Working Conditions in Ireland Project

Employment in the Irish construction sector:
A preliminary background report

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Alicja Bobek and James Wickham

The Working Conditions in Ireland Project investigates how jobs have been changing in Ireland from the boom through the crisis and into a possible recovery. Central to the project is a study of employment in four sectors: construction, financial services, hospitality and ICT/software. A background report for each sector summarises publicly available material and gives a preliminary indication of the questions that should be tackled in the fieldwork. The reports were originally intended as internal briefing papers. They are made publicly available because they may be of some use to the research community. Comments and corrections are most welcome and should be sent to the authors (abobek@tasc.ie; jwickham@tasc.ie).

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Employment in the Irish construction sector

Introduction

This report summarises publicly available material on jobs, employment and working conditions in the Irish construction sector. It provides an overview of the structure of the sector (Section 1) and of employment (Section 2). Section 3 describes employment regulations and collective representation. Section 4 identifies the key elements of working conditions in the sector: wages, working hours, non-standard employment, training, job security, health and safety and finally job autonomy. The final Section 5 highlights issues for the fieldwork research with some reference to international research.

1. Overview of the sector

The Irish construction sector experienced steady growth from the 1990s onwards. This was in response to rising demand especially in the residential sub-sector. In the early to mid-2000s, however, the unsustainable credit involved in this sector resulted in the creation of a bubble which burst following the global financial crisis. Up until today this has had unprecedented effects on the sector as well as the wider economy.

There are three main sub-sectors within construction in Ireland: the public capital programme, private commercial development and the private residential market. Government expenditure accounts for around 50 per cent of the construction output and in 2013 was at the level of around €3.4 billion, compared to €9bn in 2008 (RICS, 2014:3). The overall output in 2013 was €8.8 billion, a drastic fall from €34 billion in 2006. The decline in the residential sub-sector encapsulates the overall crisis in this industry: in 2007 there were 89,000 units completed; this number fell to 8,300 by 2013. Despite the difficult economic situation, output is now expected to grow by around 5 per cent per year until 2018 (ibid: 2). In addition, some of the Irish construction companies became involved in the international market, which was their 'survival' strategy at times of recession (Forfas, 2013). There is evidence that these off-shore activities mainly involved management, professionals and skilled craft workers.

During the boom employment in the construction sector in Ireland accounted for 13.4 per cent of total employment, which was one of the highest percentages amongst all European Union countries. At its peak in 2007 there was over 270,000 individuals directly employed in the Irish construction industry (CSO, 2014). Furthermore, it has been estimated that overall

there was more than 370,000 employed directly
and indirectly in construction; by 2013 direct employment fell to just below 100,000 with a further 50,000 in indirect employment. In 2014 there were over 103,000 individuals working in the construction sector which accounted for approximately 6 per cent of the overall employment in Ireland. Those no longer involved in the sector either remained unemployed, moved to another sector or migrated to other countries (Forfas, 2013). After the economic downturn, 20 per cent of all those unemployed in Ireland had previously been working in construction; unemployment in this sector also accounts for 36 per cent of overall male unemployment (RICS, 2014). This situation obviously has a profound effect on the working conditions. The labour market is no longer driven by the employees who now have limited bargaining power. With fierce competition for work available, we expect that some workers have been accepting working conditions that can be described as 'bad'.

The Irish construction sector is also characterised by a large number of small companies (Watson et al, 2010), with large companies adopting various subcontracting strategies. In 2010 there were 30,805 construction enterprises employing fewer than 10 people and only 16 companies directly employing 250 or more workers (CSO Statistics Database). As will be discussed further below, construction sites in Ireland often involve subcontracting chains, with very few people directly employed by the large main contractor. This also impacts on working conditions as the main contractor often does not have any control over the terms and conditions present further down this chain; we also have evidence of larger contractors turning a blind eye to bogus self-employment and low pay.

2. Employment in the sector

During the boom time employment in construction sector grew rapidly and reached its peak in 2007. Between 1997 and 2007 number of those working in the sector doubled (Forfas, 2013). As the sector was severely hit by the recession, employment in this industry also fell dramatically. The following table illustrates this decline:

Table 1: Employment in Construction Sector, 2006-2015 (000s)

2006Q1	2007Q1	2008Q1	2009Q1	2010Q1	2011Q1	2012Q1	2013Q1	2014Q1	2015Q1
247	270.4	255.8	182.8	130.6	108.5	103.3	96.3	102.3	121.8

(Source: CSO, QHNS 2014)

While the sharpest decline occurred between 2008
and 2009, employment in construction reached its lowest level in 2013. As will be further analysed below two groups were especially affected: young workers and migrants. Since then the number of people employed in construction has been rising and by the first quarter of 2015 there were more than 120,000 individuals working in this sector (CSO Statistics Database). It is also important to emphasise that not only the number of people employed in the construction declined; a similar trend applied to the number of enterprises. The following tables compare the overall trends construction and with those of all sectors together:

Table 2: Number of enterprises and employees 2006-2009: All Sectors

All Sectors					
	2006	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**% Change 2006-2009**
Active Enterprises	201,461	207,736	203,083	199,241	-1.1
Employees in Active Enterprises	1,301,887	1,387,489	1,362,212	1,189,163	-8.7
Enterprise Births	16,696	13,461	11,954	13,810	-17.3
Employees in Birthed Enterprises	6,661	6,287	6,556	3,883	-41.7

Table 3: Number of enterprises and employees 2006-2009: Construction Sector

Construction					
	2006	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**% Change 2006-2009**
Active Enterprises	58,454	59,124	53,893	44,970	-23.1
Employees in Active Enterprises	178,307	178,917	150,439	96,350	-46.0
Enterprise Births	5,717	3,824	2,489	2,278	-60.2
Employees in Birthed Enterprises	1,383	1,167	974	384	-72.2

(Source: Forfas, 2013)

As clearly illustrated by the above tables, the decline in the number of active and new enterprises was much more drastic in the construction sector. Compared to the boom period, newly established firms in the construction sector were also employing on average fewer workers.

Construction is the most masculinized of all employment sectors as females account for less than 5 per cent of the workforce (CSO, 2013). This is clearly related to the nature of work which is physically demanding. It could be argued, however, that this in fact is rather a social

construct as most of the jobs in construction can be done by women (Ness, 2010). What would require further scrutiny is the situation of women who do work on sites and are in a minority. It may be the case that they are a subject of gender-based discrimination which affects their overall job satisfaction.

Furthermore, in many developed countries the construction sector tends to be characterised by a large proportion of migrant workers who often work without proper contracts (Fellini et al, 2007). Jobs in this sector are often not attractive for the members of indigenous population due to their '3D' (dirty, dangerous and demanding) nature. Migrants, on the other hand, are more likely to accept challenging working conditions, especially if they are unskilled or do not know the host country language. All these factors combined often result in the exploitation of foreign-born workers. It needs to be emphasised, however, that the relatively high wages offered in the Irish construction sector contributed to a relatively high level of employment of Irish nationals in this industry. These jobs were also attractive for young men who were diverted from higher education and chose wages that were much more competitive compared to many of those offered to new graduates (McCoy and Smyth, 2011). As it will be further discussed below, young people were over represented in the construction sector during the boom period.

At the peak in 2007 migrants accounted for almost 18 per cent of the construction sector workforce, with the majority of them coming from Central and Eastern Europe. The following table provides a detailed breakdown of change in the workplace composition by broad national group:

Table 4: Employment and Nationality in Construction Sector, 2006-2014

	2006Q4	**2007Q4**	**2008Q4**	**2009Q4**	**2010Q4**	**2011Q4**	**2012Q4**	**2013Q4**	**2014Q4**
Irish	82.56%	82.19%	84.11%	87.98%	88.74%	90.17%	90.02%	89.96%	87.92%
EU15 to EU28 states	11.89%	13.22%	11.93%	8.28%	7.48%	6.49%	5.62%	6.66%	8.23%
Other nationalities	5.56%	4.58%	3.96%	3.74%	3.78%	3.34%	4.36%	3.38%	3.86%

(Source: CSO, StatBank)

It needs to be emphasised that while the share of foreign nationals in the construction sector was high, it remained lower than in two other sectors: hospitality (30 per cent) and industry (19 per cent). Nevertheless, the working conditions of migrants should be further examined as members of this group often are less aware of employment rights such as minimum levels of pay or working time arrangements. Furthermore, recent research in the USA also suggests that

once bad working conditions are accepted by new immigrants this can be used by employers to lower standards for all workers in the sector (e.g. Martin, 2009).

Furthermore, following the economic downturn, construction and manufacturing were the only two sectors experiencing a decline in the number of employees with a migration background. While the employment of the Irish workers in construction fell by 5 per cent between 2006 and 2011, the number of non-Irish nationals working in construction dropped from 29,730 to 9,581, a fall of fully 67.8 per cent (CSO, 2012a).

The other group whose employment was affected by the recession were young people. In 2006 there was more 97,000 individuals between age 25 and 34; this number fell to 53,000 by 2011. Today the age structure in construction is similar to that of all those in employment. The following table provides details of the construction sector age structure and illustrates changes between 2006 and 2011:

Table 5: Age structure in Construction Sector change 2006-2011 (000s)

	2006				**2011**			
	Construction		**Total at work**		**Construction**		**Total at work**	
15 - 19 years	**11,207**	**4.57%**	**44,719**	**2.32%**	**671**	**0.77%**	**14,261**	**0.79%**
20 - 24 years	**34,743**	**14.17%**	**205,379**	**10.64%**	**6,042**	**6.92%**	**116,025**	**6.42%**
25 - 34 years	**97,354**	**39.71%**	**584,861**	**30.30%**	**26,537**	**30.37%**	**530,104**	**29.33%**
35 - 44 years	48,994	19.98%	475,711	24.65%	24,227	27.73%	484,636	26.81%
45 - 54 years	33,362	13.61%	376,686	19.52%	18,241	20.88%	390,373	21.60%
55 - 64 years	17,619	7.19%	208,873	10.82%	10,182	11.65%	226,643	12.54%
65 years and over	1,905	0.78%	33,813	1.75%	1,471	1.68%	45,318	2.51%

(Source: CSO StatBank)

While the cause of this fall in employment of young people in construction is not completely clear, there are however a few possible explanations. Many may have worked as unskilled workers or treated their work in this sector as a stepping stone to better employment. In such cases the young workers may have chosen to move on to other sectors. We can expect that a certain proportion of them went back to education while, considering the high level of youth unemployment, many became unemployed. Finally, migrants were also amongst those who were most likely to be laid off and a significant proportion of these will have returned to their country of origin.

Most of those working in construction are employed as trade workers, followed by elementary workers. The following table illustrates the changes in occupational structure following the economic downturn:

Table 6: Occupational Structure in the Construction Sector (2009-2015)

	2009 (000s)		**2015 (000s)**	
1. Managers, directors and senior officials	8.5	4.65%	8.7	7.14%
2. Professional	[3.1]	[1.70%]	*	*
3. Associate professional and technical	5.5	3.01%	[3.6]	[2.96%]
4. Administrative and secretarial	7.7	4.21%	5.3	4.35%
5. Skilled trades	113.8	62.25%	70.0	57.47%
6. Caring, leisure and other services	*		*	
7. Sales and customer service	*		*	
8. Process, plant and machine operatives	18.1	9.90%	13.3	10.92%
9. Elementary	23.9	13.07%	16.8	13.79%
Total	**182.8**		**121.8**	

(Source: CSO, 2015)[1];

The highest proportion of those involved in construction worked as electricians and electrical maintenance fitters (17,700), followed by carpenters and jointers (17,000). The greatest decline in employment was amongst bricklayers and masons (fall of over 81 per cent between 2006 and 2010) (Forfas, 2013). It needs to be emphasised that there are also professionals involved in this sector, most importantly qualified engineers and architects (Bobek et al, 2008). The latter group is not categorised as 'construction' in the official statistics.

3. Employment regulations and collective representation

In line with the overall national trend, trade union membership in the construction sector has been declining over the past few decades. In 1994 45 per cent of all employees in this sector had union membership; this proportion had already fallen to 34.6 per cent by 2004 (Bobek et al., 2008). In 2009 only 25 per cent of construction workers were union members (CSO, 2010).

[1] Cases marked as (*): number of people in a cell too small to be considered reliable
Cases presented with []: estimates are considered to have a wider margin of error and should be treated with caution

This could be explained by the fact that during the
boom construction sector had a relatively high share of migrants and young people, the two groups usually less likely to be involved in the unions (Oireachtas, 2011). This may have an important impact on working conditions in this sector as traditionally the unions have played a significant role in ensuring that employment rights are properly implemented.

The Construction Industry Federation (CIF) is the main employers' organisation for this sector. It has 3,000 members and involves a network of 13 regional centres in 3 regions (Farrelly, 2012). The CIF played an important role in social partnership and has also been involved in collective bargaining (ibid.). It can also be argued that, unlike employers' organisations in other sectors such as hospitality, the CIF did not campaign against the Registered Employed Agreements discussed below.

The construction sector is also covered by Registered Employment Agreements (Oireachtas, 2011). The REAs have helped to maintain the relatively high wage level in this sector. Similarly to the agreements set by the JLCs in the hospitality sector, however, construction sector REAs were also brought to the high court which recently ruled them unconstitutional. While this does not seem to yet have any major effect on earnings within this sector, it could become an issue in the foreseeable future.

Unsurprisingly, since the economic downturn the black economy has expanded within Irish construction (CIF, 2014). There are two main types of practices involved in this shadow economy. Firstly, individuals themselves accept cash payments while remaining on job seekers' benefit. In most of the cases they would work for the private sector, mainly in residential maintenance. Secondly, there has been a rise in a number of companies attempting to lower their labour costs through employing workers 'off-books' and paying them 'cash-in-hand' (Forfas, 2013). While the private sector has been more prone to such practices, it has been argued that there are cases of this shadow economy at the lower end of the subcontracting chains within public contracts. This rise of a black economy may have a number of implications for working conditions in the sector. Lowering the costs can influence wages, especially given that the rates set by the REAs are no longer mandatory. There are also health and safety issues related to off-books employment of individuals who might not be covered by companies insurance. Finally, those working without a formal contract have very low levels of job security.

4. Working conditions – 'objective factors'

As previously mentioned, much construction work can be described as a '3D' job and thus could fall under a 'bad job' category. While the 3D aspects of this work are definitely present in the Irish construction sector, some aspects of the Irish situation have made employment in this industry not as undesirable as in many other countries. Most importantly, as a result of collective bargaining, this sector has been covered by the REAs which set the minimum rates for construction workers at a relatively high level. Secondly, as it will be further explored, there are strong safety regulations influencing overall working conditions in this sector.

- **Wages**

Considering the overall economic crisis as well as the dramatic decline of business in the construction sector, it could be expected that wages in this industry would also be affected. While there was an overall fall in the hourly average rate, such fall was not dramatic probably because the regulations regarding minimum sectoral pay were still in place. Overall pay was influenced more by the decline in the number of paid hours worked on average per week. The following table illustrates these changes between 2008 and 2014:

Table 7: Working hours and earnings in Construction Sector, 2008-2014

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Average Hourly Earnings	€21.16	€21.17	€20.96	€18.59	€19.73	€20.32	€19.81
Earnings per Week	**€789.17**	**€755.1**	**€765.8**	**€662.89**	**€704.06**	**€731.42**	**€764.10**
Average Weekly Paid Hours	37.3	35.7	36.5	35.7	35.7	36	37.7

(Source: CSO StatBank)

As demonstrated in the above table, average weekly earnings declined by 16 per cent between 2008 and 2011. Since then they have been rising and reached the level of €764.1 per week in 2014, which was 3.17 per cent lower than in 2008. As in the other sectors, there were also significant differences in pay depending on the level of employment:

Table 8: Construction Sector: detailed earnings and working hours

	All employees	Managers, professionals and associated professionals	Clerical, sales and service employees	Production, transport, craft and other manual workers
Average hourly earnings (Euros)	20.36	27.74	18.03	17.98
Average weekly earnings (Euros)	722.17	1,036.4	528.81	657.35
Average weekly paid hours	35.5	37.4	29.3	36.6

(Source: CSO, 2012b)

Mean and median average hourly rates were also only marginally lower than those across all economic sectors. In 2009 the mean hourly rate in construction was €20.5, compared to 22.05 across all the sectors; medians were €17.63 in construction and €17.82 across the workforce (CSO, 2012b). What needs to be emphasised, however, is that the above figures refer to official earnings; as mentioned in the previous section, there are evidences of a shadow economy and bogus self-employment spreading across this sector and leading to a drastic fall in the actual earnings of those working on both private and public projects[2].

- **Working hours: Change over time**

Similarly to other sectors, working hours in construction declined since the 1990s. This decrease was not however as severe as in, for example, hospitality. In fact, the number of weekly hours per week increased during the early 2000s to over 40 hours per week. This suggests the wide spread use of overtime across the sector. The following table illustrates the above shifts:

Table 9: Weekly working hours in construction sector 1992-2008

	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Working hours in construction (per week)	41.4	40.9	42.5	40.6	39.8	35.3

(Source: O'Farrell, 2013: 14-15)

[2] It can also be argued that the decrease in earnings has been counterbalanced by deflation resulting from the overall recession, but were also affected by increase in taxes.

It has been argued that the reduction in the number of hours in some sectors has been a part of longer term changes rather than just a result of the economic downturn: working hours may have been falling because of employers' greater use of flexible and variable working time. Working hours in construction however were affected by the recent recession. By 2012 the average weekly hours in construction fell to 35.3. While the actual percentage of employees on part time contracts in construction stood at 21 per cent in 2013, we could also assume that a large proportion of self-employed contractors often did not have full-time hours during their working week. If this was the case, then the fall in the amount of hours worked suggests relatively high levels of underemployment.

- **Non-standard employment:**

This sector is traditionally associated with sub-contracting and self-employment. This is reflected in the available statistics: a large proportion of establishments employ less than 10 persons; there are also a large proportion of workers engaged in small, medium and large companies on a subcontract basis (CSO, StatBank). Most of the larger sites usually involve a few larger contractors who then subcontract smaller, more specialised firms; the latter also in turn often employ individuals on a subcontracting basis. Such practices result in the emergence of subcontracting chains, where the main contractor has very little control over the working conditions in the small companies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the sectoral regulations such as minimum pay rates or health and safety conditions are not always followed by these smaller enterprises. What also requires further investigation is the extent to which these subcontracting firms also operate within the shadow economy; if it is the case then more 'bad jobs' are expected to be found in such companies. It also needs to be emphasised that 36.7 per cent of those working in construction are self-employed and the majority of them has no paid employees (CSO, 2015). In fact, there has been a dramatic increase in self-employment in this sector: during the boom self-employment was around the level of 25 per cent. What is also striking is the fact that most of this increase occurred amongst those with no paid employees. As it will be further discussed, such arrangements often have significant implications for working conditions, especially from the job security point of view.

- **Training**

The construction workforce is also characterised by relatively low levels of education, with 29 per cent not having completed the leaving certificate and only 15 per cent possessing a third level degree (Forfas, 2013). The following table provides a comparison of education levels for construction sector and the overall workforce:

Table 10: Construction sector Education Level Completed (000s)

	Construction		**Total in labour force**	
Primary (incl. no formal education)	5,538	6.34%	153,568	6.88%
Lower secondary	17,915	**20.50%**	317,691	**14.23%**
Upper secondary	42,492	**48.63%**	777,852	**34.85%**
Third level non-degree	3,611	4.13%	110,180	4.94%
Third level degree or higher	11,717	13.41%	635,022	28.45%
Not stated	1,286	1.47%	74,797	3.35%
Total whose full-time education has not ceased	4,812	5.51%	163,093	7.31%

(Source: CSO, StatBank)

As illustrated by the above table, those with secondary level education are over-represented in the construction sector. The majority of those who had completed education beyond the leaving certificate studied in the fields of engineering, manufacturing and construction (CSO, StatBank). There is also a number of apprenticeship programmes available for those who wish to become skilled craftworkers ('tradesmen') in such areas as carpentry, brickwork or plasterwork. Such programmes are run over a period of four year and are distributed between the employer, an education and training body and Institutes of Technology[3]. However the number of those enrolling on apprenticeship programmes in the Irish construction sector fell dramatically after the economic crash. The most popular programme during the boom, carpentry, had more than 2,000 individuals registered on in 2005; by 2012 there was only 90 registered on this programme. While the numbers of new apprenticeships are now slowly increasing, the levels are still relatively low, with only 2,100 new registrations on all construction programmes taking place in 2014 (CIF, 2015). This of course mirrors the dramatic fall in employment in this industry. It has been argued, however, that proper training should be re-introduced to this sector as it will stimulate growth and address future skills' needs

[3] Source: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Review-of-Apprenticeship-Training-in-Ireland.pdf

(Fitzmaurice, 2015)[4]. This issue has been addressed in both the Irish and the EU context. In relation to further training for those already working in construction sector, the results of the National Employer and Employee Survey suggests relatively low levels: 42 per cent respondents reported low levels of further training (O'Connell et al., 2010: 72).

- **Job security**

Given the severe reduction in construction sector jobs, working in this sector can be characterised by a rather low job security. Such security is also reduced by the large extent of subcontracting and self-employment present in this industry. According to the National Workplace Survey, 50.5 per cent of those employed in construction sector did not feel secure about their jobs (O'Connell et al., 2010: 36). While only 10 per cent of employees in this sector have temporary contracts, a large proportion of those working in construction are self-employed and most of these do not themselves have any paid employees. In this case they often compete for sub-contracting jobs provided by larger firms. Many face periods of lack of work given the relatively small amount of large-scale and long-lasting projects taking place across the country. As a result they are in an even more precarious situation than those employed on fixed-term contracts.

- **Health and safety**

Given the physical nature of the construction work, jobs within this sector are subject to health and safety hazards. However, the Irish construction sector is characterised by relatively high levels of regulation related to everyday health and safety on building sites. Furthermore, all of those who are involved in on-site work are required to complete the Safe Pass course which focuses on safety aspects of the job. In 2012 there were 768 injuries reported in this sector and these accounted for 11.6 per cent of all injuries reported in that year. The ratio of injuries per 1000 workers was 30.1, compared to the average of 26.5 across all the sectors. The largest proportion of injuries in the construction sector was related to manual handling (128 in total). In 2012 there were 8 fatal injuries in the construction sector which was a relatively high number considering that 48 fatal injuries occurred across all sectors (HSA, 2013). Similarly to other EU countries, health and safety in Irish construction has been improving. The rate of fatal

[4] By contrast in Germany there was only a very small decline in apprenticeships because of the crisis (Bosch 2014).

injuries is also lower than in Southern European states such as Portugal or Spain, but is still higher than in more regulated economies such as Sweden or Finland (Russell et al, 2015).

- **Job autonomy**

There is evidence that the construction sector can be characterised by rather high levels of job autonomy. On the other hand, those working in construction were the least likely to report direct participation in their workplaces (O'Connell et al., 2010). What seems to be the case is that while construction sector workers have a high degree of control over time, they do not have much influence on the tasks that need to be completed. In other words, there are clear instructions on the outcome rather than the process. The targets are set for them, the sequence of tasks is not. What requires further investigation is to what extent these targets, and the length of time allowed to complete them, have changed since the recession. As will be further argued, there is evidence of additional pressure being imposed on individuals in this sector. In order to cut down their costs, contractors may reduce the amount of people involved on the site, or reduce the length of time (or, in extreme cases, both). In both cases this increases the workload of individual workers. In turn this may negatively affect their working conditions and can also have implications for health and safety.

5. Conclusion: The Irish construction sector: 'good jobs', 'bad jobs' and changing working conditions.

The financial crisis drastically changed the employment situation for those working in construction; it could be even argued that while the whole economy was affected by the recession, this sector was hit especially hard. The volume of construction work in Ireland fell dramatically, leaving a large proportion of skilled and craft workers out of employment. It needs to be emphasised that these same workers had experienced relatively good working conditions during the boom time; they had strong bargaining power on the labour market and, with the strong presence of the REAs in this sector, relatively high wages. When the economy crashed this all changed, mainly due to the strong competition over jobs for the few contracts still available.

The employment situation deteriorated for many construction workers simply because they became unemployed and, while some chose to re-skill or adopted a 'wait and see' strategy, others were forced to leave the country to look for work elsewhere. For those who stayed, however, there were very few options left. Nevertheless, despite the drastic fall in employment,

the number of those working in construction eventually stabilized and we can now see employment growth. What requires further investigation is to what extent the recent crisis resulted in worsening job conditions for those who stayed and if more jobs in this sector can be perceived as 'bad'. We know that most of the work in construction, while physically demanding, was well rewarded financially, even on an unskilled level. There are, however, other factors that need to be considered, such as working hours, health and safety or job satisfaction. In such cases, elementary work such as site cleaning can be classified as a rather low level – even if it is relatively well paid. Such work is heavy, often unsafe, and may result in physical exhaustion. There are also safety implications in relation to immediate issues (injuries) or to long term effects (occupational health). This type of work can also have a casual character with a lack of control over shifts and frequent change of site location. Furthermore, it will also have relatively low status as there are very little skills involved. In addition international research suggests that such unskilled work is often undertaken by migrants rather than members of the indigenous population (Ive and Grunberg, 2008). In Ireland migrants were not necessarily aware of the REA rates and would accept minimum wage instead (Krings et al, 2011). Such jobs have been present on all sites during the boom and throughout the recession; however we may speculate that the pay may now be lower as a result of reductions in both the hourly rate and the amount of hours worked per week.

What is even more alarming is the overall deterioration of working conditions for those who previously had relatively secure and well paid employment. First of all, there is evidence of growing self-employment in construction, especially amongst those who do not employ any paid employees. Internationally, there is evidence from other countries that self-employment has been present even throughout the boom, partially due to the seasonality and cyclical character of construction work (Nisbet, 2007; Nisbet and Thomas, 2000). However, the widespread use of this form of employment becomes problematic when it is no longer voluntary. According to the trade unions' representatives, these workers were previously employees on proper contracts and have been recently pushed out to self-employment by larger contractors. With tender-based contracts within this sector, there are no doubts that under current economic climate there would be a preference for the lowest bidder in both the private and the public sector, as has in fact been the case in other European countries (Thornovist and Woolfson, 2012). Larger contractors would then attempt to reduce their costs by dropping their profit margins (Cunningham, 2013) and presumably also their labour costs. Large firms are also now bidding for smaller jobs (Tansey et al, 2013) which means more competition for medium size firms, and the possibility of what other researchers call 'degenerative competition'

(Harvey, 2000; Whitley, 1999). As a result of the subcontracting chain, everybody involved in the different stages of this bidding needs to cut their costs. At the bottom level, those who do not employ any paid workers can only reduce their profit margin by lowering their own hourly rate. While it is not clear to what extent this is widespread in the Irish construction sector, there is evidence of trade workers not only accepting pay lower than the REA rates, but in fact working for less than the minimum wage. As most of such workers are self-employed, it is also a challenge for the trade unions to be involved and to bring their cases to the Labour Commissioner. Furthermore, such bogus self-employment implies not only lower wages, but also a loss of certain rights such as sick pay or holidays (Behling and Harvey, 2015).

Finally, as previously noted, cost reduction can also imply worsening conditions not only for self-employed workers but also those employees of medium-size and larger contractors. Fewer people doing the same of work to tighter deadlines results in more pressure on both the physical and psychological levels. Speed up may also have health and safety implications. A particular issue for further investigation is the extent to which the regulations are still followed. Considering the weakening trade union representation in the construction sector, all these issues need to be addressed: we know that the conditions have been deteriorating, but we do not know to what extent, and this will be further explored throughout the project fieldwork.

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