Health and work in the "contingent" generation

Official figures for 2005 report approximately 193 million workers in the European Union (EU)[1]. A little more than 20 million of these are young workers aged 15-24. But the number of young people with some experience of work is much greater. Most 15-24 year-olds are still in education. For some of these – and all students in technical and vocational education – this includes work experience training. Also, a large percentage of students and schoolchildren have more or less regular part-time jobs to earn some money of their own. This makes it impossible to put precise figures on the number of young workers in Europe.

Health and safety at work data on young workers is very patchy. More or less systematic data are compiled on reported work accidents, and these show a very clear general trend: young workers are more than averagely at risk of work injuries.

The reasons, as always, are involved. Many factors are in play, including length of service with the employer, length of time in job, the industry distribution of young workers, the inclusion of safety training in pre-employment vocational training and its relevance to the work actually done, the workplace safety training received, an active workplace union, being part of a work force, etc. While each of these factors plays a clear contributory part, the broad analysis leads to a central conclusion: young workers tend to aggregate factors of endangerment. This explanation of the labour relations that distinguish young people's work is essential to a proper understanding of how work impacts on their health.

This means getting away from paternalist campaigns that pin the blame for work accidents on casual attitudes and risk-taking behaviour by young workers. The alleged casualness tends often to be no more than a reflection of casualised working conditions, a greater vulnerability to exploitation and lower level of organisation for collective action.

That is why this article falls into two broad parts. The first seeks to examine how young people enter the labour force. The second looks at how their work impacts on their health.

Unemployment, a force for casualisation

Young people are entering the labour force in increasingly insecure jobs. The pressure of unemployment is a driving force behind this. A high percentage of school leavers end up unemployed. Unemployment is a trial that every new generation entering the labour force in recent decades has gone through one way or another. For many, it is something they have personally moved in and out of, or stayed in for prolonged spells. For others, it is a threat made visible by unemployed family and friends and the relentless pressure of near-blackmail by public employment policies to accept contingent jobs in order to bring down unemployment.

Unemployment exacerbates social inequalities between young people. Its effects differ with social background, regardless of educational levels. It is a lot of what forces some young people into unskilled jobs and negates some of the anticipated benefits of higher education in terms of social advancement. Unemployment is one of the most effective economic constraint mechanisms for perpetuating social inequalities, and a daunting tool for imposing degraded working conditions.

Under-25 unemployment in the EU is approximately double the all-working-population rate. In June 2006, under-25 unemployment stood at 17.4% in the EU-25 (against 8.1% for the whole working population and 6.8% for the over-25s)[2]. There are wide between-country differences[3] (from 5.8% in the Netherlands up to 32.3% in Poland) but, everywhere, there is a very wide gap between under-25 and all-working-population unemployment. While not unknown, the phenomenon has spread particularly sharply in the ten new EU Member States. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reports 8.2% growth in youth unemployment in these countries between 1993 and 2003, rising from 22.5% to 30.7%[4].

Where health and safety at work is concerned, unemployment seems to increase inequalities and significantly hasten health damage. Far from giving a "respite" from work-related health damage, it seems to actually aggravate its effects. This can be looked at from two angles. On an individual level, unemployment may be connected with past health damage and even if not, has effects that induce loss of social status (loss of self-esteem, loosening of social network ties, etc.) and loss of income. For young people specifically, unemployment is a big factor in keeping them dependent on their parents. Among workers, unemployment affects both those who have gone through it, and those who see it as a threat looming over them. It works to undermine action for health.

Swedish research provides interesting insights into the links between youth unemployment and health damage [Hammarström, 1994]. Some studies [Reine, 2004] argue that the negative effects of unemployment affect young people worse than adults[5]. Also, the health of young female workers

[1] Unless otherwise specified, the figures in this article are for the 25 Member States of the European Union (EU-25). Figures whose source is not indicated are taken from Eurostat. Where no age is specified in statistics, "young worker" means workers aged 15-24.

[2] Eurostat, Euro-indicators, No. 103/2006, 1 August 2006. Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rates.

[3] Regional variations are even wider than national variations. In 2004, under-25 unemployment topped 42% in ten regions of the EU. Seven of these were in Poland, one in Slovakia, one in Italy and one in Greece (Eurostat, Regional unemployment in the European Union and candidate countries, *Statistics in Focus. Population and social conditions*, 3, 2005).

[4] 7th ILO European Regional Meeting, *Facts on youth Employment*, February 2005.

[5] Although other studies make different findings. These conflicts raise methodology issues. Where unemployment-related health damage is measured from the direct point-in-time health impacts on the unemployed, unemployed young people "benefit" from the generally better health of their age group. But attempts to measure the lifelong impact of unemployment on health tend to find that anyone who has experienced prolonged or repeated spells of unemployment has less satisfactory health than those who have been in more regular or continuous employment.

suffers markedly more than that of young male workers during recessions. One possible explanation for this is the greater concentration of women in personal services occupations – sectors where an economic recession may produce a sharper decline in working conditions [Novo, 2001].

Part-time unemployment

To get the fuller picture, a word needs to be said about the scale of part-time unemployment. In 2005, 25.7% of young workers were part-time (against 16% in the 25-49 age bracket and 20% of 50-64 year-olds). Here again, national differences are wide-ranging: 2.2% of young people work part-time in Slovakia compared to 68.6% in the Netherlands. While part-time work is predominantly female across Europe, it also affects a relatively sizeable share of the youngest male age-groups. Much of this stems from students' needs to finance themselves with paid work.

But another growing share does not reflect demand from young workers. In many lines of business, there is quite simply no other choice. A French survey found that among part-time workers who wanted to work more hours, under-25s were over-represented relative to their share in all part-time workers [Puech, 2004]. The same trend recurs in Italy: in 2005, 51.2% of young part-time workers reported wanting to go full-time compared to an average 38.4% for all workers [Ministero del lavoro, 2006].

Not all young people are equal in unemployment

While young people bear the brunt of unemployment, they are not all affected to the same degree. Three distinguishing factors in particular predominate in all EU countries:

1. Female unemployment is generally higher than male unemployment;
2. Unemployment rates are significantly increased by social class as reflected by educational levels in particular. Also, lower educational attainments tend to be one reason for more extended spells of unemployment;
3. Unemployment among young immigrants and those of immigrant descent is generally above average for their age group as a whole. Minority groups not of immigrant origin may be affected by ethnic discrimination in employment opportunities (especially the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, Russian-speaking communities in the Baltic republics). There is widespread employment discrimination in Europe against populations from former colonial possessions (black minorities of West Indian origin, people of Asian origin in Great Britain, people of North African immigrant descent almost everywhere in Europe, etc.) including second- and much-later generation immigrants. Neither naturalization nor higher educational attainments suffice to counter such discrimination.

These data are so important that it would be mistaken to look at the impact of unemployment only on those who directly experience it. Higher female or migrant worker unemployment rates also put more pressure on employed members of these groups. Higher unemployment tends to go together with more widespread job insecurity, lower pay and greater segregation in occupations and branches of industry.

Contingent employment

Young workers throughout the EU are much more affected by casual hire-and-fire than their adult colleagues. A full list of all kinds of unstable employment is outside the scope of this article. Employment policies have been hugely inventive in coming up with a wide variety of working arrangements whose common theme has been the partial elimination of the protective elements of the permanent employment contract.

Looking just at fixed-term contracts and temporary agency work, the growth of contingent employment among young people is seen to be a general trend in Europe. On average, 14.9% of employees had a contingent contract in the EU-25 in the third quarter of 2005. However, this average conceals disparities by age, economic activity in the job, and Member State. Workers aged 15-24 are much more likely to be on contingent contracts: in the third quarter 2005, this was the case for 43.2% of young employees, compared to 11.6% of workers aged 25-54 and 7.4% of those age 55 and over. Additionally, contingent contracts are more prevalent in sectors where poor working conditions and weak labour organisation are the norm, like agriculture (34.6%) and construction (22.1%).

In most of the new Member States, young people's employment conditions have worsened drastically. In Poland, for example, the share of 15-24 year-old workers on contingent contracts rose from 13.6% to 64.9% between 1997 and 2005[6].

Agency work is the form of contingent employment where the highest concentration of young people is found, although as this working arrangement has come more into the mainstream over the last ten years, the number of workers who never manage to leave temporary agency employment has increased [Storrie, 2002]. The share of under-25s among temporary agency workers ranges between 30% and 50%, with peaks of 52% in the Netherlands and 51% in Spain. The fact that young workers make up approximately 10% of Europe's entire workforce gives them a probability of working as a temporary

[6] Eurostat, *European Union Labour Force Survey* (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu).

agency employee 3 to 5 times higher than the average of workers. While on paper, temporary agency workers are covered by health and safety legislation, the reality is very different – they almost never have health and safety reps and have only very limited access to preventive services.

Contingent employment is sometimes played up as a stepping stone into more stable jobs. The facts scotch this idea. Spells of contingent employment tend to be longer and ultimately act as a quite harsh selection process. Some young people are shut out of the labour market altogether because of health damage. Some never manage to break out of a cycle of alternating spells of full- or part-time unemployment and periods of contingent employment. For women, this cycle may be combined with periods devoted exclusively to unpaid family work. Some with highly-sought skills manage to find stable employment. Generally, the average age at which workers manage to get a steady job is rising, but some never do.

This is illustrated by the passing of the "Biagi reform" in Italy in 2003. This legislation, strongly supported by the employers and the right-wing coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi, introduced new contingent statuses under the cloak of promoting youth employment. In 2005, the share of non-tenured employment among the newly-created jobs had risen materially and now accounts for up to a third of new jobs. Contrary to government spin, the new contingent job laws have not been a springboard into more stable employment. An Italian study [IRES, 2005] done between June and August 2005 investigated what had become of workers who were in contingent jobs in June 2004 when the new law came into force. A year into the new legislation, only 7% of the contingent workers who were previously on so-called "continuing, coordinated co-worker" ("co-co-co" – longer-term temporary freelancer) contracts had secured a permanent job, 6.3% a temporary employment contract, 70% were still in contingent jobs lacking full employee status, approximately 6% had opted for self-employment, while nearly 8% were completely outside the labour market (some probably working cash-in-hand). The findings for the other contingent statuses were little more encouraging. Among project workers, 5% were in steady jobs, while 6.3% had left the (legal) labour market. All the rest were still in contingent employment. Of workers with occasional freelancer status, 2.1% had secured a permanent job, while 12.8% had left the legal labour market.

Women and workers in southern Italy were most excluded from the labour market. The same survey reveals startling levels of dissatisfaction among contingent workers: 80% report being (somewhat or wholly) dissatisfied with their working conditions. Contingent workers are particularly critical of being denied fundamental rights in three areas: maternity protection, trade union rights and social security sickness coverage. A more recent study points up the gender dimension of the spread of contingent work among young people in Italy[7]. Just over 22% of females aged 20-24 are working cash-in-hand – three times more than same-age young males.

Concentration in specific sectors

The distribution of young workers between sectors and occupations is clearly a big factor. The educational system tends to reproduce class divisions in society. The share of working-class children entering higher education is still very small relative to those from well-off families, which explains the heavy over-representation of manual workers (usually from manual worker families) and low-skilled non-manual workers among workers aged 15-24.

Youth employment in the EU is concentrated in four sectors: retail trade (4.6 million young workers in 2005), manufacturing industry (3.6 million), construction (1.9 million) and the hospitality industry (1.8 million).

The sectors with the highest ratio of youth employment to all workers are the hospitality industry (22.7% of young workers in the whole workforce), followed by the retail trade (16.3%) and "other personal, social and community services activities" (13.7%). National situations diverge somewhat from the European average. In some countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Cyprus and Hungary) construction ranks among the top three sectors for youth employment. Elsewhere, there is a very high concentration in the hospitality industry (over 50% of young workers in this sector in Denmark where they comprise less than 15% of the whole workforce; 47.9% in the Netherlands; 37.8% in the United Kingdom). A more forensic analysis reveals very clear segregation in certain activities like call centres, fast food, amusement parks, private security services, etc.

A reason behind deskilling

A look at the working conditions in activities with high concentrations of youth employment is highly enlightening. They tend to make a combination of exacting requirements in different areas. Physical endurance, manual dexterity and precision in building trades, multitasking and extreme time pressure in call centres, a combination of physical constraints, repetitive work and a smiling, likeable, laid back demeanour in fast food and holiday villages. The list of examples could go on. All have one thing in common: the work done by these young people is seen as unskilled because much of it is not seen as really work at all. It is deskilled because a big part of the real skills is dismissed. Or, more precisely, it is presented as inherent to, and normal for, young people.

[7] ISFOL, Dipartimento di Scienze demografiche dell' Università La Sapienza, Giovani e mercato del lavoro: squilibri quantitativi, qualitativi e territoriali. Primi risultati di una indagine conoscitiva. The early results are on: www.csmb.unimo.it/adapt/bdoc/2006/48_06/06_48_54_GIOVANI_E_MERCATO_DEL_LAVORO.pdf.

Young and casualised: a killer combination

Spain is one European country where young workers are hardest hit by the growth of contingent employment. An analysis of Spanish work accident figures reveals some of the ways that casualisation is affecting young workers.

The work accident rate falls in an almost perfect inverse correlation to rising age. But adding a variable that is a descriptor for casualisation – like being on a fixed-term contract – it becomes clear that the workers in all age groups on such contracts have markedly higher accident rates than workers on unlimited term contracts in all age groups. So, while the accident rate for fixed-term contract workers is lowest in the 25-29 age group, it is still very much higher than the highest rate for workers on unlimited term contracts, which is found among the youngest workers (16-19).

Looking at the trend over time of work accidents, the Spanish statistics clearly show how the situation of young workers has worsened as the reforms to add flexibility to the labour market have taken hold. The work accident rate for under-24s rose by 7% between 1996 and 2004, but fell for all other age groups [UGT, 2006]. The sharpest increase was in the 16-19 age group, which is now well above double the all-worker average.

Work accident rate per 1000 workers, 1996 and 2004

	1996	2004
All workers	**67**	**59**
16-19	115	139
20-24	87	90
Total for under-24s	**92**	**99**
25-29	77	63
30-39	66	56
40 and over	57	49

Source : UGT

Spain: work accidents resulting in at least one day's absence, by age and contract type

	Unlimited term contracts		Fixed-term contracts		Other	Total	
Age	WA	IR	WA	IR	WA	WA	IR
16-19	4546	8624.58	26375	12933.23	1091	32012	12544.70
20-24	38943	7466.07	106156	12998.16	4936	150035	11211.70
25-29	62496	5052.22	97290	10357.71	6281	166067	7631.05
30-34	61828	4172.21	74832	11436.96	5924	142584	6674.34
35-39	59650	4188.61	59754	11548.90	5427	124831	6429.62
40-44	52510	3970.81	44783	12526.71	4875	102168	6081.79
45-49	42826	3724.00	30657	13300.22	3830	77313	5600.36
50-54	38623	4280.51	25052	15219.93	3593	67268	6305.00
55-59	28737	4437.46	13602	14080.75	2484	44823	6022.98
60-64	13245	4626.27	5436	13194.17	1172	19853	6060.13
over 64	1445	4339.34	679	16560.98	208	2332	6252.01
not specified	98		1475		51	1624	
Total	**405593**	**4473.44**	**492450**	**12084.37**	**40145**	**938188**	**7139.02**

Source: Computer records for work accident reports, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2002
WA: total work accidents
IR: incidence rate calculated by number of accidents/100 000 workers in the social security scheme
Accidents on the way to and from work are not included.

There is a phenomenon at work here very similar to that seen in the undervaluing of the real skills of many predominantly female occupations. It is "normal" for young leisure industry workers to move to the music and seem to revel in their job even if the bright and breezy facade belies long hours of heavy work, overwhelming fatigue and splitting head pains. It is "normal" for a building apprentice to lug back-breaking bags of cement, not ask questions about paint solvents and teeter perilously along unsecured scaffolding to prove themselves up to the job. It is "normal" for young motorcycle couriers to weave in and out of traffic, risking a dozen accidents a day to deliver packages safely to customers, wearing his rain -sodden orange uniform with pride. But the fact is that there is nothing normal in any of that.

The turnover that generally typifies these young people's jobs is a measure of the oppression that these stereotypes convey. There is significance in the fact that the highest youth employment sector – the hospitality industry – also tends to be that with the highest turnover. In a study on the fast food industry [Nkuitchou, 2005], Raoul Nkuitchou Nkouatchet concludes: "Casualisation in the fast food industry, reflected in very high levels of staff turnover, enables the big chains to retain only 'ideal' and particularly enthused workers. The ideal fast food workforce in the eyes of those who run it is what customers want to find in outlets when they go in: smiley young people! It is no coincidence that these young people are highly productive: those who become disenchanted are 'helped' by the organization to leave its restaurants. This is one of the keys to why the fast food industry is flourishing."

Casualisation is closely linked to low pay for young workers. One can be casualised because "deskilled", but also "deskilled" because casualised. Sectors like academic research or personal services, as well as hi-tech firms at the cutting-edge of the computer industry, employ large numbers of highly skilled people on very low pay. A new term has been coined in Spain for these hundreds of thousands of young people who, however well-qualified, stay stuck in "peripheral jobs" never earning salaries above 1000 – "*mileuristas*". It has become the new buzz word. "Mileurista" blogs are popping up everywhere, they get press coverage, groups are being set up. "Mileurista" Carolina Alguacil [Jimenez Barca, 2005] defines them like this: "The *mileurista* is a young higher ed graduate, fluent in several languages, with post-graduate and masters degrees and specialised qualifications (...) who earns no more than 1000. Over a third of their salary goes on rent because they are townies. They have no savings, own neither a home nor a car, are childless and live for the day… It can be fun, but ultimately wears you down". In fact, for most young females and young male immigrants, this is on the optimistic side, as they seldom earn more than 750.

Higher work accident rates

The all-EU work accident frequency rate for young workers is higher than for their older workmates. This is clear to see from the Eurostat data. In 2003, 16.4% of work accidents resulting in more than three days off work involved workers aged under 25, who made up just over 10% of the whole labour force. In absolute figures, for the EU-15 this meant more than 33 000 accidents for workers aged under 18, and over 650 000 accidents for workers aged 18-24.

The same trend is also found in non-EU industrialised countries [Salminen, 2004]. Fatal and serious accidents (defined by their consequences in terms of work incapacity and invalidity) tend to be more prevalent among older workers.

The many accidents among workers aged under 18 reflect the gap between law and reality. All EU countries have legislation that provides special protection for workers aged under 18 (in some cases rising to age 21). There is even a Community directive dating from 1994[8], but its content is fairly token and does not really contribute to "harmonizing working conditions while maintaining the improvements made".

One way or another, national rules do not allow young workers to be employed in seriously dangerous activities. The authorities tend not to see enforcement of these rules as a priority and workplace labour relations enable many employers to avoid this "regulatory burden". So much is shown by the work accident figures, as well as some data on exposures, especially to carcinogens.

Other health risks

The other health risks are less well-known. The relatively low employment rates of young workers imply that the health selection effect is a bigger factor than in the 25-50 age group. Also, the population aged 15-24 has better general health than older groups, so the immediate impact of working conditions logically results in fewer perceived or diagnosed injuries and disorders. So, the health and safety at work module of the 1999 European *Labour Force Survey* shows a proportion of young workers reporting a work-related injury or disorder below the all-worker averages. But there is a higher prevalence of skin complaints, where young workers account for 16.3% of all reported cases. For three other groups of medical condition – headaches and eyestrain, infectious diseases, and pulmonary disorders – the share of young workers in reported cases is very close to their share of the whole workforce.

Prevalence of cardiovascular diseases and hearing disorders is very low, by contrast. For the two groups of injuries and disorders most common among workers – musculoskeletal disorders along with stress, depression and anxiety – young workers account for

[8] Council Directive 94/33/EC of 22 June 1994 on the protection of young people at work, *OJ* L 216 of 20 August 1994, p. 12–20.

approximately 5% of reported cases despite making up around 10% of the total workforce. The observable pattern, therefore, is that the more a medical condition may be the immediate result of a very short or even a single exposure, the more likely it is to be found among young workers, whereas only a low percentage of young workers report suffering from an injury or disorder that results from prolonged exposure (like most hearing disorders).

Moving from perceived health to recognised occupational diseases, the situation of young workers could not on the face of it be bettered.

In 2001, the incidence rate of recognised occupational diseases among young workers in the Europe of Fifteen was 8.3 cases per 100 000 workers aged 15-17 and 22.7 cases per 100 000 workers aged 18-24 [Karjalanein, 2004]. The all-worker rate was 37 cases per 100 000 workers, with a marked age-specific rise.

An exposure assessment is the only way to get a more accurate measurement of the health impact of working conditions.

The European picture can be gleaned from the data of the Dublin Foundation's survey of working conditions. The 2005 survey data are not yet available, but certain trends can be picked out from the 2000 survey data [Paoli, 2001; Molinié, 2003].

Young workers (aged 15-24) experience above-average exposure to noise and vibrations. Not all differentials are equally great – the gap is much wider in some countries than others. In Belgium, for instance, 11% of young workers are exposed to vibrations all or almost all their working time compared to 7% of all workers. Young workers are also over-exposed to carrying or moving heavy loads at least half the time, as well as accumulated repetitive arm or hand movements, and working at very high speeds. The survey reveals no significant deviation of young workers from the general mean for other risk factors like breathing in vapours, fumes and dust, handling dangerous substances, radiation, work in painful or uncomfortable postures. Where the latter is concerned, it must obviously be borne in mind that the perception of such postures by young workers whose body is not yet worn down by work is probably less acute than that of older workers.

This brings us to a key issue: differential risk perceptions coloured both by objective factors (better general health) and subjective factors (less systematic information, trivializing of work hazards, etc.).

The grey areas of research

While there is fairly abundant data on work accidents among young workers, there is scant research into how work impacts other aspects of their health. Most EU countries lack any robust data. Taking just the figures for recognised occupational diseases, one would have to say that young workers are pretty healthy on the whole.

Such a conclusion overlooks three key things:
1. The long-term effects of occupational exposures: in most cases, an occupational disease only manifests several years (decades for most cancers) after exposure to the risk;
2. Contingent workers mainly fall outside recognition systems;
3. In some cases, workers wait until their employment is at an end before seeking recognition of an occupational disease.

Sickness absence data are also not statistically significant because of the pressure created by generally casualised employment statuses which results in "presenteeism" (coming into work with an illness, instead of resting and treating it) and superficially better general health.

What these findings suggest is that measuring the health impact of work on young workers requires a combination of at least three things:
1. Giving more weight to exposures than medical conditions and, when looking at systems, taking account of the real conditions of prevention. Exposure to carcinogens in the construction industry or cleaning services, for instance, is clearly generally riskier than exposure to carcinogens in the pharmaceutical industry;
2. Having longitudinal studies by which to track the lifecycle impact of working conditions;
3. Collecting systematic data on subjective risk perception, which in many cases is an excellent predictive indicator of the development of medical conditions. This cannot but benefit from set-ups where workers themselves compare and contrast the experiences of different generations.

The problem is that such data are routinely collected only by a minority of EU countries. This illustrates the failings of provision for surveying and researching work-related health damage in most European countries.

Research into social differences in health includes many studies on the linkages between unemployment – especially youth unemployment – and social inequalities in health [Wadsworth, 1999]. But there are few in-depth studies of the linkages between contingent employment and social inequalities in health [Artazcoz, 2005]. There is, for example, robust evidence that social inequalities in mortality are most pronounced among males aged 30-50 [Pensola, 2004], but no research appears to have been done into what role working conditions play in that.

It is important to note here that young workers are less well informed about risks than their older colleagues. In the Dublin Foundation's 2000 survey, 11.8% of young workers reported not being well informed or informed at all about work hazards, against an average of 9.6%.

The most salient feature relates to the difference between perceptions of an immediate health risk and a long-term risk. Proportionally fewer young workers consider that work affects their health, but more consider that they could not or would not want to be doing the same job at age 60.

Various national surveys provide a more detailed, and generally more concerning, picture.

France's 2003 Sumer survey (see article, p. 9) reports a marked over-exposure to carcinogens[9] – 17.1% of workers aged under 25 compared to under 13% in the 40 and over age groups years (13.5% for all employees). Almost 19% of apprentices and young workers on sandwich training contracts are concerned, as well as nearly 15% of temporary agency workers. The fact that the health effects of carcinogens may not manifest for several decades after the period of exposure shows the scale of the health risks inherent in such a practise. The 2003 Sumer survey in France makes the same finding as regards postural constraints and uncomfortable working positions[10]. This shows that workers aged under 25 are most affected by the combination of constraints. Almost 17% combine a tiring working position with an uncomfortable posture (against 11.4% of all workers). The proportions of young workers affected by repetitive movements (25%) and vibration (19%) are also above the all-worker averages of 17% and 11%, respectively [Yilmaz, 2006]. 26% of young workers are exposed to a level of health-damaging noise above 85 dBa at work, compared to the average of 21%.

Table 1 **Day, night and shift work in Spain, by age**

Age	Day work	Night work	Shift work
18-24	81.4 %	1.2 %	17.3 %
25-34	83.0 %	0.5 %	16.4 %
35-44	84.1 %	0.7 %	15.2 %
45-54	87.7 %	0.6 %	11.7 %
55-64	87.9 %	0.5 %	11.6 %
65 and over	90.9 %	0.0 %	9.1 %

Source: 5th working conditions survey, 2003 [Osca Segovia, 2006]

Spain's fifth national working conditions survey[11] revealed a distinct over-representation of young workers in the cluster of workers with a combination of all risk factors. They account for 11.7% of this group, but just 8.2% of all workers. Table 1 shows that the most health-damaging forms of working time organization predominantly affect young workers.

In the Netherlands [Smulders, 2006], an indicator clustering a series of exposures to dangerous physical and chemical agents reveals no particularly significant age group-specific differentials (10% of young workers experience at least one exposure a week against 9% for all workers), whereas certain specific exposures are more widespread among young workers – mainly noise exposure (34% against 29% for all workers). More pronounced differences are observed in work organisation, indicating that young workers are concentrated in low-skilled jobs.

An Italian survey on the working conditions of contingent workers in Bologna, Emilia-Romagna, reports alarming levels of injuries and disorders among contingent workers [Servizio sanitario, 2005]. The prevalence of health damage among young workers (aged 19-26) is only slightly below average. The survey was done by Bologna's department of public health among workers who started work in 2003 on a contingent contract (temporary agency contract, fixed-term contract, job training contract, freelancer's contract). Most responses were received from women (63.8%), and included a very high proportion of upper secondary school and university graduates (76.7%). Most respondents (60.4%) had been in contingent employment for between one and three years. Over 60% of respondents reported being on salaries of 15 000 a year or less. Most of the respondents reported suffering health problems, the most frequently cited being related to chronic stress created or worsened by job insecurity. Workers in the 19-26 age group displayed a very high prevalence of headaches (over 70% of replies), general stress (over 65%), low back pain (nearly 65%), anxiety (nearly 60%), and sleep disorders (just under 40%).

Life insecurity outside work

Insecurity affects the ability to take care of one's health in many ways. It plays directly into exposure to risk factors. Employers tend to use insecurity as a risk management strategy, i.e., foisting the harshest and most dangerous working conditions on the

Table 2 **Selected work characteristics in the Netherlands, by age**

Work characteristics	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
Scope for development	58 %	76 %	79 %	76 %	75 %
Complex work	60 %	77 %	81 %	79 %	79 %
Autonomous work	54 %	75 %	76 %	73 %	75 %
Work under pressure	32 %	43 %	47 %	52 %	48 %

Source: TAS, TNO Work Situation Survey, 2000-2002

[9] Les expositions aux produits cancérogènes, *Premières synthèses, Informations*, no 28.1, July 2005.
[10] Contraintes posturales et articulaires au travail, *Premières synthèses, Informations*, no 11.2, March 2006.
[11] See http://empleo.mtas.es/insht/statistics/5enct_ptp.htm.

Young, working and broke

The "working poor" – workers who earn too little to keep out of poverty – are a spreading phenomenon in Europe [Medialdea, 2005].

The Eurostat statistics agency defines the at-risk-of-poverty population as people living in households with an income (including welfare transfers and after taxes) below 60% of the median income of the country they live in. Based on the data for 2001-2002, up to 14 million people in the EU-25 would seem to be in work but living below the poverty line. The share of in-work poor among all people living in poverty has risen steadily over the past decade.

Various factors play into this situation: the number of dependent children, other household members with earned income, how many months worked in the year, etc. Contingent employment is obviously a big factor. In many cases, it explains why even full-time employed workers may find themselves below the poverty line.

In most countries in the Europe of Fifteen, young workers are more frequently found to be living in poverty than older workers. The general average of poor workers for the EU-15 is 7%, but 10% of young workers live in poverty [Eurostat, 2005]. Some countries buck this trend, however. Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Ireland, for instance, where the high proportion of young workers still living with parents – foregoing independence for a measure of material security – is probably one reason. The widest gaps are in the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, Luxembourg and Finland where the at-risk-of-poverty rate for young workers is at least double the all-worker rate. In the Netherlands, for example, 20% of young workers live below the poverty line compared to 8% of all workers.

Poverty risk of workers by different characteristics, EU-15, 2001 (%)

	TOTAL	26-24	25-54	55 and over	Permanent employment contract	Temporary employment contract
BE	4	8	4	5	3	7
DK	3	7	2	3	-	-
DE	4	10	4	5	3	8
EL	13	13	11	21	4	10
ES	10	6	10	10	5	9
FR	8	10	8	8	5	9
IE	7	2	7	13	4	8
IT	10	9	10	14	6	18
LU	8	16	8	5	8	7
NL	8	20	7	3	-	-
AT	6	5	6	8	3	3
PT	12	10	11	21	6	12
FIN	6	15	5	7	3	8
SE	3	6	3	2	-	-
UK	6	11	6	7	4	8
UE-15	7	10	7	9	4	10

Source : Eurostat, 2005

The measure of poverty risk is the share of population with an equivalent income below 60% of the equivalised median income of the country they live in. The equivalent income is defined as the total household income divided by its "equivalent size" (where the first adult counts for one unit, other household members over fourteen years of age have a weighting of 0.5 and children under 14 are attributed a weighting of 0.3).

categories of worker least able to assert their rights and force better working conditions. This tendency is borne out by abundant evidence. But the analysis should not stop at this finding. There is a very strong connection between the growth of insecure working conditions and a more prevalent "social insecurity" [Castel, 2003].

Work has been described as the "great integrator" [Barel, 1990], a role it also played in bringing new generations onto the labour market, when it was a major contributor to forging their social identity. It marked the transition to adult life, independence from parents and added a specific class identity to access to citizenship. Casualisation is at odds with these developments. It shrouds life transitions in uncertainty. It makes it hard for individuals to develop personal plans and, beyond that, collective plans for the society in which they live. Richard Sennett has admirably dissected the connection between contemporary capitalism's enforce flexibility, the undermining of personal life plans and the growing fragmentation of our societies [Sennett, 1998]. Specific surveys have thrown up much corroborating evidence of this.

The Dutch working conditions survey finds a more pronounced disengagement with work among young people. 30% of young workers feel often or always engaged with their work against an average 52% for all workers. This disengagement is itself probably linked to two other things: an immediate one of lower-grade, repetitive and flexible work that is not conducive to personal development; and a longer-term perception of instability that casts a shadow over any future prospects. When asked whether they think themselves more employable than their workmates, 50% to 55% of these workers reply "yes", a percentage that falls to 38% in the 15-24 age group.

Job insecurity has many repercussions on life in society. The main constraint for young people is to stop them growing independent of their parents. There is abundant evidence that a high proportion of young contingent workers partly rely on financial support from their family. Housing is a particularly acute issue in that in almost all European cities, property speculation has resulted in rent and home buying price rises far outstripping pay increases over the last fifteen to twenty years. Job insecurity can also be a big obstacle to getting a mortgage. Generally, it thwarts plans not only through financial restrictions, but also by reducing control of time management. Job insecurity is a factor in women's decisions to defer childbearing.

A Spanish survey points to the gap between formal pronouncements of citizenship and the many ways that insecurity curtails planning for an independent future [Sánchez Moreno, 2004]. It shows that insecurity can be approached from many different angles: insufficient pay, over-qualification for the job, irregular or unpredictable work schedules, abusive conduct by superiors, dead-end jobs, etc. There is a sort of assimilation of insecurity to be seen among the young people of three different workforces who took part in the survey; a sort of resignation to the fact of never having other than a contingent job. There is no reference to a framework of regulation and collective actions or collective representation bodies. This view of work as an individual venture lacking any framework for collective action does not, however, mean that common demands may not potentially emerge.

When questioned about pay, young contingent workers are less concerned with whether it reflects the work done by reference to collectively agreed pay scales, for instance, than with the fact that it is not enough to live on. The most vexed issue is housing. For most, low pay is what stops them getting a place of their own. The same gap between perceived and desired pay appears in other countries' studies. Likewise the inability to refer to a collective framework that regulates working conditions. The reply given by a young French worker temping for a sub-contractor firm in the motor manufacturing industry is telling [Bouquin, 2006]; when asked "Do you think you are treated equally?", he replied "Not equally, but reasonably".

Insecurity gives impetus to social inequalities. Here, the ways in which the younger generation enter or are excluded from the labour market highlight a more general trend in the development of contemporary capitalism. Very short term profit maximization can only be achieved by forcing the pace of competitive work practices. This can be observed between different countries and firms, but also between workers. The yawning chasm that can be found in any western European town between young people on the brink of social exclusion and those poised to join the elite social circles offers a glimpse of the scale of the social inequalities to come.

Granted, there is nothing preordained in it, and labour action today may change matters. The spring 2006 clashes in France over the "first job contracts" scheme also hint at the potential for resistance out there. It is significant that students should have come out in force behind work-related demands. It is both the expression of a "here and now" fact that many students have already experienced exploitation in contingent jobs, and a very acute awareness that the development of social inequalities means that a university degree can no longer be seen as a ticket to a good job. The French spring of 2006 also faces the trade union movement with an enthusing and difficult challenge: finding ways of acting and organising that reflect what the up-and-coming generations want, doing more to entwine immediate work-related demands more closely with an overall vision of society. Health and safety at work shows every sign of being one of the key issues for expanding the traditional trade union approach in this way.

The unedifying history of the Young Workers Directive

The Directive on the health and the safety of young workers is one of the most flawed pieces of Community health and safety legislation.

It was adopted in June 1994, the result of a slew of compromises. The original draft was not particularly groundbreaking. It re-enacted a few general rules already in force in most of the then Member States. It outlawed all work by children under fourteen and night work by young people aged 14-18, for whom it also appropriated a few of the Framework Directive's general provisions (risk assessment, information, health surveillance, etc). It made provision for outlawing the most dangerous activities by including some of the risks already prohibited in most Member States.

In some respects, the Conventions adopted by the ILO were more advanced than the proposal for a Community Directive.

No sooner were the plans for a proposal announced than Britain's Conservative government swung into action against it. It was the only government to oppose the Community rules as a matter of principle, with full-throated 19th century arguments about wrecking the economy and intolerable curbs on liberty. A tub-thumping press campaign was waged around defending Britain's traditional paperboys and papergirls – a campaign that attracted strange bedfellows. The shadow Secretary of State for Employment in the main opposition party (the Labour Party) made personal representations to the European Commission to water the directive down. Step forward Tony Blair, later swept to power as Prime Minister in the May 1997 elections. Mrs Thatcher's deregulation policy is the main reason for the British government's belligerent stance in this debate. In 1988 and 1989, it had successfully relieved industry of two weighty burdens: annual holiday entitlement and the prohibition on night work for young workers aged 16-18. The Tory government had no wish to have to do a U-turn on these measures.

Although broadly supporting the directive, other Member States were quick to pull some of its teeth through derogations. Denmark wanted to keep allowing under-15s to work in family concerns, while France argued that a blanket ban on child work would have damaged Parisian fashion shows.

The European Parliament tried to redress matters by voting through a series of amendments. Some States (chiefly Italy and Spain) pressed to keep the directive internally consistent, but the text finally adopted by the Council was deeply disappointing. The directive lays down thirteen mandatory rules qualified by no less than eleven exceptions and derogations! Three "rules" are couched as simple discretionary recommendations for Member States. The prohibitions on carrying out particularly dangerous activities can be replaced by an obligation to do nothing more than have the young person's work performed under the supervision of a competent person.

Elsewhere, the directive diverges from the Framework Directive and almost all other Community HSW directives by failing to provide for any consultation of workers and their representatives. The only use of the word "representatives" comes in the provision on informing children's legal representatives (usually, their parents) about any hazards connected with their work. This is a typically 19th century paternalist approach that does not see protection for young workers in the same collective representation terms as for adult workers.

Understandably, harmonization has been marginal… In six countries, including the United Kingdom, limited legislative changes have been made, usually by extending the scope of existing provisions to previously-excluded categories (work experience training in Belgium and France, sea transport, fishing in Ireland, etc.). The other six countries simply tinkered at the edges of their laws. In some countries, transposition of the directive was even used as an excuse to force employment standards down. Germany excluded apprentices over 18 from the scope of protective measures that previously covered them. The Netherlands replaced prohibitions on dangerous activities by nothing more than the obligation to work under adult supervision, and cut the length of the weekly rest period for young workers. After fierce debates in Portugal, the government used the opportunities for exemptions offered by the directive to water down the prohibition on night work laid down in a 1991 Act.

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