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## Airport chaos: security guards and cleaners still key

MARK BERGFELD 4th July 2022

The 'key' workers of the pandemic need sustained recognition. The chaos at airports shows what happens otherwise.



Baggage going unhandled at Schiphol airport last week amid staff shortages (Fery Iswandy / shutterstock.com)

On instant-messaging groups horror stories have been circulating of long queues at airport security, with some travellers having to wait for more than three hours. Photos of overflowing rubbish bins and dirty toilets are quickly turning into holiday memories—and in many countries the summer season has yet to peak. While the

lack of pilots is leading to cancellations, the bigger issue is a shortages of cleaners and security guards.

During the pandemic, airports came to resemble ghost towns—temporarily, but perhaps foreshadowing the future in an era of runaway climate change. With planes grounded, airlines and contractors pursued cost savings and placed workers on early-retirement and furlough schemes, moved them to other contracts or simply laid them off.

Simultaneously, though, the public-health crisis changed the way governments and society at large regarded the outsourced work of security guards and cleaners. Being labelled ‘essential workers’ endowed them with a special legal status in lockdowns but also offered these low-wage workers a chance of recognition.

## Promise unfulfilled

Despite heightened environmental awareness and more extreme-weather events, many travellers are opting to resume air travel as the Covid-19 safety rules have been relaxed. As European societies return to this ‘normal’, the promise of turning ‘essential’ jobs into good union jobs however remains unfulfilled.

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The ‘great resignation’ has thus taken in airports too, with more and more security guards and cleaners leaving their jobs. Even an industry web page asks: ‘Are ground staff under-valued?’

So over the last two and a half years, the service-workers trade union federation UNI Europa has run a project called **RETAIN**, with European Union support, on labour shortages, staff retention and turnover in cleaning and security.

The shortages predate the Covid-19 crisis. Already in 2018, worker representatives, shop stewards and works-council members were reporting that labour shortages and turnover were a pressing issue. Their companies couldn't recruit sufficient workers for their contracts. One company representative from the Netherlands reported that there were ten times as many open vacancies as applicants.

Digitalisation and robotisation are not panaceas for such shortages. For years, security and cleaning companies prided themselves on **investing in** digital technologies and solutions without raising workers' wages—even though security, cleaning and facility management remain labour-intensive. Robots will not replace cleaners and security workers any time soon. Even airports with large surface areas require humans to clean seats, empty rubbish and clean toilets. The automation of much airport security makes it **more prone to cyberattacks** and it requires the human eye to check and control digital systems, as well as frontline staff with multilingual and intercultural skills.

## Quick fix

Many companies have sought to meet increase demand for services and tackle labour shortages by enlarging the labour pool. In the past, they could rely on students for the summer but wages have risen more rapidly in other sectors. Today any large security company's website will show their programmes to attract workers from traditionally under-represented groups: **women, persons with disabilities and LGBT+** individuals. In recent days, the German government has been considering **bringing in** seasonal workers from Turkey to handle the situation at its airports.

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To ensure a steady flow of labour, security companies have however had to go beyond diversity, inclusion and symbolism and reach into their pockets. Free licensing training, meal vouchers for weekend work or tax-free vouchers for those who recruit someone have become commonplace. It remains questionable though whether

these strategies are more than a quick fix.

Trade unions have long **campaigned** for a reduction in working hours, yet too often workers in these sectors struggle to survive on the hours one job provides, due to the dominance of involuntary part-time work and split shifts. Additionally, interviewees report an increase in workloads and tasks arising from clients' demands. During the 2019 strike of airport security workers in Frankfurt, women working on the early morning shift **recounted** having to sleep in the break room, due to train scheduling, unsociable hours and staff shortages.

## Low wages

Most of our project interviewees report low wages as the predominant reason for labour turnover: workers consider the industry a stop-gap before finding a better paid job. Public tenders in the sector are often awarded according to the lowest price, leading to low wages and creating what my colleague Jelena Milos and I label a 'vicious cycle of labour turnover and labour shortages'.



According to our findings, based on more than 35 interviews and numerous meetings with worker representatives across Europe, staff shortages and turnover put pressure on existing employees, who suffer from stress and burnout and so leave the sector themselves. High turnover and understaffing then weaken trade unions' capacity to represent workers, leading to further deterioration of working conditions. This leads to the inability to attract new workers and poorer services.

High CO<sub>2</sub>-emitting industries such as air travel thus contribute to the degradation not only of our environment but also livelihoods. The Covid-19 crisis, the recent chaos at airports and evidence such as ours implies radical transformation of how cleaners and security guards' work is organised, structured and remunerated. Yet employers and governments will argue in unison that **flatlining productivity** in cleaning and security renders wage rises impossible.

## Major obstacle

Building on **academic research**, our project has further found that high labour turnover is a major obstacle to organising workers in the sector. By defending workers' interest and giving workers a voice at work through collective bargaining, unions can play an important role in decreasing labour turnover and addressing the dangers associated with shortages.

This is especially so where a dense network of union representatives are active on site, pointing to the crucial role of workplace organisation. Stronger unions would be able to bring environmental and workplace issues together and support projects to construct an alternative economy that puts humans and the planet first.

Such union action is more necessary than ever as workers are feeling the squeeze due to the soaring cost of living. This is disproportionately affecting low-wage service workers—many of whom will not be flying on vacation this summer and will be forced to make tough choices between buying food and heating their homes this winter. Thus, for millions of workers energy and climate policies are no longer abstractions but daily realities. Unions need to ensure that workers should not be made to pay for this twin crisis but are at the centre of the socio-ecological transformation.

## Code of conduct

Building on the agreement of UNI Europa's Dutch affiliate, FNV, with Schipol airport, the long-term aim is a Europe-wide code of conduct (a European Airport Agreement) on airport cleaning and security. This would commit airports to paying higher wages, ensuring higher safety standards and decreasing workloads. It would guarantee individuals career pathways, as well as improved educational and vocational training, which will be necessary for a **just transition**.

In the short-term, trade unions have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to improve the working conditions and wages of cleaners, security workers and all other outsourced workers and set new sectoral standards through organisation and collective bargaining. In the medium-term, airports need to rethink their purchasing practices, which have only accelerated the race to the bottom over the last few decades. In the medium- to long-term, governments ought to use the airport chaos to plan more long-term investment in **high-speed rail**, which is less carbon-intensive.

With such comprehensive policy packages unions offer a pathway to break the vicious circle of labour turnover and shortages, while workers are offered a perspective of family-sustaining as well as environmentally sustainable jobs.



## Mark Bergfeld

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