven by projects supported by company management. In Belgium, this was particularly the case when the first versions of Georoute (a postmen delivery rounds management software) were launched and, more recently, with the introduction of the MSO plan, the objective of which is to increase working time. In France, it recently led to an ambiguous agreement « Postmen 2017 »: some trade union organisations understand it as such (initiative of management to anticipate the social impacts of its strategic orientations) while others perceive it as the expression of a far-reaching, or even conflictive, social unrest.

1.2.3 About the conflictive nature of social relations

The research highlights a strongly conflictive nature of social relations in the case of bpost, La Poste and Royal Mail. The latter is described as the most conflictive company in the country. It is an open kind of conflicts that leads to calling strikes and going on strike. The intensity of conflicts could be measured by the number of strike days and varies over time. The social history of operators is therefore characterised by an alternation between periods of severe tensions and periods of “social peace”.

Conflicts can happen at national or local level. If they have a national dimension, they will result from projects that are specific to a historical operator and its staff. In the UK for instance, the process of the privatisation of Royal Mail led to severe strife in 2013. However, national actions can also be part of wider dynamics such as the defence of the public sector, the fight against government projects or, as it is the case in Spain, against the freeze of CLA negotiations. The trade unions of the postal sector participate very actively in such initiatives. At the same time, the analysed historical operators typically experience relatively recurrent local conflicts. This is the result of the exasperation at the grass roots level following a chaotic implementation of changes, as was the case in Belgium, in France and in the United Kingdom when a rounds management software was introduced, or of recurrent organisational or management problems. More specifically, such conflicts can emerge when rounds are cancelled, when working time is systematically increased or when headcount is in short supply.

National conflicts can result from two different processes: the first one is top-down; in this specific case, the trade union organisations are at the source of the conflict since they are the ones that decide to take action, to enter into open conflict. This is the case, among others, in Bulgaria where trade unions oppose privatisation - in 2009, they launched a nationwide petition which collected 211.000 signatures – or their protests against low salaries and the non-payment of the budget compensation supposed to cover the universal service. The second one is bottom-up, i.e. the ownership of the national dimension emerges as being taken back by the local conflictive organisations with a geographical dissemination. Trade union organisations are reacting to pressure, or even to the “spill-over effect” of the grass roots bodies. As opposed to this, in the top-down situation, it is the trade union organisations that are at risk of not being followed – or hardly followed – by the grass roots. However, certain local conflicts remain local. This has been observed in Belgium and in Spain and stems from the structure of social dialogue and the presence of negotiating partners in the field with the capacity to negotiate compromises.

Social conflicts are nearly always defensive. They fight back against the consequences of political and managerial decisions adopted by the historical operators as service providers, particularly concerning working and employment conditions. Such a defensive approach has been present for some time now. Obviously, the liberalisation of the postal sector and the decline of mail volumes have strongly contributed to cornering trade union stakeholders in such a position. In Belgium, the topic of working time reduction clearly illustrates the transition from an offensive position to a defensive one. In 2000, trade unions managed to obtain a reduction of weekly

working hours from 38 to 36 hours. The “RTT” is embedded in the 2001-2004 Collective Labour Agreement (CLA) This marks an important trade union victory both with effects on society as a whole and on a company meaning to reduce headcount. At the end of 2004, the management who had signed the CLA breached it on the grounds that it threatened the financial balance that the company was close to recovering after two years of deficit. Moreover, they argued it was going against the general evolution. At the end of October 2004, the socialist Minister in charge of public companies supported that position. He said that he fully understood “that trade unions might feel outraged by an employer signing an agreement and later backing out of it” but he added that the “decision made” was not “optimal”. While denouncing employment blackmail and breach of the agreement, trade unions negotiated the withdrawal of the "RTT" against compensation measures or other solutions. Trade unions started then losing their capability to impose their own solutions, as management was becoming increasingly inflexible and pushing for changes. Since then, more often than not, the employers impose their demands and dictate the contents of the negotiations. For the trade union movement, the goal is now to limit the damaging consequences of the employers' demands for working and employment conditions in an environment of general deterioration.

Finally, let us mention that strike opportunities vary from country to country. The UK is the country with the strictest conditions: strikes are a more complicated process because of mandatory procedures. In order to be legally accepted, a strike has to be approved by secret ballot organised by judicial officials and at least 30% of favourable votes must be cast out of a minimum participation rate of 50%. However, in Belgium they are decided by the trade union organisations and governed by internal procedures. In the other countries, strikes have to meet specific criteria but to a lesser extent than in the UK, and “wildcat strikes” are possible.

1.3. Work, employment and trade union action, from the perspective of the surveyed delivery centres

Our field studies have focused - on all five countries - on mail delivery centres of variable sizes, in addition to a dedicated parcel delivery centre in France. In the Spanish case, the “field” has been extended to other postmen who were not employed by the surveyed centre and to counter staff in post offices.

Table 3. The « fields» studied

France	A "Hugo" Mail Delivery Centre (40 postmen), reports to the Mail Preparation and Delivery Platform of the Aix-en-Provence area (290 agents). Performs part of the mail general sorting collection and delivery through four delivery centres. One of the two <u>Parcel Delivery Agencies</u> , "Papin" (44 agents, excluding subcontractors) of the city of Marseille.
Belgium	<u>Mail Center (MC) of Mons</u> (400 agents). Responsible for the finalisation and delivery of mail and parcels. One main centre (Ghlin) and four decentralised delivery offices.
Spain	<u>Jerez de la Frontera n°1 Delivery Centre</u> (51 postmen), under the authority of the province of Cadiz (750 agents). Performs the delivery of mail and small parcels (up to 2 kg).
Bulgaria	<u>Sofia Postal Delivery Office</u> (45 postmen, 170 agents). Performs mail sorting and delivery.
United Kingdom	<u>"North way" Mail Centre</u> , in an urban area (1000 agents, 30 delivery centres), performs mail and parcel sorting and delivery. <u>"Plain" Delivery Centres</u> (95 agents, 70 to 80 postmen) and <u>"Hill" Delivery Centre</u> (130 agents).

1.3.1. Work (organisation, conditions, contents, time...)

The postal activity of the surveyed delivery units primarily focusses on the distribution of mail and parcels and, as a result, on the work of postmen. They are indeed the most numerous and the most emblematic professional group in the mail delivery chain. The changes they experience in their work, employment and collective labour relations are indicative of broader changes in postal activities.

The consequences of the major common trends are visible in all five cases, but with uneven degrees of progress. It should be remembered that these developments stem from technical and organisational changes in postal activities that are produced by a business approach based on productivity and payroll savings in a context of uneven vitality of the different market segments. In particular, while postal mail is in decline, parcels of variable sizes grow, while printed advertising appears to be stable or on the rise. The way in which new developments affect the day-to-day work and experience of postmen will depend on the way the delivery of objects of different types is organised and shared out. The computerisation of tracking procedures of objects also has an impact on work and workers. It should be stressed that the number of objects is as important as their quality. However, the increase in parcels, the stability or growth of unaddressed advertising - without even mentioning longer delivery rounds although the volume of objects remains constant - seem quite systematically underestimated in

managerial evaluations of the workload. Hence, the contrast between the general experience of a heavier workload, which goes hand-in-hand with the ageing of the workforce, and the managerial vision of labour.

Therefore, the effects of the five main trends in the transformation of postal activities can be identified more or less clearly in all the fields surveyed, under the constraint of overall headcount reduction and gradual replacement of stable employment with precarious workers (the inseparable nature of the "employment" and "work" dimensions is highly visible in the different monographies, showing that the NETPoste project was right in insisting to deal with both together) :

- The growing automation and centralisation of mail sorting and preparation, which directly leads to the transfer of these operations from postmen to sorting operators and which, in the long run, facilitates the division of the postman's work into sorting and delivery operators, although this division is still uncommon in our case studies.
- The previous quantification of tasks by using software tools.
- The restructuring frequency, justified by the decline in mail volumes.
- The questioning, when it existed, of the "tenure" of delivery rounds closely linked to the degree of precariousness of the agents.
- The lengthening of working hours and later working hours (especially in France).

1) The automation of mail sorting and preparation before delivery hours leads to the decrease - and even disappearance - of "indoor work" and to the lengthening of rounds - "outdoor work" (France, Belgium, Bulgaria...). In some cases, the postmen and postwomen are totally relieved of the sorting/preparation operations of their round. In the Sofia (Bulgaria) delivery centre, this separation between people exclusively responsible for sorting and those responsible for delivery is clearly visible, but this kind of division of labour is not - or not yet - generalised in the country. In France, this form of organisation of labour is called "bag rounds"; they are a quite recent and gradual development but they are not, or not yet, visible in the case studied. This model also exists in Belgium but not in the case of the Mons Mail Center.

This evolution raises several issues. First of all, the last stage of automation of sorting - the organisation of mail per round, according to the delivery order in the postman's round - is sometimes not the best solution according to the configuration of the round. Secondly - but this feature is unevenly present in the different countries although it is strong in France and in the United Kingdom -, the heart of the postman's profession, efficiency and professionalism hinges on having the preparation and delivery operations carried out by the same worker, stabilised on a territory he/she knows. The division between these two operations can lead to the deskilling and casualisation of these two new professional profiles, which replace the postman, i.e. the sorting agent and the delivery agent. It can also favour the development of versatility in rounds. Finally, longer rounds, even becoming a full-time activity for 6 or 7 hours every day, could tend to compound the issues of wear and tear and onerous work which are already characteristics of the trade in ordinary conditions.

At the same time, it is worth asking whether the figure of the postman is identified everywhere as such in the professions' names. We notice that, in the United Kingdom, they call them "postmen" ("postier" in French), which implies that the identification with postal activity prevails over the identification with one of their occupations, even though it is the most visible in the public sphere, and furthermore one of the most "popular" in the French case.

2) The question of the rationalisation of delivery through the previous quantification of operations and use of software tools, which have become prescriptive since the early 2000s, has been most particularly taken into account and studied by the Belgian and French teams. These tools were also introduced in 2006 in the United Kingdom and it is most likely they are also used in Spain, but not in Bulgaria, where management methods have remained more traditional with few changes compared to the 1980s and 90s. In Europe, Belgium seems to have been the only country that imported the tool from Canada. It can be noted that the use of these methods has gradually been put in place when the decline in ordinary mail has become clear and when it has started producing systematic and recurrent restructuring of delivery, through headcount reduction, and of rounds, via the extension of their perimeter. In a nutshell, a technical- scientific justification of the workload and working time calculation has replaced an empirical justification - supervision by a coach - as soon as productivity gains have become a higher priority.

The deeper issues that arise here are - at least - of three different types. The first is that this mode of evaluation and prescription of labour implies the existence of an "average" - and constant over time - postman in terms of professional skills. It therefore inevitably leads to underestimating the effects of his/her uneven performance that arises specifically from ageing and professional wear and tear. The second one is that it is based on summing up "average" periods of basic operations, which is particularly unsuitable concerning delivery because of the particular nature of each round and the daily uncertainties involved. The third is that it is impossible to take into account the interactions between postman and users, but these selfless relations are highly valued by postmen, who consider them the most interesting and gratifying aspect of their trade. This so-called "social ties" function is directly called into question by the pressure to accelerate the speed of delivery and by the push towards the commodification of the services provided. In France, for example, the idea of computing (in time and money) visits paid to elderly people comes into direct conflict with the professional ethics of older postmen.

It is understandable that this kind of rationalisation of delivery work has given rise to protests, conflicts - at least in three of the countries surveyed: Belgium, France and the United Kingdom - and reached as far as the arena of "social dialogue", and even of bargaining. Yet, the much-criticised tools are still in place and used. In France, the management has always refused to reveal their intentions to the trade union organisations or to Health and Safety at Work committees despite repeated requests, echoed by the groups of experts working for these Committees, among others. In Belgium however, the Georoute software was introduced as early as 2001, and its consequences have been subject to social dialogue. It is true that these tools may appear, despite everything, as means to reduce load differences between one round and another; in addition, they are supposed to include procedures that enable postmen to present

their real workload and demand a review of their round. Hence in France, the "facteurs 2017" agreement repeatedly goes into detail on these procedures, and the "organisers" responsible for load calculations have been brought closer to the work centres. It is also true in Belgium, with the relocation in Mail Centers, regarding the preparatory restructuring work, and "browsing", an individual choice offered to the postmen to change their services based on agreement with their managers.

3) There are other strong similarities between Belgium and France in terms of the benchmark frequency - every two years - and the local modalities and procedures of restructuring. They are very formalised and leave much room for "social dialogue", either in the form of consultation or bargaining. The coexistence of the communication and dialogue efforts made by management and the frequent tensions and conflicts typical of delivery restructuring is only an apparent paradox. In reality, despite the "social dialogue" mechanisms meant to prevent those conflicts as much as possible, they clearly express the differences between the management's views and the postal workers' perspective of workload assessment.

4) The only one of the five cases where apparently there is no strong tradition of stabilisation or "tenure" of rounds is Sofia, in Bulgaria. Postmen/women are somewhat versatile, as each one of them knows 4 urban "districts" covered by his/her team in addition to 2 more districts usually covered by other teams. This allows interchangeability of workers in case of sickness leave or holidays. In Spain, a certain stability in rounds also seems to exist because "the routes are usually set for each postman, but with a tendency to expand" (round lengthening process that exists in the other four countries too). In France, where postmen are traditionally very much attached to the "sale" of neighbourhoods - and even had the practice recognised in collective agreements³ -, the number of postmen who have "tenure" of their round tends to decrease in parallel with the creation of more jobs for versatile postmen, and the splitting or booking of rounds for specific profiles. It is estimated that a third of them do not have "tenure" of their rounds, a proportion mirrored at the "Hugo" delivery centre. The main access criterion to have tenure of a round, and later to rounds considered particularly interesting, is seniority. In practice, versatile postmen and postwomen are, in addition to those with a fixed-term contract, the most junior employees. In Belgium, tenure is enshrined in national rules and differentiated according to employment status: it is more fragile for the auxiliary delivery agents who only enjoy it between two restructuring processes. Likewise, in the United Kingdom, tenure is also governed by national rules that regulate access to rounds in a very precise way, according to seniority criteria among others. However, when the round "owners" are absent their rounds are sorted by other colleagues during their working hours and then systematically entrusted for delivery to other postmen who volunteered for working overtime.

³ For instance: "Booking rounds [for new postmen, employment of older workers, taking disabilities into account] does not preclude the allocation ("sale") of neighbourhoods at all". Services-Mail-Parcel Branch Agreement, February 2017.

Tenure of a round or versatility among several rounds are key aspects that determine the vision of the profession and its likely future. Two typical figures are opposed: the postman, who has taken "ownership" in the full sense of the word of a territory within which he/she is known and recognised as a familiar figure and where he is a catalyst for "social ties", and the couriers, anonymous or unknown because they change too often, people who may just as well be totally invisible from the perspective of the user-customer.

The postman's round, whatever the means of transport used - varying between our five delivery units according to the urban configuration and the type of object delivered - is still largely a solitary job. From that point of view, the original organisation of labour of the United Kingdom is worth highlighting: it involves teams of two postmen who travel together in a van before going on - separately - to deliver on their section of the round. However, as the duration of the preparation of the rounds and delivery periods is only rarely identical, it involves waiting time. The same problem has been observed in France, where they tried out delivering in pairs, or even with three or four people. In any case, it clearly shows the individual and uncertain nature of delivery, which is the stumbling block of many attempts at streamlining the management of this operation.

5) The lengthening of daily working hours, particularly of "outdoor workers" (rounds), under the dual influence of automation of sorting operations and the increase in the workload, which in France is topped up by the introduction of a "Midday break" of 45 minutes.

Working hours vary between countries. In the United Kingdom or in Bulgaria, post collection still takes place very early in the morning (06:30) but the day ends earlier in the UK, between 13:00 and 14:00 with variations from day to day and a 40-minute break, as opposed to 15:30 in Sofia. The issue of working time is very sensitive in the United Kingdom, where the labour legislation only lays down a maximum weekly working time of 48 hours over 17 weeks on average. The employer must not exceed this but any wage earner may exceed it provided they are at least 18 years old and apply for it in writing. At Royal Mail, the last labour dispute ended in a collective agreement that provides for a two-stage two-hour reduction of the weekly working time, first from 39 to 38 hours a week in 2018. It is the only one of the five countries where the traditional demand to reduce working time has been partly successful in recent times. In Spain, post collection takes place later (07:30), and the day ends at 15:30; the "job and finish" principle is not in use but it should be pointed out that counter staff are organised in two shifts, from 08:00 to 15:00 and from 12:00 to 21:00, and they may not work overtime. The Spanish postmen of the surveyed delivery centre have a "late" lunch after returning home (but they have a paid bocadillo [sandwich] break of up to half an hour). In Belgium, the "job and finish" principle is still applied; working time is not recorded and, with certain exceptions, overtime is never paid. The agents come in around 07:00 in Mons, with variations according to their "service", and leave around 14:00-15:00; nowadays only very few postmen manage to finish earlier and enjoy the "job and finish" principle. In the Hugo French centre, since its recent restructuring, official mail collection takes place much later, at 08:15 for most postmen. In France and in Belgium, there are postmen who arrive earlier in order to finish work earlier or enjoy some social life with their colleagues,

or else go about their round in a more laid-back way. In Bulgaria, postmen may leave earlier if their job is done, a quite widespread albeit unofficial practice.

Compliance with official working times is an issue in most case studies because mail traffic and parcels to be delivered vary from one day to the next - without mentioning seasonal fluctuations - and because the labour force at hand is calculated on the basis of very tight, unplanned leaves and/or leaves for which there is no available replacement, i.e. that must be offset by increasing the working hours of the available postmen. It used to be one of the reasons for the existence of the "job and finish" principle. As, among others, this practice has been receding, it has become more common to split rounds (in France), to prioritise urgent traffic such as parcels (in Spain) or to resort to sometimes unpaid overtime (in Belgium or in the United Kingdom for instance). In this last case, because of the labour shortage, it is impossible to get time off as compensation for the additional working hours, and it is becoming very difficult to get paid leave on requested dates. This situation is also well-known in France, where it is often a bone of contention though it has been mentioned very little in our survey on the Hugo centre.

Saturday work is a clear differentiator between countries. In France, as in the United Kingdom, Saturday work is the rule. In France it is a day of the universal service provided 6 days out of 7. In Spain, there is no universal service on Saturdays and no delivery at all by the centre studied. Belgium has a middle-of-the road situation with no universal service on Saturdays but delivery of parcels and newspapers. There has been a dispute about higher Saturday pay which has ended in a trade union defeat despite a few concessions by the employer. In Sofia, postmen/women regularly work on Saturdays (one or two a month) but with a lighter load (a few letters or newspapers). As in France, they have another day off every week in addition to Sundays. Of course, these differences have an impact on the working time experience, for example in France, where postmen and women claim that Saturday work is a constraint of the profession that vindicates their opposition to the lengthening of the working day.

In the five countries, the question of the impact of the heavier workloads on health at work and career-ends. arises. The United Kingdom has the most sensitive situation in this regard because of the low replacement income in cases of disability or early retirement. It has led to timid measures in France and in Belgium, which are far from responding to trade union demands justified by professional wear and tear and the lengthening of working life as a result of the pension scheme reforms. In Belgium, there is the possibility to work part-time from 55 years of age, and there are a few posts adapted to older workers, but not enough. In France there is the "Temps Partiel Aménagé" (adapted part-time) which makes working time lighter for those who are close to retirement age, although under more restrictive conditions, as well as "reserved rounds" (without splitting) for senior employees. In the Hugo centre, most seniors have also obtained exemption from the "midday break" after the last restructuring. It should be noted that the issue of the onerous nature of work and wear and tear is even more susceptible to parcel handling, where there are only very few earmarked posts for older workers.

However, heavy workloads and the onerous nature of work do not only affect older workers; from that perspective, data on absenteeism belie the commonly-held opinion whereby protective employment promotes sick leave.

Mobility and redeployment in the course of one's working life is an issue for the operators of the five countries. The Spanish case is particularly interesting, as postmen who are civil servants seize career-end opportunities of voluntary mobility towards other administrations where the work is easier.

1.3.2 Employment

The effects of managerial choices in terms of employment are felt in all five case studies - headcount reduction, partial renewal of staff by replacing workers with protective status by less protected employees - and are closely intertwined with the work challenges we have pointed out above and with the challenges brought about by the multiple divisions within the working community and the related difficulties of trade union action.

Headcount reduction takes place in the five countries and in the five case studies without downright dismissals⁴ but by not replacing most of those who retire, mainly the older generations of postmen with civil servant status. This reduction can take place at an impressive pace, as in the Spanish centre of Jerez de la Frontera (one job out of four lost during the last year). It mechanically leads to the ageing of the workforce while at the same time productivity demands are on the rise. It also implies that departures can be induced by managerial pressure of various kinds, including penalties imposed to workers considered to be professionally unsuitable (individual dismissal, more or less forced resignation, "contract termination").

In at least three countries and case studies (France, Belgium and Spain), the diversification of employment boils down to three different statuses :

- The civil servant: when he/she has not disappeared, as in the United Kingdom, it is becoming extinct because operators no longer recruit employees with this status (France, Spain, Belgium). There are differences in the pace of this evolution which are still to be interpreted: very advanced in Spain, maybe because of the more frequent voluntary mobility towards other Administrations - much less in Belgium, with France being in an intermediate situation.
- The contract employee with a private law open-ended contract (France), the contract employee with a seniority scale (Belgium), the stable contract employee (Spain): without the statutory protection of civil servants, they enjoy a certain stability and have seen their status get closer to that of civil servants. For instance, in France, they have had the opportunity "to buy" rounds. In Belgium, the status of civil servant and contract employee with a seniority scale is being gradually replaced by the 'auxiliary delivery agent' status, whose introduction has led to serious strife and bargaining, which has in

⁴ It is common knowledge that all the historical operators have not made this choice. See the case of The Netherlands.

turn resulted in their being hired on the basis of open-ended full-time - and no longer part-time - contracts, but with a 20% lower salary grid. The auxiliary delivery agents are almost one third of the employees of the Mons Mail Centre. They only have provisional "tenure" of their round during the two years between two restructuring processes.

- The precarious worker, whose status is quite diverse in each country. In the surveyed centre and in mail delivery in general in France, they mainly have fixed-term contracts (10 to 15% in the Hugo centre, 13% in the whole PPDC (Mail preparation and Delivery Platform)), while the centres specialised in parcels delivered in urban areas increasingly subcontract and hire temp workers for the end-of-year peak period. In this end-of-year period, Royal Mail also resorts to fixed-term contract hiring on an enormous scale. Specific contracts, much less advantageous than permanent employees' contracts, are offered. However, with the exception of that period, the operator has pledged, through the "Agenda for Growth" agreement signed with the CWU in 2013, to resort only very occasionally to this type of fixed-term or temp work contracts and only for periods of a maximum of two months. In exchange, the workers accept to work a lot of overtime - up to 30 hours a week – to absorb workload fluctuations. In Belgium, next to the "auxiliary" agents under open-ended contracts, there is a limited number of fixed-term contracts and temp workers who fulfil the two typical functions of carrying out the extra work and being a labour force in reserve. In Spain, temp workers, known as "eventuales" (casual workers), are 24% of Correos' workforce; apart from that, they also have a high number of part-time workers (23%).

In the case of the Sofia (Bulgaria) centre, the only employment status is the full-time open-ended contract (whereas the national operator has a growing number of part-time employees). It is likely that low wages and the associated very high turnover makes it useless - or very difficult - to resort to flexible forms or employment in such a big city.

The case of France is worth noting as they seem to have put an end (in 2017) to the reduction of headcount in the wake of the agreement struck in February 2017 in the mail branch of the operator. At the time, the management had pledged to hire 3000 workers on open-ended contracts, yet it has recently announced 4700 recruitments. Provided there have not been more voluntary departures than in the previous years and the fixed-term contracts employment volume has been stable, this could imply a stabilisation of the headcount, which would be extraordinary given the prevailing trend in recent years. Our field study carried out at the end of 2017 has not, however, recorded any significant effect of this change on the operating conditions of the Hugo centre. The point is that, in order to make sure there is really a higher headcount in delivery offices, besides stabilising employment on the whole, the rise in absenteeism due to illnesses or occupational accidents must be halted.

In all cases except Bulgaria (where precariousness stems more from wages than from contracts), it is clear that the use of precarious employment status makes work more onerous, mainly because the most precarious workers are assigned to replacement tasks and, as they are less familiar with the rounds, they have more difficulties in ensuring the right level of quality of their

work and doing it within the time allotted. To top it all, they are those with the least forward visibility of their work schedule. In the Spanish case, the "part-time temporary" workers are very precarious figures responsible for the delivery of "notifications" from public administrations in the afternoons. We have another such figure in France, with the parcel agencies' subcontracted workers, whose daily workload can be twice as heavy as that of parcel couriers.

This last example shows the tremendous challenges trade unions are faced with. The employees of subcontracted companies are not hired by the 'historical operator', but often by much smaller companies under contracts that respond to a social dumping logic, where they are frequently not covered by any collective agreement and have no employee representative body, and often fall into the area of competence of other trade union federations, and/or have anti-trade union practices. It is therefore very complicated - to say the least - for trade unions to achieve a proper presence in those places.

1.3.3. Trade unionism

At the five postal operators, and to a certain extent in our five case studies, trade unionism still has a strong, largely historically inherited presence. It is probably most obvious in Belgium and in the United Kingdom, as in recent years trade unions have been able to fight and bargain to reach agreements that have limited management ambitions. In contrast with Spain, and even more so with France, these struggles had been programmed at national level and were not sudden local uncoordinated clashes. In the Mons distribution centre in Belgium, as well as in the Plain and Hill centres in the United Kingdom trade unions have a strong legitimacy and the expectations of wage-earners seem more in tune with their perception of trade union practices than elsewhere. In the surveyed delivery centres of at least of two countries (in France and even more so in Bulgaria), trade union presence in the field is weak compared to what could be expected given the trade union weight within the operator as a whole. Certain workers are affiliated to trade unions, despite being critical of their work, as in Bulgaria, but they probably keep their membership to benefit from the collective labour agreements. On the other hand, even first level managers are affiliated and take part in trade union activities, thus contributing to maintaining the image of proximity between trade unions and the management.

In Spain, the very high trade union membership rate does not prevent a certain critical distance of members, who sometimes blame dominant trade unions for being too institutionalised. Currently, the position of wage-earners vis-à-vis trade unions is ambiguous and depends on their category. On the whole, the trade union affiliation rate is very high (80%), as is participation rate in trade union elections and responsiveness to calls for mobilisation. Beside the two most influential trade unions (CCOO and UGT), CGT is the most radical anti-establishment organisation, much favoured by precarious eventuales (temporary contract or zero-hours workers). When trade unions fail to get what they demand, most people do not blame the unions but rather the inflexibility of the policies of CORREOS, which actually negotiates very little despite appearances.

This last remark also applies to France. The dense nature of formal social dialogue contrasts with the scarcity of real negotiations about the issues raised by trade unions and the frequency of repression against the most combative trade unions. In addition, they have no united trade union front and a recurrent opposition between the so-called "reformist" side on the one hand, and the "anti-establishment" side on the other. In the Hugo delivery centre, the despondency of old-timers, caused by what they see as a succession of defeats and social regression, coexists with the scepticism of the young as to the use and efficiency of trade union action. The situation seems more open in the "Papin" parcel delivery centre, where trade union presence and daily activity is real and appreciated, including by the younger parcel couriers employed by the operator. However, trade unions have not been able to organise subcontracted workers who deliver half the parcels of the agency. It is noted that these two centres have been spared by the strikes of recent years - a quite exhaustive count of the strikes in delivery centres in France since 2014 indicates approximately 800 -, which does not mean that they have not experienced other forms of action. Driven in most cases by restructuring processes coupled with redundancies and round removals and/or the relocation of delivery centres, they often challenge the establishment of the "Pause Méridienne" (midday break). They are mainly supported by CGT and SUD, and sometimes by FO, but very rarely by the other trade unions. Although, on average, a rather small number of workers take part in each one of these strikes, they can last for several weeks and mobilise politicians and users too.

In the United Kingdom, a 'virtuous momentum' has been noted over the last few months between conflicts and negotiations, finally leading to an agreement involving working time reductions, wage increases and better retirement packages, among other things. True, CWU had a very high majority vote in favour of a strike.

Lastly, by looking at the main demands put forward by trade union organisations, the specific issues they are faced with can be identified.

- Concerning wages, they are considered to be low almost everywhere, and were even at the level of the minimum wages in Bulgaria until recently. Yet, when wages are low and struggles in that arena are difficult, they tend to focus on bonuses. For instance, in Belgium this is the case of the auxiliary agents; in Bulgaria, they fight for the delivery of unaddressed advertising or remittances; in France, in parcel delivery, they fight for turning bonuses into a real unconditional 13th month's salary. However, bonuses tend to be divisive and are difficult to apply generally. In Spain, salaries were frozen at the very beginning of the crisis when the government implemented austerity policies that hit all public sector employees, resulting in effective wage decreases.
- Concerning employment, the first goal is to avoid redundancies, limit precarious work and favour full-time hiring and working time reduction. Yet, how is it possible to protect jobs without going on the offensive about the future of the parcel business, and the "new services" that offset the decline of mail? How can we reach out to the most precarious workers?

- Concerning working time, the issue that is likely to become increasingly thorny will be limiting flexibility in a context of managerial pressure towards night and Sunday deliveries of parcels.
- Concerning the workload and working conditions, this is clearly the most sensitive issue for trade unions. It is the reason why it is necessary to deepen the reflection about progress made and the limits of conflicts and bargaining on these matters, particularly on the basis of the experience of Belgium, France and the United Kingdom.
- Finally, concerning onerous work and ageing workers, the very limited progress in that field cannot go unnoticed, with the exception maybe of the United Kingdom, where an agreement has been signed in order to find arrangements for workers with work disabilities. Is it conceivable to find other modes of recognition of professional wear and tear than regulation through seniority of access to less arduous rounds?

1.4. Conclusion

In the five countries surveyed, the historic postal operators have undergone major upheavals since the early 2000s. They have not only had to deal with deregulation, which has affected activities that were previously carried out as a public monopoly, but also the direct effects of the digitalisation of exchanges. The heart of their traditional mission – the sorting and delivery of mail – is under attack from an ongoing decline in the volume of letters. Beyond the relative diversity of strategic and management choices, these upheavals take the form of a spectacular fall in the size of the workforce everywhere and a deterioration in employment status. Less visible are major changes to the conditions and organisation of work, and of the postman’s job in particular, that have occurred; these all give rise to considerable concern around the future of the profession.

However, our survey confirms the existence of resources that contradict the most pessimistic forecasts. The dynamics of the market - and postal activity in general - is far from limited to the oft-proclaimed decline in traditional mail; advertising brochures and parcel deliveries are performing strongly thanks to the rise in distance purchasing. The union movement among postal workers maintains considerable power and continues to play the role of halting the most notable deteriorations in the social status of postal workers; in the future, they could still have a larger say in the redeployment of activities, associated with social conquests. Indeed, it is in an extremely defensive context that we should evaluate – at present – the results of collective bargaining and workplace conflicts (either latent or open) that sustain it. For example, the absence of collective and forced dismissals (in the five countries); the maintenance – and sometimes increase (UK, Bulgaria) of wage levels; holding back the deterioration of employment status (Belgium); the maintenance of the ‘tenure’ model for postmen’s rounds; consultation on the tools used to rationalise work (Belgium); the maintenance of pension retirement schemes (UK); a reduction in working hours (UK); the ‘circumscribing’ of versatility (France)... Our survey shows, however, that a more and less clear discrepancy exists between the perception that union leaders have of the results of trade union activity and that of the postmen in the distribution centres studied. True, the former are mainly concerned about saving jobs, which

involves the diversification of the services provided by the operators. Postmen are particularly sensitive to the deterioration of their working conditions and the 'meaning' of their work, i.e. elements that are particularly difficult to negotiate at the centralised level, and which give rise - especially in certain countries like France or Spain - to a high level of conflict that is dispersed and not very visible. The most dissenting trade unions, moreover, tend to put the emphasis less on their ability to hold back negative developments on the national level than on the local level.

While most trade union organisations affirm their willingness to support the redeployment of the operator's activities towards 'new' ones - starting with parcel sorting and delivery - not all of them apply the same conditions to plans for the future regarding working conditions. The acceptance of longer working hours and Sunday work may be dealt differently by them. They are also differentiated by major nuances in the level of engagement in the debate around the strategic orientations of the operators, and in the way of strengthening their audience among new categories of workers, in particular young people and women.

2. Trade unions practices and strategies regarding postmen's work and employment issues

The survey carried out by the historical postal operators has led to the identification of five major issues calling for trade union action at the central level of collective bargaining and at the local level of delivery centers. These issues are each examined from a specific national context.

Trade union practices aimed at regulating the reorganization of postal work are central to the Belgian contribution. In a context of strong institutionalization of collective labour relations, in spite of the partial privatization of bpost and the opening up of the market to competition, trade unionism with its strong presence in the workplace was able to seize the issue of the rationalization of work very early on and contain deteriorating working conditions within certain limits.

The exploration of the Bulgarian case focuses on the poor quality of work at Bulgarski Poshti. Although trade unionism is strongly implanted and recognized in the collective bargaining structures, it has little success in restoring low wages. This is in particular due to the bad financial situation of the company and the lack of long-term strategy.

The central issue of work quality is examined through the situation of Correos in Spain. The historical operator, still under the supervision of the State, is diminishing the workforce by transferring workers to other administrations and through the large-scale use of temporary and part-time employment. The unions are involved in the defense of precarious workers.

Changes in the working hours at La Poste in France have contributed to destabilising the postal work profession there. The rolling out of extended collective working hours in the afternoon with the introduction of a midday break, splitting with the traditional morning working hours and the principal of leaving when finished, has been one of the most conflictual ways of doing this.

Finally, in the United Kingdom, tensions between measures to increase financial profitability of the historical operator, Royal Mail, totally privatized since 2015, and continued trade union presence translate into new compromises in health and aging at work, protection of pension plans, reduction of working hours and commitment to productivity efforts.

2.1. Belgium. Trade union guidelines on the rationalisation of the tasks of postmen

The implementation of the Géoroute programme to optimise rounds since 2001, and the introduction of “auxiliary agents” in 2010, contract workers who would gradually replace statutory civil servants and salary scale workers, are the two main ways in which the Belgian Postal Operator (bpost) sets out to respond to the competition, by developing - beyond the provision of the universal service - the collection and distribution of a growing volume of parcels. This being said, the economic and organisational framework in which bpost evolves is similar in many ways to that of other European countries, marked by the liberalisation of the postal market and a fall in mail volumes to the benefit of parcels. However, mail delivery still represents the core activity of the postal company. It is also the provider of the universal service, at least until the end of 2018, and maintains a leadership position in the highly competitive parcels market in Belgium.

In this well-established current context, which has given rise to a high level of conflict and intense negotiations⁵ the periodical reorganisations of services in the 60 mail centres that bpost currently operates give a good insight into how the workload has evolved - both in terms of time and quantity - as well as the margins for manoeuvre that postmen and their trade union representatives have to influence the rationalisation of their work.

2.1.1. Transformations to structures and logistics

These transformations have taken place at a faster pace since 2000. La Poste became bpost, a public limited company. In 2006, after several years of organisational, political and legal preparation, bpost opened its capital up to financial and industrial partners – who would only hold a stake for a few years – with the State remaining the majority shareholder (50% plus one vote). In 2013, the company was listed on the Stock Exchange, and in 2015 a law authorised the State to hold a stake below 50%, thus opening the way up to a possible privatisation.

At the same time, the company restructured its activities, creating three main entities, one of them being Mail & Service Operations (MSO), regrouping the operations of collection, sorting, transport and distribution of letters, newspapers and magazines, unaddressed mail and parcels (on which 75% of the personnel of bpost worked, i.e. around 17,849 full-time employees in 2015). The strategic plan ‘Vision 2020’, begun in 2011, sets out to adapt the company to new market conditions through the modernisation of its network, mainly through the automation of mail and parcels sorting in five industrial sorting centres, the centralisation of the treatment of parcels (in Brussels X) and a reduction in the number of delivery centres (mail centres) from 400

⁵ Vancauwenberge M., “L’agent auxiliaire à bpost : le facteur modernisé”, *Travail Emploi Formation*, 14/2016. Vandewattyne J., Cultiaux J., Martinez E., « La négociation des conditions de travail et d’emploi dans les entreprises publiques belges : le cas de la poste », *Chroniques du travail*, 6/2016.

to 60. These organisational changes led to a drop in the number of jobs of around 31 % between 2005 and 2015, and to a radical rationalisation of postal workers' rounds with the help of computer software, mainly the Géoroute programme.

2.1.2. The reorganisation of “services” inside the mail centers

In bpost, the organisation of deliveries is done from 60 operational mail centres. The organisation of the postal service (OSP) is divided into “services”, each one corresponding to the total tasks allocated to a job for a normal working day of 7 h 36 min (+ 30 minutes for a lunch break). A “service” can include sorting, the delivery of mail and/or parcels, newspapers, or collection. These are detailed on the record cards that serve as a route map for the postman and as a reference document in the event of a problem. The “services” are mainly provided from Monday to Friday, with Saturday work being limited to the delivery of newspapers and packages. For most postmen (apart from receiving delivery trucks from the sorting or newspaper distribution centre), the start of the working day is staggered between 06.00 and 07.00 hours. After a period in which the postmen carry out sorting, the rounds start some time between 08.00 and 08.30. The postal workers are split into teams of around 25 people, led by a team leader, who particularly focusses on organising the replacement of absent workers.

The organisation of the postal services is continuously changing. Indeed, every two years the mail centres need to reorganise the “services” to take into account how the objects to be delivered/collected have evolved and to set up the rounds. These periodic reorganisations give rise to a large amount of preparatory work, followed by different forms of collective and individual consultation. The preparatory work is done by the management team at the mail centre (data managers and Local Operation Specialist) who updates the databases to get a clear picture of the characteristics of the street sections in the distribution and collection territory. This work is fed by the regulations defined at the head office of bpost. They serve as the basis to calculate the time needed for the different operations required in the rounds. Nevertheless, adaptations are possible at local level, to take local particularities into account; postmen are urged to notify these, under the control of the data managers. These databases supply the Géoroute mapping software, which assembles street sections (to which times are allocated) in order to create the rounds. The ‘weight’ of the rounds is calculated by the central services of bpost, which have projections on the evolution of the volume of objects to be processed.

A key element in the modernisation policy of the company, and even more so in the transformation of the postman's trade, Géoroute has been used since 2001 with the aim of improving the processing and distribution of mail. Many tensions and conflicts have arisen due to the implementation of the system - criticised because of its prescriptive nature and because it is ill-adapted to the reality on the ground - and have certainly contributed to creating a specific consultation procedure at local level during the reorganisation of the “services”.

2.1.3. Consultation at local level during reorganisations of “services”

Two months before the start of a new organisation, the management of the mail centre provides the trade unions with the relevant information within the framework of a joint working party. Two weeks later, an initial joint consultation committee (CC) meets so that the trade union organisations can make their comments. Given that this is a consultation process – not a negotiation – the management is only obliged to provide a reasoned opinion in response. If modifications are introduced after these initial exchanges, the new organisation must be validated by the senior management of bpost. The next step is another round of consultation in the presence of the affected workers. Any comments or objections are examined in a joint working party, sanctioned by the CC and presented to the senior management for validation.

Once the organisation has been decided and the services assigned (see the ‘points system’ phase later), the postmen are invited to examine the ‘navigation’ of their round, i.e. the order in which they should make deliveries which will be coded later into the system. At that stage, they can still suggest different arrangements. In the mail centre examined, there is a further stage: three months after the implementation of the new organisation, a monitoring consultation committee meets to examine the comments made by the postmen and team leaders. This type of partial decentralisation is implemented gradually. Previously, reorganisations were the responsibility of the regional level. However, bpost’s management realised that it was more efficient to decentralise preparation, implementation and consultation at the level of the mail centres in order to get a clearer idea of the reality of work on the ground and avoid conflicts. Indeed, on the postmen’s side, this mode of operation may offset, to a certain extent, the negative effects of rules imposed from above.

2.1.4. Allocation and ‘tenure’ of rounds

We need to look back at a critical moment in the reorganisation process, one that leads to a lot of tension: the distribution of the ‘services’ among the postmen. The ‘services’ redefined in the framework of a reorganisation are selected by the postmen based on criteria of status and seniority during the ‘points system’ phase. Statutory civil servants have priority. They have the tenure of their round and are assured of keeping it. If they wish to change it, or if it is eliminated in the new organisation, they will have priority over contract staff (salary scale workers and auxiliary agents). We would recall that the category of auxiliary postman was introduced in 2009, mainly with a view to reducing the wage bill and to compete better in the market. After a long conflict, the status of ‘auxiliary postman’ – initially envisaged under a part-time blue collar contract – has been slightly improved through the step up to full-time employee contract, a higher basic wage and fringe benefits. It is on this basis that two trade union organisations accepted (in 2010) the introduction of the grade of auxiliary postman. However, disparities are still objectively considerable and are perceived subjectively: in terms of job security, pension system and remuneration (no wage increases for seniority, contrary to the salary scale contract workers, nor automatic indexing of wages). When it comes to the ‘points system’, contract workers - and particularly the auxiliary postmen - can also take ‘tenure’, although on a

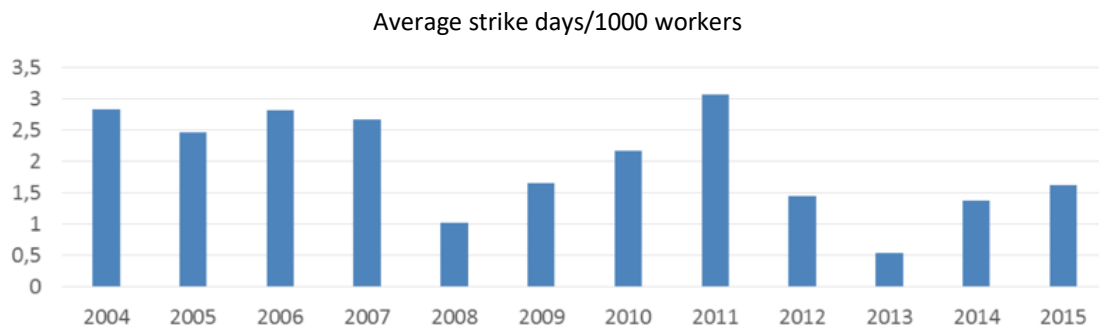
temporary basis, for the duration of the reorganisation. This option of ‘temporary tenure’ for assistant postmen was acquired in 2015 during the negotiation of the ‘MSO’ plan, which introduced (notably) measures to make working hours more flexible. Once the rounds have been allocated, the remaining contract staff are included in a group of replacements who will offset absences by incumbents (in the short run or for longer periods).

The tenure of the rounds is very important, both for the postmen’s well-being at work and for the efficiency of the services provided. Knowing a round well allows one, to a certain extent, to anticipate the workload - despite the variable nature of the volumes to be delivered - and to do this within the standard times, and even to “gain time”. In contrast, replacement postmen, and even more so temp workers, have difficulty in getting the job done within those times. Furthermore, stability in the round opens up the possibility of creating links with consumers, and thereby ensuring the social role that postmen still tend to play, a role they consider one of the most important aspects of their job. True, the current functioning of the ‘points system’, based on criteria of status and seniority, makes younger members of staff - auxiliary agents or temp workers, and particularly younger women, who are less numerous among statutory postmen - carry most of the burden of instability and versatility requirements. If the rationalisation of rounds has generally led to an intensification of work and a reduction in postmen’s autonomy, involving greater stress, unpaid overtime and the feeling of having been deprived of the relational dimension of the trade, unhappiness at work is worse among auxiliary agents due to the unstable nature of their work. From this perspective, unequal access to tenure is a revealing factor of statutory inequality. On the other hand, however, using the criterion of seniority for the choice of rounds is a way of rearranging the workload towards the end of careers, allowing older workers, mainly statutory civil servants in this case, to take on or keep the ‘services’ that are less challenging in terms of physical effort.

2.1.5. Conflict and consultation: the central level and the local level

Although the trade union organisations do not all challenge the principle of modernisation of the company, given the risks hanging over jobs, bpost has seen a high level of conflict over the last two decades, with strikes peaking during major restructuring processes: until 2006-2007, with the introduction of successive versions of the Géoroute programme; in 2010 and 2011 following the introduction of the status of auxiliary postman, and in 2014 and 2015 as a reaction to the Alpha and MSO plans.

Figure 1. Evolution of strikes at bpost (Belgium)



Source : bpost

Around 80% of the personnel are members of the three representative trade union organisations (CSC/ACV, CGSP/ACOD and SLFP) which participate in the different levels of social negotiations, ie in the centralised joint committee, in the joint sub-committees and thematic groups and at the level of regional and local consultation committees. At these different levels, they intervene actively in the framework of programmed consultation, and in reaction to restructuring processes and the company's strategic plans. At the national level, as indicated by the analysis of the negotiations on the status of auxiliary postman or the implementation of the MSO plan, the CSC-Transcom (and to a lesser extent its Flemish component) holds the most radical position vis-à-vis the company management's plans. In contrast, CGSP and SLFP are more inclined to accept compromise in the name of job preservation. Whatever the case, the transformation of the company is based on an intense social dialogue that combines formal procedures, punctuated with episodes of conflict, and finally leading to collective agreements and more informal aspects that aim at creating relations of trust between the social partners.

This is partly repeated at local level, although the differences between the positions of the trade unions are reduced. The trade unions have a strong presence in the workplaces, through the functions of active full-time union reps, both at regional and local level, and many freely appointed shop stewards among affiliated workers. Fluid dialogue is also facilitated by the make-up of the local management, including team leaders. These are quite often people who have worked as postmen at one time or another, and some of them even as shop stewards. However, this notion of professional 'proximity' should be qualified. On one hand, it is not seen in the higher levels of management or among commercial staff, whose activity determines the workload of the postmen to a certain extent. Furthermore, the 'generation effect' should also be considered. Work experience in a period commonly considered to be bygone does not necessary help to understand the experience of young postmen, whose situation is more precarious; they are experiencing the consequences of the changes in the last decade to the full.

Specifically, during the reorganisation of the 'services', trade union representatives, in contact with the reality on the ground, participate in working groups and consultation committees. This enables them to propose amendments to proposals made by local management, although any

modifications must be approved by the regional management. Their margin for manoeuvre lies more in the definition of the perimeter, the workload, the duration of the rounds and their practical organisation than in the ability to overturn senior management choices that are determining factors in the definition of standards of production, the assessment of the performance of the mail centres, the ongoing reduction of the wage bill and the number of jobs, the way parcels are delivered etc. Collective labour relations at local level within the consultation process, i.e. consultation with the workers, fail to resolve the differences of opinions on the basic issues or to prevent tensions, but rather favour local arrangements while defusing most conflicts. If it appears possible to circumscribe and marginally amend these new ways of working, the basic questions related (mainly) to statutory inequalities, intensification and flexibility of work, and low wages are not sorted out at local level. Furthermore, postmen, and particularly the assistants, while belonging to unions locally (affiliation, individual access to a shop steward, ...), express their difficulties in gauging the benefits of trade union action at national level.

Conclusion

Seen from below, based on the work done in mail and parcel delivery centres, consultation sustained by local trade union activity is the norm, and open conflict the exception. A high level of union membership, a strong union mesh among the workplaces and a high level of legitimacy granted to the unions by the the postmen and the management structure are, therefore, elements that bear witness, in principle, to a high mobilisation capacity. The fact is that the large-scale conflicts related to the degradation of working conditions (Géoroute, flexibility) and contract conditions (auxiliary postmen) have already happened and, in their daily work, postmen and their union representatives want to protect the prospects for growth of the company that favour job creation. However, there are other serious challenges. They are raised, on one hand, by the continuation of the automation and rationalisation of sorting, which would leads to radicalising the separation of the postman's job into those of full-time sorter and deliverer, and the separation of the processing of letters from parcels, at the risk of increasingly resorting to subcontracting and hiring self-employed people. This would annihilate union efforts to preserve internal jobs, which are at least regulated even if they have deteriorated. Furthermore, with the programmed elimination of the statutory framework (and salary scale contract workers) and the ageing of the first generations of auxiliary postmen, the question of the balance to be found between increasing the workload (in quantitative and length of time terms) and wage increases, will inevitably arise, whereas it does not currently apply to this category of personnel.

2.2. Bulgaria. Addressing problematic quality of work

The presentation of the Bulgarian case focuses on the problematic quality of work and the ageing and feminised labour force of the historical postal operator in Bulgaria, Bulgarski Poshti EAD (BP EAD). Established in 1879, just after the liberation of the country, the state-owned BP EAD provides universal post services (UPS) and non-universal postal services (NPS) and carries on some 'social functions' such as payment of unemployment benefits, social welfare and pensions. This short report is based on desk research and a fieldwork research conducted at the Central Post of Sofia distribution (see for details the three full reports on Bulgaria). The basic idea is that there are numerous signs of the problematic quality of work in the company, those problems are addressed by trade unions, but the results of their action are modest.

2.2.1. Ageing and feminization of the workforce of BP EAD

The first important sign for the problematic quality of work in the company is related to the shrinking employment and the ageing and feminization of the working force. While employment in the overall postal sector in Bulgaria is increasing, due to the growth of private companies, the employment of BP EAD gradually decreases: from 15,072 in 2002 to 10,508 in 2016 (or about 30%) (see Table 4).

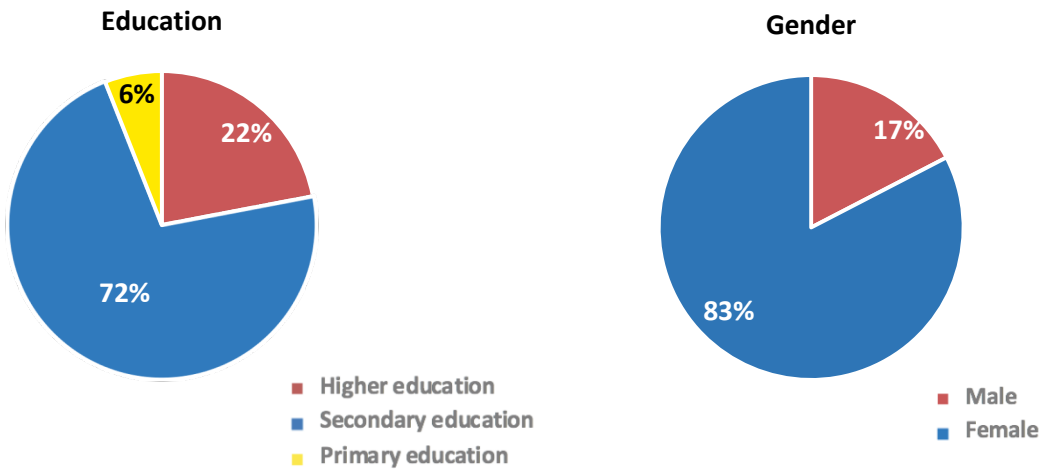
Table 4. Employment in the postal sector and BP, selected years

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2008	2013	2015	2016
Secteur postal	15323	15487	15427	15676	16071	16536	18474	17434		n.a.
BP	n.a.	n.a.	15072	12965	12996	12921	11348	11126	10783	10508
Secteur privé	n.a.	n.a.	355	2711	3075	3615	7126	6 308		n.a.

Sources : Own elaboration on the basis of data of Eurofound 2007, BP annual reports, Eurofound 2016

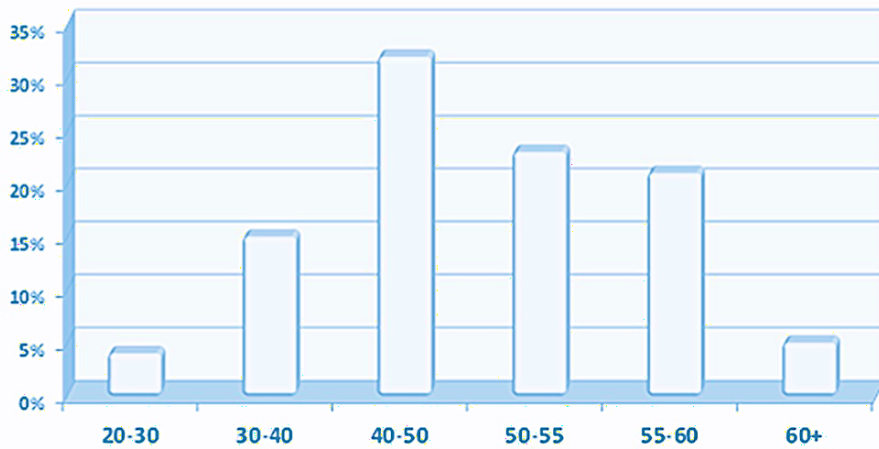
In 2016 83% of all employees are women and only 17% are men (see Figure 2). This represents a slight increase of the share of female employees compared to previous years (they used to be about 78% in 2012). In 2013 the largest share of the employees of BP are between 40 and 50 years old (32.1%), followed by groups of 50-55 and 55-60 years old, which suggests about the continuous ageing process in the company.

Figure 2. Distribution of the personnel by education and gender (2013)



Source : BP, Annual Report 2014

Figure 3. Age distribution of BP employees (2013)



Source: BP, Annual Report 2014

2.2.2. Problematic quality of work

At first glance, the situation about the quality of employment in BP EAD seems to be non-problematic. All the employees of the company are engaged on open-ended contracts (after 6 months' probation period, according to the national labour legislation). However beyond those figures, there are two major facts suggesting that the situation is more complex. First of all, the imposed part-time in BP EAD is significant. In 2016 (31 December) 27.7% or 2,910 employees

are engaged part-time (work between 4 and 7 hours per day in small towns/villages with lower workload) in the framework of cost-reducing strategy.

Employees in the capital Sofia and large towns experience work intensification, due to the increased volume of small parcels and advertisement materials. In general working conditions in the company are problematic and pay – very low (close to the minimum statutory wage, see table 5).

Table 5. Wages per main professional categories and MSW (2013 and 2018)

	Gross monthly wage in BGN (2013)	Gross monthly wage in BGN (2018)	Minimum salary wage BGN (2018)
Manager of postal office (Category I, II ou III)	629		510
Controller in post-office/sorting centre	595		510
Driver	585		510
Employee on the counter, manager of postal office category IV and V	512		510
Cashier of Postal office	495	650	510
Sorter or press distributor	512		510
Postman	477	525	510

During the interviews, the postmen evaluated positively the following: the movement, the social contacts, the work autonomy ("when you are on a tour, you have no boss to hang on your head"), the job security (permanent contract of employment and permanent income) and the convenient working time (allows access to administrative services, provides work-family balance and time for additional unregulated employment and income generation). However, the negative evaluations prevailed: low pay, bad conditions at the workplace, increasing intensity of work, bad equipment (low quality bags, lack of trolleys), increasing the number of shipments, difficult access to the customers, fatigue of long the walk, aggressive customers...

2.2.3. Trade union strategies

Paradoxically, while the quality of work and employment is very problematic, the social partnership in BP EAD is well developed, with traditions and functioning structures, and from this perspective it is exceptional within the Bulgarian IR landscape. The three trade union sections in the company represent more than 90% of the personnel, cooperate relatively well and are engaged in a number of bipartite structures that operate on a regular basis and discuss large number of issues related to labour social security and working conditions (including the Social Partnership Council at the national level and the Commissions for social partnership at regional level and the Committee of working conditions). The company has had all the time very comprehensive and detailed CLAs with several advantages (additional leave, large compensations envisaged in case of retirement, bonus for length of service, food vouchers) and very decent conditions for workers representation. The last CLA, signed for the period April 2016 – April 2018 includes ten chapters: object, corporate social responsibility, employment and training, wages, health and safety, working time and leaves, protection against discrimination, social policy and individual support of employees (in case of illness, etc.), information and consultation and social partnership.

However, in practice the situation is rather difficult because of the legacies, the bad financial situation of this public company, the political instability and lack of incentives for sound long-term strategy. In this context the wages are very low (even if slightly improving, but partially because the increase of the minimum statutory wage in the country) and the working conditions – very problematic and bad in most of the workplaces. As a result, the labour force in the company is ageing, there are difficulties to recruit, the turnover is important in some of the units. The financial difficulties are also a barrier for the modernization and technological change.

The major axes for the trade union action focus on the improvement of the wages, the optimization of the structure of the company in order to ensure reserves for the wages increase and the resistance to the attempts of privatisation.

However, despite the strong presence and union action at higher levels in the company, the appreciation of the trade union activity at the local unit is basically negative. While the collective bargaining at the level of the company is well developed, at the level of the examined unit employees do not feel how those agreements (e.g. the CLA) are contributing to the significant improvement of their situation. The employees are very critical, especially concerning the need to increase wages.

2.3. Spain. Evolution of employment in grupo estatal de correos y telégrafos : business policy and trade union strategies

The Cross-country Report showed that the general evolution of employment in the historical operators of the European postal services since its liberalization in 2010 have some common elements. Two of them stand out: first, in all cases, employment has significantly reduced, and this trend can be observed at least since the mid 2000s; secondly, the reduction in employment is accompanied by a significant degradation of its quality. However, although this double phenomenon occurs in all the studied historical operators, the institutional dynamic is different in each case. The present report addresses the specificity of the Spanish case. We divided our analysis in three parts. The first part shows the specific institutional aspects characterizing and differentiating the Spanish historical operator CORREOS from the others. In the second part, we analyze the evolution of employment and its structure as a result of the business policies which were implemented. The third part deals with the role that trade union strategies of negotiation and conflict have played on the evolution of employment. The report ends by making a small reference to how these union strategies are perceived and valued by the employees themselves.

2.3.1. A socially relevant institution but politically weak.

As a postal service provider Correos is a public institution characterized by a great social relevance. Created in 1716 by King Felipe V, it is the largest Spanish public company, at just over 50,000 employees. It is present in every corner of the country and enjoys a high degree of recognition from the entire population. But, at the same time, it bears the seal of institutional weakness. The number of employees or offices per inhabitant is below European average. The recognition and support that has received and continues to receive from public authorities is neither consistent, nor stable. Its competitive position in the postal market is fragile. By 1960, the Postal Regulation Act excluded of its monopolistic control urban mail, direct mail, parcel service and express mail, that is, the postal activities considered to deliver greater economic performance. In 1991, the Postal Bank, one of the pillars of the institution, was privatized by the Government and estranged from the institution. In 2001 Correos was converted into a State Limited Company and, consequently, regulated according to private sector norms. In terms of activity, as is the case in the rest of the countries studied, traditional postal traffic decreases unstoppably when compared to the growth of parcel traffic. Despite its downward trend, at present, traditional traffic continues to dominate the institution's turnover (almost 75% of the total). This predominance is due, in large part, to having the Universal Postal Service assigned (and the corresponding budget allocation), but the state contributions are neither firm nor are they regularly met. All of these are signs of a far-reaching problem that union organizations often highlight and defend: the lack of a true strategic plan. It is not the best context in which to convert employment and its quality into a central objective of the Sociedad Estatal de Correos y Telégrafos.

2.3.2. The evolution of employment as a result of business policies.

In 2015, the number of employees in Correos reaches the figure of 50,153⁶ (Table 6). This figure allows us to affirm that the State Correos Society is one of the largest Spanish public companies in terms of employment (comparatively, the number of RENFE employees, another large public company, does not reach fifteen thousand). However, the first fact that stands out when looking at the evolution of employment in Correos is its significant decline since the year of its liberalization: if the current figure is 50,153, in 2010 the number of employees was 61,850, implying a decline of 19%. This entails a higher rate of employment destruction than that of the whole postal activity sector, which only represents 10.7%. Although at a different pace, both in the sector as a whole and in Correos in particular, the drop in employment begins even before the year of liberalization. This means that, although the cause may be a fall in postal activity, this decline of activity is not equally managed in the public sector as in the private sector, as these results prove. Another relevant fact is that employment in Correos tends to represent a decreasing percentage of the postal activity sector's total employment.

Table 6. Evolution of employment in correos and in the postal activity sector (2008-2015)

YEARS	2008	2010	2015	Difference 2010-2015 (in %)
Correos	66.091	61.850	50.153	19,-
Activity sector	125.900	112.000	100.400	10,7
Employment in Correos as percentage of total employment in the sector.	52,5	55,2	50,-	----

Source.- Trade Unions, Labour Force Population Survey and authors' elaboration.

The marked decline in employment since 2010, well above the fall in the sector, is also due to a second reason, which has its origin in the public nature of the company. Since 2011, all public entities have been subjected by government mandate to close to zero employment replacement rates for structural positions. Stable positions left vacant for reasons of retirement or for any other reason on the part of workers, were either considered terminated or, in the event of their being covered, they could only be so through contractual positions. In the case of Correos, the reduction in job posts caused by the cessation of employees/civil servants has been of particular relevance given the high presence of civil servants in its original workforce. This was intensified as a result of the recognized workers' rights to change their labour activity to another public

⁶ In the various reports consulted, numbers regarding employment are neither coinciding nor stable. They seem to coincide along general lines. Here, a CGT technical document is used as a basis, providing information on employment for the period from 2008 to 2015, consequently including the years leading up to liberalization.

administration. Hence, the analysis of the evolution of employment in Correos must necessarily encompass the evolution and development of the employment of civil servants within the company.

Given its former status as a General Directorate of the Central Public Administration, an important share of Correos' employees have maintained their status as civil servants, which, therefore, grants them a labour statute with a greater social protection than that of personnel with a common labour contract. Since 2011, the year of the conversion of Correos into a public limited company, its civil servants have become a group to be extinguished; from that date, and even from earlier dates, their decline in numbers is much more accentuated than that of the rest of workers. Following we see this evolution and its explanation.

As Table 7 shows, although the drop in the number of civil servants starts at earlier dates, the number of civil servants fell by 36.5% from 2010 to 2105. In 2010, civil servants represented 40.6% of the total workforce; by 2015 this percentage had fallen to 31.8.

Table 7. Evolution of the number of civil servants in Correos. Total and index numbers

YEARS	2008	2010	2015
Absolute values	29.684	25.091	15.936
Index	100	84,5	53,7
% over total	44,9	40,6	31,8

Source.- Trade Unions, Annual Reports and authors' elaboration.

This decline is not directly due to corporate employment policies in Correos. Rather, it is so in an indirect way. Correos civil servants, as indicated, have the possibility of opting to transfer to other public administrations. In practice, many workers have opted out to other administrations due to the evolution of working conditions, which they consider to be negative. The legal impossibility, on the part of the company, to replace its personnel losses with new structural additions, has had - and continues to have - a high incidence in the global decline in employment. There is no doubt that the fall in employment between 2010 and 2015 (of 19%) is largely explained by the decrease in the number of employees (from 36.5%).

One of the most important consequences of the marked drop in civil servant employment in Correos has been a profound restructuring of the composition of the workforce differentiated by labour statutes. In 2004 the number of civil servants represented a clear majority of 65.2% of the total workforce, but in 2008 it gave way to common labour personnel (44.9%) and, by 2015, the majority of the workforce was overwhelming hired staff (68.2%) (Table 8).

**Table 8. Evolution of employment in correos according to different labour statuses.
Absolute values and distribution (2008-2015)**

LABOUR STATUS /YEARS	2008		2010		2015	
	Absolute values	%	Absolute values	%	Absolute values	%
Civil Servants	29.684	44,9	25.091	40,6	15.936	31,8
Hired staff	36.407	55,1	36.759	59,4	34.217	68,2
<i>Permanent workers</i>	<i>21.867</i>	<i>33,1</i>	<i>23.770</i>	<i>38,4</i>	<i>23.685</i>	<i>47,2</i>
<i>Fixed term workers</i>	<i>14540</i>	<i>22,-</i>	<i>12.989</i>	<i>21,-</i>	<i>10.532</i>	<i>21</i>
Totals	66.091	100	61.850	100	50.153	100

Source.- Trade Unions, Annual Reports and authors' elaboration.

It is also necessary to distinguish clearly between the workforce with a permanent contract and the workforce with fixed term contracts. It is a distinction that must be made in order to assess the quality of employment. Employees with an indefinite contract enjoy a higher degree of social protection in all its dimensions (starting with stability) than those with temporary or precarious contracts. Employees with a permanent contract seem to have been converted into the central core of the workforce (in the present they represent almost half of the entire workforce). This notwithstanding, the company still maintains a relatively high percentage of temporary workers. Its proportion moves around 20% of the total staff: in 2010 they already represented 19.9% of the total; in 2017, they have reached 23.7%. The status of fixed term worker gives the company the possibility of managing this staff with a high degree of flexibility (and at a reduced cost): easy to hire and, above all, easy to dismiss (or, simply, not renew the temporary contract). It must also be noted that, within this body of fixed term workers, Correos has increasingly turned to hiring part time workers, a trend which they intend to increase. This contractual figure of eight hour a week or weekends has been referred to as *mini-jobs* by the trade unions.

In the day-to-day management of the company, employment policies consist, above all, in achieving the greatest possible adjustment between the availability of personnel and the demands and variations of activity. This permanent adjustment, which resorts almost systematically to short-term hiring, is not usually well valued by the personnel affected and is at the origin of tensions and permanent local conflicts.

2.3.3. Union strategies of conflict and negotiation.

The strategies of conflict and negotiation in defense of employment carried out by the unions that operate in the *Sociedad Estatal de Correos y Telégrafos* are developed in -and are influenced by- a business context characterized, as indicated above, by limited recognition and government support, by the scarce initiative and independence of the company with respect to the Government and by a business policy that, in the absence of a Strategic Plan, tries to cope with the effects of the liberalization of the sector by reducing labour costs.

With this context as a backdrop, we will address trade union strategies for the defense of employment, distinguishing between two levels of union action that correspond, in turn, to the particular structure of worker representation currently in force at Correos. These two levels are the state and unitary level, on the one hand, and the provincial (local) level, on the other. In Correos, elections for worker representatives take place at the provincial level. It is in this area that the unitary collective representation bodies are elected: the Personnel Board for civil servants and Works Councils for the rest of employees. But, at the same time, the sum of the union delegates (depending on the votes obtained) elected in the fifty provinces for each of these representative bodies (Works Council and Personnel Board) determines the degree of representativeness (state) of each union before the company and before the rest of unions. Thus, based on these provincial results, a unitary organ of representation of the workers is constituted at the state level, that is, for the entire company of Correos: the Negotiating Commission. The Negotiating Commission is composed of a total of twelve representatives, divided according to their degree of representativeness among the unions that obtain at least 10% of the votes cast in the provinces as a whole. This body of unitary representation has great relevance in the functioning of labour relations in Correos: the union organizations that compose it obtain the recognition by the company as interlocutors for collective negotiation and, in case they sign the Collective Agreement, the right to participate in the monitoring and control committees included in the agreements. The union organizations that obtain at least 10% of the votes in the union elections and, therefore, make up the Negotiating Commission are the five that operate at the state level: Comisiones Obreras (CCOO), Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), Central Sindical Independiente y de Funcionarios (CSI-F), Sindicato Libre (SL) and Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT).

2.3.3.1. Union action at the state level.

The Collective Agreements include the criteria, rules and instruments for the negotiated management of employment in the company. On the one hand, they establish the system for hiring temporary staff to cover short-term needs. This is carried out through the call for job vacancies, that is, lists of possible employees ordered according to their merits that are hired as needs arise in each province. The unions have managed to maintain this system in opposition to the desires of the company, which advocates resorting to Temporary Employment Agencies. It is important for trade unions to maintain the negotiation of the employment banks within the scope of the Collective Agreement, since this way they still maintain some influence on the hiring

criteria. Secondly, the agreement regulates the entry of permanent staff through public calls, the so-called Calls for Employment Consolidation. Finally, the Collective Agreement establishes the creation of the Central Employment Commission composed of the company and the unions that have signed the agreement. This commission negotiates and sets the bases of these calls. The matters agreed upon through collective bargaining therefore condition the discretionary power of the company to manage employment and provide the unions with a certain capacity for control.

Generally speaking, in recent years union strategies have been very focused on curbing the destruction of employment and avoiding the implementation of a precarious employment model on the part of the company. But, as has already been pointed out, the decisions related to employment in Correos not only depend on the company. Any relevant decision regarding employment must be governed by the general guidelines established by the Government for the public sector as a whole or be authorized by the Ministry of Finance and Public Function. In this context, the Government is constituted as a third relevant actor in labour relations, and political exchange becomes an important part of union strategies. For example, after four years without Calls for Employment Consolidation due to the restrictive measures of hiring in the public sector imposed by the Government, the unions carried out intense and sustained mobilizations, including two general strikes. Coinciding with the electoral campaign period for the December 2015 general elections, the government's position on hiring began to soften and the unions managed to unblock these calls: the company has called for around 6,000 new permanent jobs to be covered between 2015 and 2017.

The strong dependence on government decisions on the part of Correos has led unions to also develop strategies of political pressure and social dialogue. Although indirectly, these strategies are also aimed at defending employment in Correos given that, from their perspective, without a clear Government commitment to the viability of the company, the future of Correos will not be guaranteed. And, if there is no company, there will be no employment. In this regard, the maintenance of the public ownership of Correos, the guarantee of financing and provision of the Universal Postal Service, and the elaboration of a Strategic Plan that rests on parcels and logistics as main activities, are fundamental aspects of the strategic positions of the unions. Actions in this area include awareness campaigns directed at the general public, threats of mobilizations against the Government, meetings with political parties with parliamentary representation in order to obtain their support in the defense of public mail and its staff, presentation of Non-legislative Proposals in agreement with two parliamentary groups (PSOE and Unidos Podemos) in the Congress of Deputies, and submission of partial amendments and interpellations to the Minister of Development in the Congress and in the Senate.

2.3.3.2. Union action at the local level.

It is at the local level where the restrictive employment policies of the company and, above all, their consequences become more evident. It is the Provincial Employment Commissions, the local equivalent of the Central Employment Commission, that operate at this level. But, if at the state level the bargaining power of the unions in this Commission is limited, at the provincial

level it is almost next to nil. Local human resources managers apply the guidelines set by the company's management in a strict manner. In this context, one could argue that the role of trade unions at the local level has been to defend workers against what are considered to be negative consequences of the business strategies of flexibilization and precarization of employment.

Due to this, an almost permanent dispersed conflict develops at the provincial level, always related to cuts in employment. The perception of the unions is that the reduction and precarization of employment are key elements of the flexibility strategy that the company has been applying in recent years and, therefore, the core problem that gives rise to conflicts always tends to reproduce itself in the mid term range. Thus, the elimination of distribution areas with the consequent increase in workload in some localities, the refusal of the company to cover structural vacancies, leaves and permits and the increasing pressure of the leadership over the workers, have been causing the almost permanent calls for partial shutdowns and concentrations.

Conclusion

The reduction of employment in Correos and its almost constant deterioration are proof that in the tension that confronts the company's employment policies and trade union strategies, there is a clear predominance of the former over the latter. However, this predominance has not had the effect of opening a gulf between workers and union organizations. In general, the employees of Correos seem to trust them: the membership rate is 80%, the participation in union elections every four years is very high, as is the support to calls for mass mobilization.

2.4. France. Destabilisation of the postman's job : through the prism of new working hours

Among the series of transformations of the working and employment conditions of postmen that have taken place in La Poste in France since the early 2000s, we have opted to focus on the new model of daily working hours: work starts later in the mornings – around 08.00/08.30 instead of 07.00/07.30, the day includes a 45-minute ‘midday break’⁷ and the the working day no longer finishes around 13.30 but around 15.30. Indeed, this modification leads to considerable discontent among postmen and feeds a number of localised labour disputes. It gives form to and symbolises a wider-ranging mutation of the work and of the profession in general, and finally of the group of workers, who largely experience it as a process of deterioration that takes many forms. The main pillars on which the interest and attractiveness of the job were based have been undermined. Will it disappear in the near future, due to the split between the two figures of ‘sorter’ and ‘deliverer’ and/or the continuing drop in the number of workers?

2.4.1. The time element in professional autonomy

Three elements characterised the working hours of postmen up to the early 2000s: 1) work in the morning – starting sometime between 06.00-06.30, with a round that ended at around 12.00-13.00. This freed up a good part of the afternoon for other activities, sometimes remunerated; 2) the “fini-parti” (i.e. finish [the round] and go home), with the finishing time adapting to daily and seasonal fluctuations of postal traffic, as well as to the strategies and style of the postman’s work; 3) the frequency of Saturday work, imposed by the constraint of continuity of deliveries six days out of seven, although with a number of delivery centres organised so that postmen could take one Saturday off out of two.

These three dimensions of the ‘time envelope’ of the activity only made complete sense when they were part of a series of other features of the postman’s status. Let us emphasise the ‘finish and go home’. The control exercised over the duration of the working day involved a certain flexibility in terms of the pace of delivery – particularly of the intensity and duration of a postman’s exchanges with users – and the collective and individual control exercised over the daily workload. The latter has been practically wiped out by the mechanisation of sorting and the rise of ‘just in time’ management of the dispatching of objects.

⁷ This is not the correct term, strictly speaking, but it is very widely used in most managements. Indeed, as opposed to a ‘break’ (included in working hours, paid in the form of a ‘snack bonus’), it is a ‘cut-off’ (not remunerated) imposed by labour law for shifts of over 6 hours. When it is applied strictly, it therefore represents a reduction in the hourly wage.

The postman's working day used to be separated into two very different sequences.

First, the 'internal work' done at the 'office', consisting of a series of sorting operations in preparation for delivery: general sorting between rounds, done collectively, followed by the sorting of mail for the postman's own round in order of delivery, done individually by each postman in front of their sorting shelf. This first sequence brought the postmen together in the presence of supervisors in a time and space that was typical of a classical workshop. The activity was subject to certain rhythms, and its duration could, to a certain extent, be influenced by the number of objects to be processed.

The next sequence was the 'outdoor work', i.e. the round out on the street, without the presence of supervisors. Postmen attach great value to this as it is their 'tenure'; they control the territory. The postman has a certain degree of autonomy there and is in full control of the timing of the work to be done. Personal strategies and styles come into play in this environment. However, the infinite diversity of the specific routes of delivery and the numerous random events the postman is subject to "seemed to be a major obstacle to any attempt at the theoretical evaluation of the duration of the delivery"⁸. The informal regulation of the 'finish and go home' working day responds to this key element of a work process in which the "task-oriented" approach resists a "time-oriented" way of working. Furthermore, the differences between individuals in terms of effective duration started to be put down to, above all, varying experience - the "tenure holders" were clearly faster than the replacements or postmen without tenure ("rouleurs") when they were new to the job - or to a personal professional orientation, rather than to reasons of structural inequality.

The link between these two sequences is at the heart of the postman's job. In the interaction between the specific knowledge and 'adoption' of 'his/her' neighbourhood and the preparation/anticipation of the delivery round lies a large part of the efficiency, quality and interest of the job. The postman also participates in the breakdown of the round: with 'checkers' - former postmen - accompany him/her on the round to take specific situations into account. Having 'tenure' over 'his' or 'her' round according to seniority, and based on personal preferences, the postman enjoys real autonomy in the interpretation of the rules of the job⁹.

The mastery of the external and internal timing required for the work, an essential element of this autonomy, is therefore seen - along with the status of civil servant and the right to take retirement at 55 years of age - as one of the key compensations for the constraints of the job (physically challenging, Saturday work) and the limits of the status: low wages, limited promotion opportunities. etc. Postmen as a group are often perceived as part of the segment of "honourable lower classes"¹⁰. The positive relationship they have with their work and their

⁸ As stated in a study by the management of the postal services made in 1983, quoted by Bouhdjar N. (2017), *Le caché de La Poste. L'usage du temps virtuel dans la distribution du courrier*, Research report.

⁹ Demazière D., Mercier D. (2003), "La tournée des facteurs. Normes gestionnaire, régulation collective et stratégies d'activité", *Sociologie du travail*, Vol. 45, pp.237-238.

¹⁰ Cartier M. (2003), *Les facteurs et leur tournée*, La Découverte.

status now seems to be inscribed in a kind of implicit, but solid, social pact between the Administration (of the PTT, the French Postal Service) and its employees, although one that does not exclude a high level of labour conflict.

A quarter of a century after the initial split in 1990 – the separation of the PTT (Post and Telecommunications) into two public companies – the metamorphoses of La Poste and the transformation of the situation of its most numerous agents - postmen - have been considerable.

Research on postmen carried out in the late 1990s showed that trends towards rationalisation and the intensification of the work are still far from having turned the situation round. Furthermore, major changes have only taken place in the last decade, not more. For example, it was only in 2005 that standard times ceased to be “indicative to become imperative”¹¹.

2.4.2. A time of rupture

Three particular moments have marked the transformations: the introduction of the 35-hour working week in 1999; the introduction of flexibility - “The Postman of the Future” - soon followed by the systematisation of the reorganisations linked to lower mail traffic levels, from 2005, and the multiplication of “new organisations” since 2013.

The reduction of the working week to 35 hours in La Poste from 1999 onwards took place in a very poor climate of labour relations, as shown in several disputes and agreements at local level. La Poste sought to gain in productivity what it conceded in the reduction in working hours. Postmen favoured the regrouping of their RTT (working time reduction) days according to multi-week cycles. For some trade unionists, this modality contributes to divert the attention of the postmen and the unions’ efforts away from the issues arising from the intensification of work and, in the best cases, leads to favouring the hiring of “rouleurs” (postmen without tenure and replacing absent colleagues on their rounds), although more often of substitutes with precarious statuses. This increases the number of postmen who offset absences – both structural and occasional - and no longer hold tenure of their round.

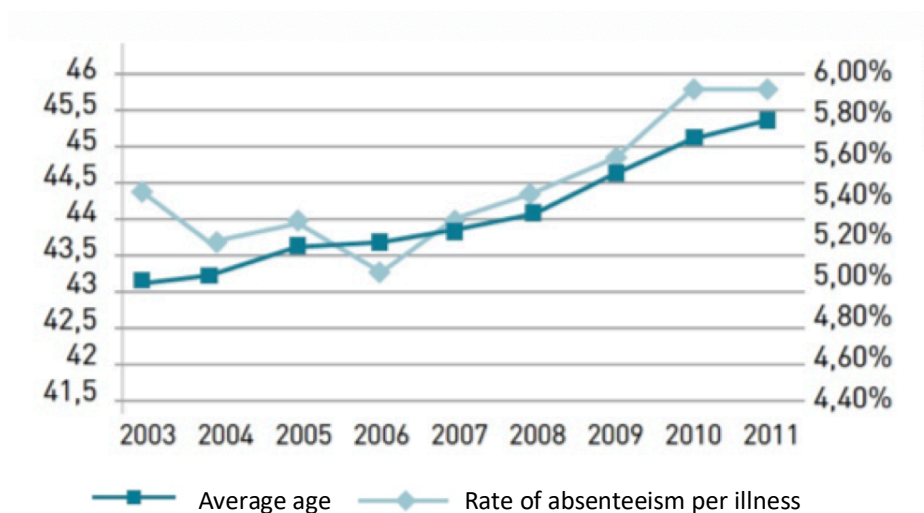
The organisational changes in the early 2000s, coupled with a territorial decentralisation, consisted of the separation of tasks into mail, parcels, and network. They are based on management modes in the private sector. This occurs in a context in which two-thirds of postal work is already carried out in competing markets. At the same time, a continuous reduction in the volume of postal traffic starts taking place following the rise in digital mail. This gives way to an ongoing drop in the number of staff,¹² mainly through the non-replacement of many people

¹¹ Bouhdjar, 2017.

¹² For staff as a whole: 320,000 jobs in 2002 (of which 1/3 were not public servants), 225,000 in 2015 (of which half were not public servants), while the remaining jobs in delivery stayed stable (around 70%).

who retire. This leads in turn to an ageing workforce which is one of the factors of the deterioration in health at work and increased absenteeism.¹³

**Figure 4. Evolution of the level of absenteeism due to illness -
Data from social reports from 2003 to 2011**



There was a change from a situation in which the evolution of the perimeter of the rounds was largely left to the postmen’s criteria with a view to making them less onerous, to a situation in which the rounds are planned by the management in order to reduce their number and extend those that remained. In 2005 the pre-quantification of the duration of rounds through a software program called METOD became prescriptive, and the ‘checkers’ were replaced by ‘organisers’, who were no longer former postmen¹⁴.

The management’s overall strategy regarding mail set out to accompany the decline in volume by rationalising it with a wide-ranging plan to centralise and automate sorting (“Cap Qualité Courrier”) and new ways of organizing postmen’s work (“The Postman of the Future”). The automation of sorting operations was intended to reduce those carried out in the delivery centres, including a part of the preparatory sorting before each round. New modalities of organising the work were tried out¹⁵ from 2006. These involved dividing delivery offices into ‘teams’, within which a certainly versatility is installed through the “splitting” of part of the rounds and the creation of new functions and grades of postmen who do not hold the tenure of a round: “facteur d’équipe” (team postman) and “facteur qualité” (quality postman). Allocated to a ‘team postman’, the ‘splittable’ round can be shared on so-called ‘weak’ days in which the ‘team postman’ covers the rounds of postmen taking a day off. As for the ‘quality postman’,

¹³ In 2015 : 45% of over-50s in mail, 30% in parcels.

¹⁴ Bouhdjar, 2017

¹⁵ Since then, ‘experimentation’ has been the favoured way of implementing changes, which largely explains the dispersion - in time and space - of resistance to these changes.

he/she should both improve the quality of the service, replace absent postmen and help out local management. This new organisation represents a major change. It means a reduction in the number of regular rounds for postmen and leads to their continuous assessment. Aware of the unpopularity of this transformation, the mail management has offered some trade-offs, formalised in an agreement signed by some of the trade unions in 2007. However, the target of the continuous adaptation of the organisation and jobs to this reduction takes the form of very frequent readjustments at the level of a delivery office, and they may happen every 18 months.

These transformations also involve health and labour relations crises. Strikes happen here and there and delay their implementation, although without stopping their advance, based on a very experimental approach that takes the steam out of a generalised trade union response. For example, a mission called the “Grand Dialogue” was implemented in 2012. While it advocates a slowing down in the pace of reorganisations, a “provisional loosening of constraints on staff” and a wider formalisation of “social dialogue” within the framework of the “conduct of change”, the strategic orientations of the operator are validated¹⁶. Reorganisations, therefore, take place at a sustained pace, and always through an adjustment that envisages – via methods that are not very transparent - a fall in traffic. Postal staff get the feeling that they are immersed in a permanent state of instability and are particularly overloaded in the months that follow a reorganisation.

The persistence of a diffuse sense of unease and a lot of small disputes at local level as a result of the flow of reorganisations lead to the start of negotiations at mail branch level in late 2016. The draft agreement was supposed to take the working conditions and the future of the postman’s job into account¹⁷. Its preface states that “Looking ahead to 2020, postmen and women will dedicate more than half their time to other activities than the delivery of traditional mail: delivery of small parcels and ‘small international parcels’, letters and media catalogues”, remises commentées, the provision of local services and home visits”.

Since 2013 “new organisations” have been promoted by the Branch [Table]. They come under the new “industrial blueprint” and the search for new commercial services designed to offset the fall in traffic. For all the stakeholders involved it is clear that the final aim is a larger presence of postmen out on the street in the afternoon, in order to activate demand in other services apart from the delivery of mail; parcel deliveries and new services.

¹⁶ Commission report “Grand Dialogue de La Poste”, presided by Jean Kaspar, september 2012.

¹⁷ It was signed by CFDT and FO, but not by SUD-PTT or CGT. The former placed more emphasis on hiring and the promotions obtained, while the latter considered that there was a lack of real progress, especially in the area of reorganisations.

The « new organisations » promoted at branch level (non-exclusive list):

Distri-PLUS	Increase in daily working hours
Distri-MIX	Mixed working system: morning and afternoon
Distri-DATE	Stop at a letter box only if the mail is about to pass its expiry date
Distri-VAG	Many 'waves' of distribution within a single office
Distri-DISS	Splitting up of internal and external tasks
Distri-LIV	Delivery of bags with the round prepared
Distri-BIN	Delivery in pairs
Distri-SYN	Versatility counter/distribution carried out by a postman (behind a counter)

The two most frequent programmes at the end of 2016 were “Distri-PLUS” (34%) (lengthening weekly working hours) and “DISTRI-Mix” (26%) (involving the “midday break”) [Encadré]. They are followed by “DISTRI-Date” (17%)¹⁸. The most radical of these new organisations, still not strongly implemented at present, are the total separation of internal and external work (“Distri-DISS”) and/or “bag deliveries” with the round prepared beforehand (“Distri-LIV”). This form of division of what made up the postman’s work unity between sorting-preparation and delivery, between “sorting agents” and “delivery agents” has already been implemented in other countries.

The modalities of these “new organisations” - the most implemented - are those that tend to extend the duration of daily and weekly working hours, particularly through starting later and the setting up of a 45-minute “midday cut” (“Distri-MIX”). “Collective working hours” are implemented at the same time, designed to put an end to the “finish and go home” system. Based on repeated interventions by the labour authorities that have been accepted by some trade unionists – who see this is a way of giving greater recognition to overtime worked – this mode of regulation of working time also affects postmen negatively, even more so when they finish their round before the ‘official’ end of their service and they are not busy doing something. Or, on the contrary, when they go over the delivery times laid down without being able to claim payment for the overtime worked.

¹⁸ In its recent version, this new organisation is directly integrated into the selection of mail in sorting centres through ‘discrimination’ in favour of consumers according to criteria of frequency of mail and contractual dispatch periods. This removes the small degree of autonomy that the postman had in this area.

2.4.3. Behind working hours: an in-depth upheaval of the job

The new working hours are largely seen by long-standing postmen as auguring the end of the job as such. This is the case even when they benefit from arrangements that allow them not to observe the “midday cut”.

For most postmen, the combination of morning working hours/finish and go home was seen as legitimate compensation for Saturday work and the resulting lack of a completely free weekend. It is, therefore, within the time saving linked to the job that this change is considered. However, it appears that it reveals a deeper upheaval of the job. Within this, there is the deterioration of the conditions, content and meaning of the job: accumulated workload, more intense work, fewer (and poorer quality) interactions with the public, more tensions among colleagues, etc. The workload issue is a core theme in postmen’s testimonies. Even if they have ‘tenure’ of a neighbourhood, and therefore a round they know well, the longer-serving postmen are probably most sensitive to this, both because they suffer the hardships of the job more as they get older, and because the other elements involved in being a postman as they have known the job are being eroded away: an empirical, not scientific, assessment of the round, greater solidarity among workmates, lighter working hours and a more controlled workload, and the possibility of doing other activities - possibly remunerated - in the afternoon. This is also one of the main reasons for the disagreement between postmen and their management: they challenge the extent of the fall in mail traffic – although not the reality of the drop - and its implications on their specific workload. Their assessment is qualitative, while the management’s is quantitative. On one hand, the same quantity of mail delivered on a longer round does not have the same ‘weight’ in terms of load. On the other, the nature of the objects to be delivered – the “content of the bag” - has a major effect on the objective and subjective load, and on the importance and nature of the interactions that take place during a round: the share of advertising brochures, objects to be signed for, Small International Parcels, etc. The testimonies collected in the office we examined emphasise the growing role of registered mail - for which the rules of presentation and handover are now stricter, plus the higher number of associated administrative tasks - as well as small parcels and ‘unaddressed’ advertising materials.

Faced with this time pressure, therefore, it is understandable that postmen still try to get around a number of rules in an attempt to continue, as one postwoman said, to “do our job intelligently”. For example, by adapting the conditions for handing over registered mail: when ‘dual presentation’¹⁹ makes no sense because the postman knows the consignee sufficiently well, as well as the reasons for his/her absence; by “forgetting” the item in his/her bag the first day(s) while waiting for the consignee to return; by giving his/her phone number to the

¹⁹ The presentation the following day – after placing a ‘non-delivery notice’ in the consignee’s letter box - of an object that could be not delivered due to the absence of the consignee from his/her home or office.

consignee; or even “notifying” on the first day because he/she knows that person will still be absent the next day²⁰.

The range of specific practices applied to deal with the higher workload seem to be polarized around a split between the ‘seniors’ and the ‘juniors’ regarding the application of the rules, and in a wider sense around the way the job is perceived. For the ‘seniors’, the juniors go too fast, rush the work, and limit exchanges with consumers to what is absolutely necessary. In contrast, the juniors see the seniors as people who do not respect the rules issued by the management, who are largely demotivated and show little concern for the future of La Poste. This shows, as other researchers have highlighted in other professions, the inter-individual diversity of ways of resisting the intensification of work as a source of division and deterioration in the atmosphere among work colleagues.

The systematic use of software tools to pre-quantify the duration of rounds – first “METHOD”, then “GEOROUTE” - clearly reveals the structural conflict between the prescriptive and abstract approach to the work and the qualitative angle, that of the reality experienced by postmen. However, as Nicolas Bouhdjar (2017) comments, if these tools have imposed themselves despite the systematic refusal of managements to make them public, it is that they are presented as an aid to the objectivisation of the workload in a job whose characteristics may create and continuously renew a feeling of injustice.

In the HUGO depot, the very recent reorganisation has given rise to a general feeling that the workload has been made heavier. At the time of the survey, three of the eighteen postmen with tenure in their neighbourhood had just formulated a demand for a ‘review’ of their round. Many others probably kept quiet, either because they expected to be turned down or through fear that one of their colleagues might end up with an increased workload.

2.4.4. The time issues: between arrangements and collective conflicts

The creation of the ‘midday break’ did not happen without a lot of resistance and disputes that delayed its implementation. In the HUGO distribution centre, for example, one third of the thirty-plus rounds have managed to officially ‘escape’ from this type of working hours: the “senior” or “arranged” rounds. Postmen also managed to maintain the practice of “finish and go home” during last summer. Most of those subject to the new “midday break” system do not carry it out at present. They do their round in one go before returning to the centre and taking a break if they get back well before the official ending time of the working day. For the time being, the local supervisor and the management are tolerating this practice, hoping that taking a lunch break before finishing the shift - only done by a small minority in this depot - will become common practice over time.

²⁰ Nevertheless, in a large number of other offices these practices can be very severely sanctioned by the management.

We have noted more than 800 strike episodes in mail delivery between 2013 and the end of 2017. Although jobs are clearly the main reason, the theme of working hours is also strongly present. This is so in 40% of cases, even more (60%) if we add the matter of the length and workload of the rounds. On its own, the refusal to change to the system with a midday break and/or 'mixed' rounds (morning/afternoon) is present in almost one dispute out of five (18% of cases). This is followed by challenging the non-payment of overtime and hours worked in excess of normal working time (14% of disputes), and by other demands related to working hours and days off or holidays (10% of cases).

A comparative analysis of the themes behind the demands made and those related to protocols for ending disputes indicate that the demands related to working hours and their organisation are those that give rise to concessions by the management least frequently. However, in a certain number of cases, the struggles usually end up either delaying the implementation of the 'midday cut' or limiting the number of rounds involved and/or their allocation on a voluntary basis.

Conclusion

Behind the issue of the new working hours with a "midday break" are others related to the content of working hours, the control over and the meaning of the tasks involved. Here, these issues are radicalised by the transformations that affect all the aspects of a person's professional identity. Finally, it is the social contract with the employer – the PTT public administration for the senior staff - which is broken. Thus, entrusting each of the two sequences – sorting-preparation on one hand, delivery on the other – to different operators (the sorting agent and distributor/delivery agent) would complete the decomposition of the job and at the same time open the way to hiring under worse forms of employment, even to subcontracting. Without being so extreme, making rounds longer - beyond 4-5 hours - while reducing preparation time poses the problem of the physical sustainability of such an evolution. The pursuit of the rationalisation of the delivery process via, among others, pre-quantification tools for tasks and times, affects the density and quality of the interactions that really make the job rewarding. Moreover, the imposition of "collective working hours" where "finish and go home" used to be the common practice reduces a postman's ability to control the pace of his/her round.

However, have postmen had their last word in a context which is certainly very unfavourable? True, one observes that the unions have great difficulty in abandoning defensive practices aimed at obtaining partial gains and at holding back new developments, often at the cost of a diversification of local situations. Indeed, the ongoing decline in mail traffic is a major handicap. However, can *La Poste* accept the breakdown of this "connivance"²¹ (Rousseau-Devetter and

²¹ Rousseau-Devetter S., Devetter F.-X. (2003), "Travail relationnel et contrôle hiérarchique : pourquoi La Poste modifie-t-elle les circuits de distribution des facteurs", IXèmes Journées de sociologie du travail, Paris, 27-28 novembre.

Devetter, 2003) between postmen and users, a breakdown that is the result of the deterioration in their status and of the service provided? One might well doubt this, at a time when the operator is searching for a redeployment of the services offered, precisely based on what is left of the “social ties” of these workers. With the rise of parcels, this is one of the means through which the unions are probably maintaining a certain potential for the redeployment of their initiatives in favour of a different future for the work of the postman.

2.5. United Kingdom. Taking health and ageing at work into account at Royal Mail

In the United Kingdom, the mail market was completely liberalized in 2006 to allow competitors to enter. The historical operator - Royal Mail - completed its privatisation process in 2015 after an initial opening up of its capital to investors in 2013. Twenty licensed operators now share mail services. These include Royal Mail and the main private courier and logistics companies such as ANC, DHL, Lynx Mail, Securicor and TNT.

The Royal Mail Group is nevertheless still responsible for providing the universal service and maintains a market share of over 90% in the postal operations sector. Several of its competitors have signed “access agreements” with it, authorising the dispatch of the mail they have collected and sorted into its network for final delivery. During 2014-2015, the Group held 6th place among the main contributors to the nation’s economy. One in 180 British employees worked there²².

On the level of labour relations, Royal Mail Group is in a rather exceptional situation vis-à-vis British standards. Indeed, the two trade unions recognised there - the Communication Workers Union (CWU) for postal workers and the Communication Managers Association (CMA-Unite) for management staff - cover 90% and 70% of the company’s employees respectively. They intervene through a system of consultation that is highly implemented at national level and rather well relayed to local levels. Historically, the CWU has evidenced a strong capacity for mobilisation, which has led Royal Mail to be named the most conflictive company in the UK. At the time our survey was completed, the CWU had just obtained a new agreement favouring the maintenance of the benefits of the specific retirement scheme for its employees, a reduction in working hours and a wage increase.

We will come back to the specific context of this agreement and the negotiations that preceded it, based on the field survey we carried out in two distribution centres in the London area. The first centre has 94 employees and the second 137. The two centres are dedicated to the delivery of letters and parcels of maximum 11 kilograms. In both centres we were able to observe the indoor work and also accompany postmen on several rounds. The data we present here are based on the field work, plus documentary research and interviews with national and local leaders of the two trade union organisations, CWU and UNITE.

2.5.1. Evolution of the organisation of work: three major changes

In 1986, Royal Mail Group was reorganized from top to bottom, and new company structures were put in place. Several waves of automation (in 1990, 2007 and 2010-13) led to a reduction in mail sorting work done by postal workers (indoor work). In 2003, there was a change in the way deliveries were made. The number of addresses served daily rose from 450 to 750, while the number of daily deliveries went from two to just one in urban areas. Furthermore, parcel

²² <http://www.royalmailgroup.com/about-us/who-we-are>

delivery has been reorganised in such a way that it has been largely entrusted to letter delivery postmen. In 2006 a Postal Digital Assistant (PDA) programme was introduced to enable postmen to scan parcel barcodes and communicate with the distribution centre during the round.

Finally, the introduction of trolleys and minivans has led to the extension of the duration of postmen's rounds. They currently do 4-5 hours of delivery in a row, which makes the work more demanding physically. At the time we were carrying out the study, Royal Mail planned to move the last postman's round to later in the day to align with its competitors' working hours, which deliver parcels any time of the day and work 7 days a week.

Following these transformations, productivity rose considerably. Between 1979 and 1994 it had already increased by 60%. However, the new British competitors in the parcels market employ more flexible and lower-paid workers, which gives them advantages in terms of costs. The attempts by Royal Mail to increase the efficiency of postal workers have been perceived as counter-productive by our interlocutors because they consider these attempts to be responsible for the deterioration in employees' health and an increase in absenteeism.

Despite these three major changes, two key aspects of the organisation of work have remained stable: first, postmen continue to deliver mail door-to-door; and secondly, the allocation of tasks, the selection of annual holidays and the allocation of overtime are always done under the supervision of the two trade unions, and based on seniority. The more experienced workers generally have better jobs that are less onerous and better paid. However, in centres where the trade unions are weaker and there is not a very strong collective awareness, seniority is sometimes not taken into account or neglected by the company management.

2.5.2. Characteristics of the workforce

Royal Mail's workforce is mainly made up of older British white males. Of its 143,000 or so employees, only 16% are women²³. This percentage, which falls well short of what is seen elsewhere in Europe, has nevertheless increased since the 1990s. Ethnic minorities represent around 17% of the workforce. The average age of the workers is 40 years old.

Following the "Agenda for Growth" agreement signed by the CWU and Royal Mail in 2013, the possibilities for the company to implement 'atypical' jobs have been considerably restricted. In particular, fixed-term and temporary contracts have been drastically limited. The result is a strong stabilisation of the workforce. The company is, however, in the process of implementing a new recruitment policy that favours part-time contracts, with less favourable terms and conditions. The CWU estimates that 70% of the workforce currently works full-time, with the remaining 30% part-time.

²³ According to Royal Mail CEO Moya Greene : "Women currently represent (in 2017) 16% of the total workforce and 19% of our management structure - without counting senior executives. Within the workforce in general, this figure falls to 14% for all employees and managers". <http://www.springboardconsultancy.com/2017/09/06/royal-mail-case-study/>

2.5.3. Working conditions and health in the workplace

Postal workers work five days a week, from Monday to Saturday. They enjoy one day off a week, which changes every week. They officially work 39 hours per week but they do a lot of overtime, either helping out with general sorting before they start their shift or replacing sick colleagues. These replacements may be made at the end of their normal working day or on their day off. It appeared to us that this latter case happens particularly frequently.

There is a list of replacement personnel, but they only intervene to cover rest days linked to the organisation of work over six days. The management of unannounced absences therefore gives priority to the mobilisation of permanent staff, under the conditions we mentioned above. In this case, the distribution of extra work is done, in principle, on a voluntary basis, i.e. the possibilities for overtime are announced to everyone every day.

Most of our interlocutors told us that the onerous nature of the work had clearly increased as a result of the reorganisations, the longer time spent outdoors on deliveries, the growing number of addresses served, the growing volume of mail to be transported and changes in the nature of the mail to be delivered. Indeed, each postman now delivers both letters and parcels up to 11 kilos. Deliveries being made door-to-door, it is often easier for the postman to leave his/her trolley in the vehicle or park it in the street to gain mobility. Bundles of mail corresponding to each section are then carried in a bag that the postman carries on his/her back. During the survey it emerged that the maximum loads laid down are rarely complied with. We would add that the increase in the number of addresses served has led to a higher number of stairs to climb and descend. During one of the rounds we accompanied, we went up and down around fifty floors in less than one hour.

Although we have not had access to precise data on occupational diseases and work accidents, we were able to distinguish three related sources of deterioration of employees' health: work-related wear and tear, accidents and psychosocial risks. In terms of wear and tear, our interlocutors mentioned musculoskeletal disorders linked to the loads to be handled and transported during deliveries. It is likely that work at the sorting shelves also leads to musculoskeletal disorders.

As for work accidents, their causes are very different. Many are related to the state of pavements and stairs, road traffic and the state of properties that postmen enter (there was one mention of an accident due to a badly-fastened gate). Finally, psychosocial risks were not mentioned very much by our interlocutors, except those caused by pressure from the management or the increased tension between colleagues related to the intensification of the work and the sharing of vehicles.

For our part, we noted a convergence of several elements that could lead to a deterioration of people's health in the workplace. The first is the intensification of the work arising from the greater number of addresses to be served and the diverse nature of the objects to be delivered. The second is linked to the increase in the number of overtime hours requested by the

organisation - up to 31 hours per week - which can take the total weekly working time to 70 hours. The third element has to do with the reduction of postmen's autonomy, even though it is still quite considerable. Postmen are, after all, followed along their entire round via their PDA, which traces all their movements. A fourth element that could lead to the deterioration of health at work is the breakdown of the workforce and the individualisation of situations. The elimination of the second round has effectively made the social times that created bonds in the workforce disappear. Canteens and rest rooms have been gradually abandoned for the sake of an organisation of work that drives postmen to finish their tasks as quickly as possible so that they can then work overtime. A fifth element that could lead to poorer health at work are the value conflicts that arise from the productivity targets imposed on postmen. These targets conflict with their professional ethics of public service. Many told us that the time spent on informing or helping users is not recognised at all by the company management as a service quality element. A sixth element that could intervene in the deterioration of health in the workplace is the uncertainty currently hanging over the future of the company.

It is reasonable to think that the combination of these elements has an impact on the mental health of employees and can potentially spill over onto their physical health too. We lack tangible data to really understand the situation. Nevertheless, our interlocutors mentioned an increase in long-term absences from work since privatisation occurred.

2.5.4. The management of absenteeism

In Royal Mail, long-term absences are defined as those longer than 14 days. A procedure was negotiated between Royal Mail and the CWU in 2013 to manage these absences. It envisages, as a first step, a gradual return to the adapted job through arrangements subject to agreement with Occupational Medicine. If the return to work is seen to be impossible, efforts are made to try and find a different job for that person in the delivery or sorting centre. If the employee cannot be reclassified, he/she is dismissed for reasons of medical unfitness. He/she benefits, in such cases, from an early retirement scheme.

According to the testimonies collected in the distribution centres, arrangements are indeed made to enable employees to carry on working as long as possible. One of the postmen we accompanied during a round said that he had agreed to change his round with an employee who could no longer push the trolley up slopes due to back problems. Another postman said that arrangements were possible for those who were no longer able to climb stairs.

Nevertheless, the deterioration in employees' health remains a cause of concern, and a particularly sensitive issue in a context marked by an ever later retirement age. In 2008, it had been extended to 65 for men and 60 for women. It continues to be pushed back since then.

2.5.5. The dispute in autumn 2017

Throughout 2016, the atmosphere became very tense between postal workers and Royal Mail management after the latter announced it was phasing out its retirement scheme. Until then Royal Mail employees had benefited from one of the most advantageous retirement schemes

in the United Kingdom. It had already been substantially amended for new entrants from 2008. At the time of privatisation in 2013, however, the management of Royal Mail had to provide certain guarantees on the continuity of its retirement scheme and improve the one for new entrants.

In 2017, the CWU launched a campaign called “four pillars of security” with a view to proposing an alternative industrial strategy for Royal Mail. This campaign advocated a sustainable solution for retirement based on a “retirement allowance” for all its members, maintaining the employment standard in the form of a full-time permanent contract with a general reduction in working hours, the extension of the agreements having legal force and a long-term vision of growth for the postal activity based on the renationalisation of the company.

In October 2017, given the management’s refusal to negotiate, the CWU received a massive vote from its members in favour of strike action. The management of Royal Mail challenged this vote in the courts but found itself obliged to negotiate.

The negotiations ended in January 2018 with an agreement that was immediately submitted for consultation. The agreement envisaged a 5% wage increase for full-time employees, covering basic salary, overtime and bonuses (for residence, etc.). This increase will be applied retroactively from 1 October 2017 and maintained in 2018-2019. It is planned that salaries will increase by a further 2% from April 2019. The gains will be much less advantageous for part-time salaried employees, as it is envisaged that they will only receive a 2.6% increase between October 2018 and October 2019.

The agreement also foresees a reduction of one hour’s work a week, going from the current 39 hours to 38 from October 2018. A further reduction in working hours will come into effect in October 2019. Royal Mail has undertaken to reduce the working week to 35 hours by 2022.

Basically, one of the most important points in the agreement is undoubtedly the setting up of a new retirement scheme to replace the old one. Built on the model of existing retirement schemes in force in the Netherlands, this new system is characterised by a management modality that pools financial risks. With it, Royal Mail will contribute to increasing the retirement allowance of each of its employees by 13.6%.

While the transformations in the British postal sector bear witness to the particularly powerful advance of the deregulation of public services in Europe, the study of the case of Royal Mail nevertheless highlights the persistence of effective levers in the areas of social dialogue and collective action. Indeed, in the postal sector the trade unions of British salaried employees have been able to maintain their influence and have shown themselves capable of negotiating agreements that offer tangible protection for their members, even following privatization. It is likely, however, that the challenges posed by the ageing workforce will call for even greater efforts and the ability to be inventive in the social sphere.

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