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► **To cite this version:**

Cédric Lomba. Occupational accidents in Belgian industry in restructuring contexts. What precariousness means for health, a Franco-British Comparative Day Workshop, London Metropolitan University, Working Lives Research Institute/Université Paris 8, CRESPPA-CSU, Sep 2014, Londres, United Kingdom. hal-01293877

HAL Id: hal-01293877

<https://hal.science/hal-01293877>

Submitted on 25 Mar 2016

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Occupational accidents in Belgian industry in restructuring contexts

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Over the last forty years, contradictory movements have been observed on health conditions at work. On the one hand, there are mechanisms in place to reduce injuries, with laws and directives that provide greater protection for workers and oblige companies to take account of safety, there are also more experts who implement procedures to ensure greater safety, and on another level, workers take more account of their physical integrity. On the other hand, the intensification of labour, the employment instability conditions and restructuring operations contribute in certain sectors to rising injury rates.

Restructuring operations increase the health risks both for workers who are made redundant, particularly in terms of psychosocial and cardiovascular problems, and for those who remain following job cuts, that we call “survivors”, in terms of stress or musculoskeletal disorders. However, some researchers point out that we have little data about the effects of restructuring on these survivors. My research proposes to analyse the issue of physical health among blue-collar workers within large industrial companies in a context of successive restructuring operations since 1975.

To achieve this, I produced a monograph on blue-collar workers in a Belgian steel company (Cockerill). I collected archives like the individual declarations of accidents at work, reports of the equivalent of Health and Safety Committees, or union-related letters and emails. I observed teams on shift work over a period of 10 months in three plants, and I made interviews with managers, union representatives, and with workers.

Cockerill, the main Belgian producer of steel became a subdivision of the world's largest steel company ArcelorMittal at the end of the 90', and staff numbers have decreased from around 25,000 in 1975 (with around 20 plants) to less than 1,000 today

(with 5 plants). These successive restructuring operations have resulted in continuous staff cuts via various forms of early retirement (at age 50), plant closures, extensive use of temporary staff and outsourcing, and repeated changes in the work organisation.

1. A paradox: falling accident rates despite restructuring

The Cockerill factories are dangerous places. Most of the workers have experienced accidents, sometimes serious. Many have also witnessed other workers' accidents, which have sometimes proved fatal (17 workers have died since 2002).

One might expect that restructuring operations, subjecting workers to repeated changes of post and plant and an intensification of labour, would result in increases in accident rates. Instead, indicators show that the accident frequency rate fell since 1979. How to explain this reducing?

2. Employers' long-standing concern for safety

First, the fall in accident rates is due in part to successive employer policies promoting safety at work. In Cockerill, the managers' concern for safety result from the interplay of multiple approaches, combining factors such as consideration for workers, legal obligations, efforts to minimise costs and disorganization, the need to control the company's external image, and competition between plants within a multinational company.

In this enterprise, many measures promoting prevention and "best practices" were implemented in the 1960s. Some of these measures are still used today like the weekly 15 minutes safety reminders, the method of "causal tree analysis" after an accident, individual bonus for presenteeism, team bonus connected to accident frequency rate objectives, protective equipment is widely available, and large-scale prevention campaigns with training sessions, posters and a lot of meetings.

3. Mechanisms for making occupational conditions "disappear"

On the contrary, several mechanisms are also used to minimise injuries suffered by blue-collar workers :

-Outsourcing dangers: Cockerill has increased outsourcing of unskilled manual labour in the 1990s and further in the 2000s, contributing to outsource accidents.

-Stamping out “fake accidents: Cockerill’ private insurer are increasingly refusing to compensate reported accidents because of the absence of evidence of link between injury and the context of work or of the absence of direct eyewitnesses for workplace accidents (workers are more often isolated due to automation and downsizing).

-Use of “adapted work”: In this case, injuries are officially recognised by the company, but excluded from the data used to calculate accident severity rates. With adapted work, the management offers injured workers the option of recuperating in the workplace, either in their normal post with adjustments or less onerous post. This measure led to lower accident frequency and severity rates.

4. Workers’ ambivalent attitudes to accidents

The subjective attitudes of blue-collar workers to accidents (which loom large and yet at the same time are denied) can be attributed to some factors, including a denial of danger, masculine bravery, the protection of career prospects, and safeguarding one’s body, health and reputation in an uncertain context.

While some workers follow rarely rules, others bend the rules at certain times only – for example, when following them would cause technical difficulties or increase everyone’s workload; because their perceptions of danger are reduced when they are exhausted; or because the safety rules are contradictory; or in defiance of the managers who keep imposing restructuring plans; or in order to maintain productivity levels. Even if attitudes to the body vary across social groups, with a more instrumental relationship observed among the blue-collar workers, there is nevertheless a common desire to preserve their physical integrity in this high-risk environment.

Above all, it is the constant changes and the resultant incompetence of young or reclassified workers that are perceived as particularly threatening, to the point of fostering a sense of constant fear for one’s health and for the health of others. In addition, in a context of uncertain career progression, taking care of oneself means establishing a reputation as a worker who is never sick or injured, which can open the way to better posts or avoid the bad posts.

More generally, workers’ ambivalent attitudes to risk and self-preservation are here reinforced by the double-bind situation in terms of official orders (being told to

follow rules without having the means to do so) and a commitment to the job imposed by personal uncertainty in terms of one's career and collective uncertainty in terms of the skills required for the work in question. The explanations for these attitudes to safety therefore probably have less to do with a working-class male culture than with the professional projections and concrete situations that workers are faced with every day. In this case, workers are torn between preserving their health and protecting their position and their future within the company, in the face of various uncertainties.