Higher safety risks for temporary agency workers: new data from the Netherlands and Germany

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Published in:
CLR News

Citation for published version (APA):

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Non standard employment and the erosion of workers’ rights
Higher safety risks for temporary agency workers.

In the spring of 2009 the Dutch Labour Inspectorate came up with new figures (based on 2007 statistics) dedicated to the health and safety risks of temporary agency workers. In these data the estimation was that agency workers’ risks are three times higher than the occupational risks for direct labour. According to the labour inspectorate the main causes for these higher risks are the lack of experience with possible and potential risks and poor introduction and integration at the workplace.

In June 2009 the German sickness fund Techniker Krankenkasse (TK) published figures and data that go in the same direction. The TK-health report includes figures over 2008 and is based on a survey with up to 1000 respondents. The total amount of temporary workers in Germany has almost doubled between 2003 and 2008.

One of the findings is that the annual loss of working hours because of illness problems amounts for temporary agency workers to 4%; this is one third beyond the national average. The German health report comes to the conclusion that risks are higher for muscular and skeleton diseases and that the chances for accidents and injuries are higher.

Remarkably, men are more often sick than women in the German temporary agency sector. This is the reverse of the overall figures for the whole economy. The authors see a clear relationship with the work executed: many temporary workers are serving as hod carriers and unskilled day labourers (“Hilfsarbeiter”) in the logistics and distribution sectors. This is heavy work with manual loading, constant time pressure and unsafe workplaces.

This conclusion was confirmed by a spokesman of the German employers’ organisation in the temporary agency sector: up to one third of the temporary workers are serving as unskilled labourers, whilst the normal percentage of these unskilled workers in the German industry is only 1%. So temporary workers are over represented in the lowest echelon of the workforce.

All in all these recent findings are in line with the results of a European research project (2009) that covered agency work in France, Sweden the Netherlands, Poland and the UK. The conclusion of this research is that temporary agency workers do not get the same level
of health and safety protection as permanent staff. One of the key issues is how to control and guarantee the legal obligations of the user undertaking. In most countries these latter are responsible for working conditions of agency workers during their assignment. There is an obvious risk that health & safety issues for agency workers fall between two stools. Representation of temporary agency workers via the classical workers’ representation (local union representative’s, works councils or health and safety committees) in work environmental and health & safety issues is often missing. This is even more a problem as temporary agency workers are more likely to be working in sectors or occupations where there are health and safety concerns and where their status as new workers, probably with difficulties in fully understanding the risks related to their workplace, may place them at danger. The idea is that these workers are used to carry out quite simple tasks and, therefore, training needed is usually only a couple of days.

The figures once again demonstrate the urgency to pay more attention to the health and safety conditions for temporary workers. Information about health and safety issues is crucial at the very beginning. Secondly, training and instruction on how to carry out work tasks in a safe and healthy way is needed. Thirdly, safety representatives should act on behalf of all people working in the workplace including temporary agency workers. Fourthly, inspecting bodies should be made more sensitive to the needs of temporary workers and especially vigilant as to observing health and safety rules in jobs carried out by these workers. And finally, legislation has to clarify the shared responsibility and liability between agencies and user firms.