



From the unions

Since the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Europe in March 2020, tens of millions of people doing jobs incompatible with working from home have been making sure society keeps running. Although the media and the public have shown their support for healthcare staff, workers in other sectors have also been putting in their share of labour completely away from public view. Some of Belgium's "invisible" workers tell *HesaMag* their stories.

Covid-19 Their stories, our story

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Interviews carried out between June 2020 and February 2021

↓ Photo: © Belga



"We couldn't support elderly people when their families weren't there"

Carol, a cleaner in a nursing and care home

With a lump in her throat, Carol takes a deep breath, and then bursts out: "We were there every single day, whatever we felt like, however frightened or anxious we were. We were doing it for our residents. The ones who were spared never stopped asking us, 'What is going on?' They kept saying to us, 'We're at war.' They could see the hearses going by. The ones who were most depressed just stayed in bed all day. You could see them fading away before your eyes."

The establishment where Carol works was hit full on by the first wave of the virus, despite the isolation measures the management adopted at a very early stage.

"The staff were tested as early as 16 March 2020. Out of 70 workers, only one test came back positive. The following week, it was carnage," she remembers with tears in her eyes. In all, 26 elderly people died in the home and five staff members were taken to hospital.

When it comes down to it, dying in a nursing home, or in hospital, is not all that unusual. The people who work in those institutions are used to it. But with Covid-19, death appeared in its cruellest, most dehumanising guise. Not being able to be with the elderly people and support them in their dying days, even though they were the only ones who could do it because the patients' families no longer could, is something that will haunt the workers in that sector for a long time to come.

"In normal circumstances, the undertakers clean up the people who pass away. With this disease, you couldn't touch them any more, or even wash them. Their bodies were rushed away as quickly as possible," she confides.

"In the early summer, we really felt the pressure on the unions to agree to the number of trollies in our supermarkets being increased."

With Covid-19, death appeared in its cruellest, most dehumanising guise.

Carol, who is also a union representative, puts the blame on the public authorities, whom she accuses of leaving retirement homes to cope with the crisis by themselves. She is still indignant that the emergency services refused to take some residents to hospital. "I was very upset by what happened to one of our female residents. She was a relatively young person with a disability, who had no family left any more. Although we kept insisting she should be taken to hospital, their answer was, 'Her brain's had it anyway, there's no point putting her in hospital.' And that same evening, we were to be given 10 respirators. I really have the feeling that everything was done to make sure our residents wouldn't go and take up space in hospitals."

"We're doing our best to make sure that workers' health takes priority over commercial interests"

Francesco, supermarket worker

For 20 years, Francesco has been working for a major Belgian retailer employing around 20 000 workers. "Since this disease broke out, proactivity on the management side has, for once, taken second place to the needs of the workers. Panic spread like wildfire, and the staff just had to deal with it," Francesco, a cash manager, tells us.

"My telephone started ringing non-stop. Sometimes it would be a member of staff who had diabetes, other times a workmate living with her elderly mum. The only advice I could give them was to tell them to go and see their doctor. At the end of March, the whole chain was facing an enormous absentee rate. What management did then was call in temporaries and students," the delegate of the Belgian socialist trade union the FGTB told us.

Tension mounted still higher when the media reported at the beginning of April that a worker in a Brussels supermarket belonging to the chain had died. A heated argument soon broke out in the media over a report that the worker had been forbidden to wear a mask for commercial reasons.

"When the health crisis first started, some colleagues did actually complain that a manager had asked them to take their masks off 'so as not to frighten the customers,'" the delegate of the Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work (CPPT) recalls. "I told management it was not acceptable, and I put a post up conspicuously on my Facebook page saying I one hundred per cent supported workers who wore masks. You have to remember that the authorities at the time were saying things that tended to downplay the usefulness of masks, saying that all you needed to do was wash your hands and practise social distancing," the representative adds.

"Senior management finally agreed that we could wear our cloth masks, until surgical masks were delivered." Now he still has to fight to get the company to comply strictly with the rules limiting the number of customers per square metre in the stores. "Between the two waves, in the early summer, we really felt the pressure on the unions to agree to the number of trollies in our supermarkets being increased."

Francesco does point to one positive outcome of the current crisis, though: "I've seen a degree of solidarity re-emerging between management and the workers."



↑ Sabrina, live-in caregiver.
Photo: © Denis Grégoire

"The people who write the safety rules don't know what our work involves"

Sabrina, live-in caregiver

"I've had huge numbers of calls from workmates in tears, sometimes right up to midnight. One I especially remember was a colleague whose son had been taken to hospital with pneumothorax. She was screaming over the telephone, she was so terrified of catching an infection when she went to work and passing the disease on to him," says Sabrina, who has been working as a live-in caregiver (home help) for the last 16 years.

As there was no sign of any reaction from her employer, this trade union representative called for an emergency meeting of the CPPT. "I'd put together a note based on the questions my colleagues had asked me over the phone," she explains, pulling four handwritten sheets of paper from her document folder.

Sabrina also offered to supply female workers with homemade masks. "To begin with, there wasn't much reaction from management to my offer, and then, as they were just as much at a loss as we were, they eventually agreed to it."

"I'm hopeless at sewing, but two other workmates are very handy at it. They sewed the masks, I did the finishing, and I ran up and down collecting material or elastic from private people who'd contacted me through a Facebook group which I'd set up." All in all, Sabrina and her two workmates were to produce and deliver no fewer than 150 masks during their spare time.

As in many businesses, the first few weeks of the crisis saw a great many cases of people somehow muddling through. When

members of staff were away, the gaps had to be filled, and people had to devise their own strategies to prevent the disease from spreading. "We were getting orders from our supervisory authorities saying things like 'You must always keep a distance of at least 1.5 metres between you and the person you're caring for.' All I can say is the people who write these safety rules don't know what our work involves. How are you supposed to practise social distancing when you have to feed someone who can't feed themselves any longer or when you have to wash them and clean them up?" Sabina tells us.

"We don't only go out to help the elderly, we also work with young people who've been diagnosed with schizophrenia or paranoia. Sometimes when I've arrived with my mask on, they've been scared and had anxiety attacks. Some of them, unfortunately, even had to be taken to a mental hospital, they were so disturbed by the situation," she adds.

"The wellness professions aren't being given the recognition they deserve"

Christian, a steelworker and masseur

What can working in the steel industry and having massage skills possibly have in common with each other? On the face of it, nothing — these two worlds seem so far apart. Yet that is a gap that Christian,

an iron and steelworker and, wait for it, masseur, has managed to bridge in a quite unusual way. Every morning, he turns up for work at a factory in La Louvière which, among other things, produces steel coils for the car-making industry. In the evening, he swaps his blue work overalls for more casual dress, picks up his Tibetan bowls and goes to visit his clients.

"The steel manufacturer I work for has gone through several restructurings one after the other over the past two decades. This has meant that, as the internal reorganisations have been carried out, I've held a number of less and less skilled jobs, from being a civil engineering mechanic to being a cleaner. In the end, my passion took over from my main job, and I decided to become a masseur as a side job," adds Christian, now in his fifties.

His double working life means he has been able to look at the health crisis from an unusual angle. "As a paid worker and trade union activist, I defend the idea that strict measures have to be imposed to minimise the risks. My wife is a nurse, so I'm in a good position to see the tragic effects the epidemic is having. But I can also see things from the point of view of tens of thousands of self-employed workers in the wellness sector who've been robbed of the chance to work for several months now, even though they've done everything they can to tighten up the hygiene standards they were already used to strictly complying with in any case," he confides to us.

↓ Christian, a steelworker and masseur.
Photo: © Jérémy Briquet



As in many businesses, the first few weeks of the crisis saw a great many cases of people somehow muddling through.



← Mohammed, an undocumented worker.
Photo: © Denis Grégoire

"I also feel that the professions which promote well-being aren't being given the recognition they deserve. I'm not just thinking of the people working in those professions, I also mean the people on the receiving end. One of my clients is a lady of 70 who lives on her own and only sees her daughter once a fortnight, because her daughter works in the healthcare sector, so she cuts down on the number of visits she makes for fear of contaminating her mother. Our senior citizens are suddenly completely cut off from the rest of the community and can no longer have those little moments of relaxation and friendly companionship that a visit to the hairdresser or a massage session can bring them."

"We just soldiered on as per usual"
Cécile, a worker in the food-packaging industry

At 56, Cécile feels more and more as if her body is giving up on her. Over these past few months, the mental stress caused by her fear of possibly being infected at her workplace has obviously not done anything to calm the many ailments she suffers from every day. Physical pain has been part of this worker's life since 1984, when she found herself disabled at the age of 20 after a road accident.

Despite her disability, Cécile has been working for 15 years or so in a company in the food-packaging industry which supplies chain stores with containers for cheese, sausages or sweets. The repetitive work this involves and which she does for 38 hours a week is bound to hasten the onset of a range of musculoskeletal complaints.

Since the health crisis started, she has been setting out to work every day with a knot in her stomach because, on top of her musculoskeletal afflictions, she also suffers from allergies and bouts of chronic bronchitis. "At the beginning of April, there were rumours going round that two workers had tested positive for Covid-19. I was expecting them to take my temperature before I went into the building, but no arrangement at all of that kind had been set up. We had to put on masks and use hand sanitiser, but we usually had to do that anyway. So, in the end, we just soldiered on as per usual," she reports.

Her company is regarded as being an essential business. "Even though we are linked to the food industry, I don't see how our products, which are mainly used for celebrations, family barbecues and so on, were so essential when the whole country was in lockdown," she says.

"If I didn't have my family, I'd have to beg for my food"
Mohammed, an undocumented worker

Mohammed, 46, is one of the 150 000 undocumented workers living in Belgium. Now with the public health crisis, they have become slightly more invisible than they were before.

Even so, Mohammed thinks he is luckier than other illegal workers. "I can rely on my sister and her family, who've been living in Belgium for a long time. I've seen other people waiting for butcher's shops and bakeries to close so they can get a bit of what hasn't been sold during the day. If I didn't have my family and some friends,

I would be reduced to begging for my food like them," he says.

Since he came to Belgium eight years ago, he has been earning a little money working for private individuals or small businesses. He can never be sure of getting paid, as he found once again at the beginning of 2020 when he did some gardening jobs at a client's house. "That hurt me because she and I had built up a relationship of trust. She was very happy with my work. We'd agreed on a price, 10 euros an hour. Her brother-in-law told her that was too much for undeclared work and I never saw a single euro for all the work I'd done."

He also works as a labourer in businesses, but it always ends up being more or less the same story. "We agree on a price, but in the end I get 60 euros at most for a working day of at least 10 hours, with the constant fear of having a serious accident," he adds.

With the public health crisis, the scanty earnings from that work have dried up. He has heard about action being taken to regularise the status of undocumented workers in Spain and Italy, and hopes Belgium will join the trend. ●



FURTHER READING

COVID-19. Notre histoire, CSC Namur-Dinant, November 2020, 32 pp.

Available free of charge on request from dgregoire@acv-csc.be