The missing stone in the Cathedral

*Of unfair terms in employment contracts and coexisting rationalities in European contract law*

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**Publication date**
2020

**Document Version**
Other version

**License**
Other

**Link to publication**

**Citation for published version (APA):**
Leone, C. (2020). The missing stone in the Cathedral: Of unfair terms in employment contracts and coexisting rationalities in European contract law.

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Candida Leone

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sabot
[noun]
clog, a shoe made entirely of wood

In its notorious "arrêt sabots" from 1866, the French Cour de Cassation quashed a decision by the Prud'hommes of Saint Etienne which had imposed a penalty of 10 Francs on a factory worker for having worn their wooden sandals inside the plant. The fine, we know from the Prud'hommes' decision, corresponded to almost half the worker's monthly salary. It was set in the factory's règlement d'atelier, which was hung somewhere within the factory and was binding between the parties on a contractual basis. The Cassation considered the Prud'hommes, who had decided in equity, to be in breach of article 1134 of the Code civil – in other words, they had failed to properly honour the binding force of contract. This was one of many cases through which, towards the end of the 19th century, contract law rules came to be seen as an instrument of workers' oppression.
The missing stone in the Cathedral
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ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de
Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex

ten overstaan van een door het College voor
Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
op 12 juni 2020, te 11 uur

door

Candida Leone
geboren te Rome
Promotiecommissie:

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