

## **Fuss on the bus**

### **A participative action approach of working conditions in a public transport company in Belgium**

Egmont Ruelens, [egmont\\_r@hotmail.com](mailto:egmont_r@hotmail.com)

#### *Introduction and context*

Work and working conditions are an important determinant of health. According to the ILO, every day, 6,300 people die as a result of occupational accidents or work-related diseases – more than 2.3 million deaths per year. 317 million accidents occur on the job annually; many of these resulting in extended absences from work.<sup>1</sup> The human cost of this daily adversity is vast and even exceeds the number of casualties in all armed conflicts worldwide. This is indeed very alarming. But action on health at the workplace has proven to be a complex matter.

Working conditions and safety at work in western Europe are under great pressure by neoliberal austerity measures. Recent harsh attacks on public services and social welfare in Greece is the most striking example of how economic and monetary institutions like the IMF, the European Central Bank and the World Bank put pressure on countries to pay back their foreign debt. This neoliberal strategy to privatize public services alongside further deregulation of financial markets and cuts in social services has resulted in a major raise of socio-economic inequality. Austerity has clearly become the main political discourse in many European countries. Belgium is no exception. The current government, in power since mid-2014, is led by a right-wing coalition of liberal and nationalistic parties and has taken austerity measures to another level in Belgium. Not only did they pick up speed in announcing cuts and savings on public spending, such as reducing pensions, raising the age of retirement or reduce wages. They also took a confrontational stand against the trade unions.

In the decades following World War II, Belgium has developed a social model of negotiations between employers and trade union institutions to guarantee social peace and economic development. In order to attenuate class struggle, these trade unions were granted an important role in economic decision making. Thus giving them an important leverage on the political level. The number of workers who joined one of the three unions in Belgium, rose from 71% in 2000 to 74% in 2010. This makes Belgium an exception in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Trade unions are thus powerful institutions and political decisions concerning wages, pensions, taxes or public services are ideally made with their consent. When the current government came into power, it was clear that this model of negotiations and consent would no longer be respected. Soon, deep cuts in wages and pensions were announced, public services were to undergo austerity cuts and attacks on the trade unions intensified. This resulted in mass demonstrations and a wave of strikes by the end of 2014, culminating in a day of national general strike. However, this did not abate the stance of the government and austerity measures continued.

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1 <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work>

2 “Geen grenzen aan de groei : de Belgische syndicalisatiegraad in de jaren 2000 Geen grenzen aan de groei : de Belgische syndicalisatiegraad in de jaren 2000” Vandaele K, Faniel J. 2012, ETUI. Available at: [http://works.bepress.com/kurt\\_vandaele/108/](http://works.bepress.com/kurt_vandaele/108/)

Public transportation is one of the sectors witnessing severe health issues as it is gravely struck by the recent cuts and savings by the in 2014 elected Belgian rightwing government. Working conditions have deteriorated and the health of workers has increasingly been undermined by more flexible working hours, longer working days and poorer compensation. This contribution shows how a participative action research on the health of tram- and bus drivers in the Flemish city of Antwerp unfolded against the background of intensifying neoliberal politics.

*A Participative Action Research on working conditions. Easier said than done.*

Participative Action Research (PAR) has proved its value in many different settings around the globe. It is most frequently used to challenge power structures and dynamics that produce socio-economic inequity. The goal of PAR is not to gather scientific data as such, but to use this data in a struggle for better working or living) conditions. This approach to science and research has already proven valuable for decades in the social struggle in Latin America.<sup>3</sup> In Europe, PAR has not yet been fully accepted as a mature form of science, not even by progressive researchers. Fear of not being taken seriously in academic settings or to avoid the reproach of partiality and getting mingled up in politics, makes traditional researchers stay away from participative action approaches (PAR). I believe that research on health cannot be seen apart from a human rights framework. Health and healthcare cannot be separated from the political and economic context and power balance that create or does not create the conditions for a healthy society. Research that produces scientifically validated knowledge can thus be used to improve and advance the struggle for health within this power balance. The following case study is a testimony of this approach to research.

The idea to initiate a PAR on working conditions started at the heart of a first line health clinic in Hoboken, in the outskirts of Antwerp. The clinics of “Medicine for the People” have a long history of research on working conditions and are actively supporting the trade unions in their struggle for better working conditions. Many tram drivers are patients in the clinic, as a tram terminal is located in the neighborhood. Their health has frequently been a source of worry by the physicians working in the clinic. Moreover, some trade unionists at the public transport company had frequently alarmed the clinic about the appalling working conditions for tram and bus drivers.

The PAR was conceived as the graduation project of a physician in the final stage of his training. The research team initially consisted of two doctors, a researcher specialized in PAR at the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp and 3 trade unionists.

In the first stage, early in 2012, several focus group discussions were organized. Tram and bus drivers who were also patients at the clinic, were invited to join these groups. In all, 4 focus groups were held in the clinic in which 17 drivers participated. The discussions were loosely structured around the issue of health at work. Three main problems resulting in worsening health conditions were identified.

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3 “Participatory action research in health systems: a methods reader” Loewenson, Rene; Laurell, Asa C; Hogstedts, Christer; D’Ambruoso, Lucia; Shroff, Zubin. 2014, TARSC, AHPSSR, WHO, IDRC Canada, EQUINET, Harare

Firstly, non-ergonomical and worn-out chairs and long working hours without breaks result in problems on the lower back. Secondly, stress and fatigue due to changing working schedules and not having enough time to complete the bus or tram rides within the given timetables, result in a variety of complaints such as stomach problems, insomnia, and burn-out. Last but not least, a tensed relationship with the employer, who is seen as a controlling actor rather than a supportive one. The management prefers sending control doctors to drivers on sick leave or organizes absenteeism interviews, instead of investing in prevention of stress and physically harming working conditions. The attitude of the drivers towards their employer is based on distrust and fear as company repression is a daily reality. In the beginning of this project, certain drivers even feared the researchers involved as they thought they might be spying on the drivers on behalf of the company.

The outcome of the discussions was presented at the trade unions and the occupational physician of the public transport company in Antwerp. They were identified by the drivers themselves as the people or institutions to promote the right to health in the workplace. Specifically the company doctor took much sympathy and trust on behalf of the drivers, as it was felt he gave priority to their health and well being over company interests. He would send drivers on sick leave, even when they preferred to keep on working, afraid of company repression. As the board of the company was not seen as a partner in advancing healthier working conditions, they were not included in the discussions. The trade unions, as well as the company doctor were clearly aware of the problematic conditions in the workplace. They affirmed that the board of the company was also aware of these problems, but preferred to minimize the problem and did not invest in prevention.

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“De Lijn” is an autonomous public company that carries out urban and regional public transport by tram or bus on behalf of the Flemish Region. With 80% of its shares, the Flemish Region is also the main stakeholder of the company. De Lijn holds a monopoly on public transport by tram or bus. Nevertheless ever since 1991, when public transport was centralized in one public company, more and more bus lines are serviced by private companies, commissioned by De Lijn. In 2015 half of the bus lines were exploited by various private companies. Urban and regional public transport in Flanders is thus a complex merger of public and private providers. This transition from a state-owned enterprise to a partially privatized company introduced a logic of economic efficiency, competition and pro-profit management. Providing service as well as the cultural and social role that marked the initial mission of public transport became less relevant. Hence, working conditions have deteriorated over the last decades since drivers got longer working hours, less time to complete their rides and financial means necessary to upkeep buses, trams and depots were restricted. In addition to this, fares went up as well, with the most pronounced increase in 2015, when the price of a single fare ticket went up by 50%, from 2 to 3 euros.

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During various discussions with trade unionists, bus drivers and the occupational doctor, it became

clear that stronger evidence of unhealthy conditions was needed in order to take action for better working conditions. This evidence was to be provided by a large survey in which the drivers would be able to report the problems they encountered and give their opinion on possible solutions. The survey was drafted, reworked, distributed, recollected and the results were processed within the framework of a close cooperation between the researchers, a group of drivers and trade unionists who got involved during the process and the company doctor. This second stage of the PAR early in 2013, reached more than 400 of the 1000 tram and bus drivers in Antwerp. In all, 460 surveys were recollected and 406 were retained for further processing.

The reaction of the company upon discovering the scope of the project was of key importance for the further development of the project. Within days after the first surveys were distributed, De Lijn circulated a communication letter addressing the drivers, stressing that the survey was not initiated by the company and that authorization to hold a survey needed to be given by the board. The researchers were contacted in person by the company to demand the immediate end of the project. The company doctor was fired on the spot for his participation in the PAR. Despite these forms of intimidation, this course of action backlashed and provoked fierce resistance from the trade unions. They took full responsibility of the project, opposed against the demission of the company doctor with the threat of a strike and encouraged the drivers to further distribute and complete the survey. More drivers completed the survey and ultimately the company doctor was to stay in office, after being pushed by the company to take paid leave for one month.

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The results of the survey were alarming. 46% of drivers reported lower back pain, contrasting with 26% reported in European surveys among workers. Over 40% took painkillers but continued working. Because of the changing working hours, almost half of the drivers (48%) struggled with sleeping disorders and half of them took sleeping pills. 27% reported digestive disorders due to irregular breaks. One in three drivers couldn't take any breaks at all between their rides and just as many drivers tend to drive too fast because of tight timetables. One in four drivers were at the brink of burnout or depression related to their work. Nonetheless, absenteeism didn't exceed that of other workers in Belgium. Fear of the famous absenteeism interviews and of losing their jobs were the main reasons for 30% of the drivers not to stay home on sick leave.<sup>4</sup>

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Despite the staggering results of the survey, the PAR project started loosing momentum. During the process of digesting the survey results, the political scene in Belgium was shifting. Elections were held in May 2014 and a newly elected right wing government announced serious cuts in the budget of public transport. These cuts would have a serious impact on public service provision. The discourse stating the right to basic mobility for users shifted towards one of basic accessibility of key destinations. Soon, several bus lines, especially in the countryside, were no longer serviced. More general measures threatened wages and the living standard of many workers in Belgium. The

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4 The results of the survey were not published. They can be verified by contacting the author.

response was a wave of strikes and mass mobilizations by the end of 2014. The trade unions suddenly had other priorities than advocating and struggling for healthier working conditions at De Lijn and other workplaces. Job retention was now top of the agenda. Although meetings with bus drivers and trade unionists continued, less and less participants attended them, also out of fear for company repression. Moreover, the company doctor had retired from the project to avoid more harassment by the management. The last meeting took place in March 2015 and no further initiatives were taken.

Nonetheless, one of the researchers took the project to another level by applying incognito for the job as bus driver. He drove a bus in Antwerp for almost a year. As a bus driver, he witnessed the mobilizations and struggle of the labour unions by the end of 2014 and is currently working on publishing his experiences.

### *Discussion*

Although the results of the survey were alarming, no concrete action was taken that measurably improved working conditions for the bus and tram drivers. On the contrary. As a result of a crackdown on public services and trade unions by the end of 2014, working conditions even worsened.

Several limits and restraints can be identified to explain why the project did not lead to improvement of the situation of the concerned drivers. Firstly, company repression resulted in a significant decrease in participation in the project on the long run. Furthermore, as stipulated above, the trade unions formulated new priorities in their struggle against austerity. An unfavourable political climate finished the job.

Nonetheless, a bridge between research on working conditions and both trade unions and workers was constructed. Knowledge and data production 'per se' are often the main objective of research in an academic setting. Hence, the population it tries to investigate often receives research with a certain reserve. PAR tries to bridge this gap and to construct a relationship of trust between the researchers and the population involved. By helping the drivers to formulate their concerns and to take action to improve their conditions, the researchers see the people they work with as real stakeholders. These people know and understand their situation and conditions better than anyone else. This knowledge can be mobilized and transformed into collective action. The divide line between the researchers and the drivers was even erased entirely when the junior researcher and author of this article became a bus driver himself. The company would not have hired me if it had known about my intentions during the application program. Before soliciting, I informed trade unions and more than a dozen drivers about my plan, yet no one denounced me to the management. In a big terminal where five hundred people work, news and gossips travel fast, but it took the management six months to find out about my presence. The silence of the bus drivers would not have been possible without a relationship of trust that was built up throughout the project.

The strong coalition of researchers, drivers, trade unionists and the company doctor was short lived, but strong enough to temporarily shift power balances within the company and advance the demands of the drivers for better working conditions.

This challenge to overcome existing power relations was probably the first and most important result and success of the project. Through various discussions with drivers and trade unionists, it became clear that drivers had raised awareness on their noxious working conditions. Confidence in the trade unions as important stakeholders in improving these conditions, had risen.

Although the trade unions changed course by the end of 2014, and focused their energy on repelling the attacks of austerity politics, a debate was initiated among the drivers and trade unionists on the importance of the struggle for better working conditions.

Many of them became convinced that the struggle for job retention and acting for better working conditions are actually two sides of the same coin.

Egmont Ruelens

egmont\_r@hotmail.com