Construction is a major economic sector that is heavily dependent on inputs from the rest of the economy. One characteristic is its labour intensive nature. Much of the work in construction is subcontracted with, as a result, rather long production chains and a fragmented structure. Two different models of sub-contracting have developed. Cooperative subcontracting aims at a long-term division of labour between different players (for instance specialised subcontractors) with rather limited formal controls and a high feeling of mutual trust. Competitive subcontracting tries to maximise the margins of tight contractual obligations, with the aim to control and reduce costs. The implications for vocational training, skill development and continuity in the sector are quite different.

Labour productivity in construction is believed to be low compared to average. However, given the fact that few construction projects are identical and that national differences in the way construction work is organised are significant, it is not easy to undertake strictly comparable studies of productivity. Notwithstanding these remarks, the overall meaning of vocational education and training, and its impact on productivity, has always been stressed. Also in our contributions we have several times made a strong plea for industry-wide arrangements in the field of vocational education and training. Learning from each other and the transfer of best practices can perhaps bridge wide gaps in efficiency still existing in a pool of poorly performing survivors and only few outstanding players. In such a situation, the joint regulation by employers and trade unions of vocational education and training has to be the norm.

Against the background of the financial and economic crisis, the need for qualifications and vocational training has gained momentum in some of the EU member states. Building unions have (again) put it on the agenda, as an anti-cyclical instrument in a period where, for the first times for years, mass unemployment is at stake. The actual order books are still reasonably filled, but what happens once the sites are finished? In November 2008, colleagues from CLR-UK organized an international seminar on vocational education and training jointly with the School of the Built Environment of the University of Westminster. This issue of CLR-News is the result of that seminar. Linda Clarke not only organized the seminar, but has also acted as sub-editor of this issue.
A separate contribution comes from UCATT’s Dörthe Weimann. The impact of (bogus) self-employment on the industry has figured in several issues of CLR-News. Dörthe provides us with an overview of the actual situation. Next to the usual reviews you will finally find the invitation for our annual meeting.