PRIVATIZATION POLICIES OR DEGRADATION POLICIES?
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¿POLÍTICAS PRIVATIZADORAS O POLÍTICAS DEGRADADORAS?
El caso de los ferrocarriles españoles

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Abstract

One of the key strategies in the process to modernize the European economy is the privatization of railway transport; separating infrastructure maintenance from transport management. Privatization has led to far-reaching changes with respect to organizations, professional careers, and the very culture of railway work. The opinions held by those most closely involved in and affected by these changes can contribute to the analysis of occupational health and safety with a view to preventing failures that have occurred in previous railway privatization processes. In this article, we analyze the effects of this privatization model on the safety and health of railway workers as well as on the safety of passengers and freight.

Keywords

Health, Occupational Risks, Privatization, Railway Transport, Safety.

Resumen

Una estrategia clave en el proceso de modernización de la economía europea es la liberalización del transporte ferroviario, separando el mantenimiento de las infraestructuras de la gestión del transporte. Nos encontramos en un momento de transformación de las organizaciones, de la carrera profesional y de la propia cultura de trabajo ferroviaria. La percepción que trabajadores y directivos tienen sobre las tendencias de cambio en el ámbito de la seguridad y salud pueden contribuir a un diagnóstico acertado que permita no repetir anteriores fracasos en procesos liberalizadores del transporte ferroviario. En este artículo, analizamos las consecuencias, en un sector estratégico, de este modelo liberalizador sobre las condiciones de seguridad y salud de los trabajadores, y su efecto sobre la seguridad de los pasajeros y mercancías.

Palabras clave

Liberalización, Riesgos laborales, Salud, Seguridad, Transporte ferroviario.

INTRODUCTION[1]

When analyzing current conditions of employment (Castillo, 2005) —and moving beyond the debate about new or old organizational models or the hybrid models adopted by companies depending on their particular environment (Gutiérrez, 1997)— we should not lose sight of the fact that we are immersed in a liberalization discourse that extends outwards to include all sectors of activity. The effects and intentions of such a discourse are often more related to "a form of propaganda or ideological indoctrination of the managerial classes" rather than to a serious attempt to understand current working routines and the organizations within which they are developed (Alonso 2007a). The railway transport sector is, in this sense, a peculiar case: it is characterized by strong work traditions and work culture, high levels of safety regarding the transportation of both passengers and freight, and safety and health conditions for employees. Yet the future of the railway transport sector will largely depend on the European privatization drive, which has established the year 2010 as a deadline for separating transport management from infrastructure maintenance. In the case of Spain, this has led to a division between RENFE (Spanish National Railway Network) and ADIF (Railway Infrastructure Agency), and the gradual incorporation of new rail operators. These changes have been implemented despite their adverse effects on the safety and health of railway workers, passengers and freight as witnessed in previous privatization processes such as those occurring in British rail transport (Cobos Artega & Martínez Vara, 2005).

The liberalization discourse is a predominant component of management literature, high management courses and master's programs, and the economic vision of both public and private institutions. Aimed solely at increasing competitiveness and economic growth, the liberalization discourse encourages a Darwinian type of individualism which attaches little or no importance to cooperation, as demonstrated in the so-called "airport literature" (Spencer Johnson, 2007). Critical viewpoints, such as those found in *Critical Management Studies*, have revealed hidden aspects in the hegemonic managerial discourse characteristic of neo-liberal service economies (Fernández Rodríguez, 2007: 8). In our opinion, it is important to analyse not only the structures of power, organizational issues and job instability, but other aspects linked to this organizational model which lead to greater risks in terms of health and well-being: occupational accidents, injuries, illness, death or disability. In order to analyze current and former occupational health and

safety risks, we examine the discourse and views of experts[2] and workers[3] in a sphere of activity undergoing far-reaching changes: the railway sector. Bearing in mind the current process to redesign the sector, we propose strategies and make recommendations for immediate action with a view to preventing organizational and managerial approaches that do not favour the implementation of appropriate preventive measures.

In contrast to technological determinism or neo-liberal determinism veiled under privatization claims, we focus on the current working conditions in the sector, the prevention strategies that are being implemented, the expectations of workers and the risks they perceive, and how to deal with such issues at a time when railway transport in the European Union is to be deregulated. In this sense, we must bear in mind that "the social consequences of a specific productive organization are contained within the design itself, in its own origins" (Castillo, 2005b: 4), and that the origins of the "new" model of railway transport are currently being developed.

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[2] Eight interviews were conducted with experts involved in the present process of railway transformation throughout 2006: two executives from the two main companies in the sector (labelled E1 and E2, respectively), a trade union manager specialized in occupational safety and health (E3), a risk prevention delegate (E4), a risk prevention technician (E5), a risk prevention manager (E6), and two trade union managers working in the sector (E7 and E8). In a process of organizational transformation, the views and opinions of those involved (Alonso, 1998: 67-68) are key to identifying risks affecting workers that are not addressed in the privatization discourse. It also allows us to bring to light the strategies of confrontation workers put into practise, and the demands to build a new model of railway work that would at least maintain the low accident rate of the previous model.

[3] Five discussion groups were held in 2006 in Madrid to collect a wide variety of opinions and views (Callejo, 20002) on the organizational process currently affecting railway workers employed by RENFE and ADIF as well as the numerous subcontracting companies responsible for work in the areas of maintenance, cleaning and workshops. We analyzed old occupational risks as well as new ones that are emerging and the measures being taken to deal with them. The discussion groups were designed according to 3 variables: worker's profile, professional category and activity. The groups were organized as follows: Group 1 (GD1) motormen, workshops (maintenance, repairing), administrative, officers (ticket offices), conductors (train personnel); Group 2 (GD2) officers, circulation personnel, operative personnel with different skills, (signalling, rails, telecommunications), administrative, terminus (cranes). Group 3 (GD3) workers under collective trade agreement contracts not including the metallurgy sector, services and workshops (cleaning, maintenance), terminus (loading and unloading), train cleaning, rail maintenance, workshops; Group 4 (GD4) prevention delegates of areas and companies that affect the whole sector; Group 5 (GS5) supervisors and team managers directly responsible for workers. The discussions were recorded and fully transcribed.

Freight, passengers and workers: Is a safe model of railway transport possible for all?

The defence of individualism and personal qualifications for inclusion in labour markets and global economic competitiveness is one of the most widely publicized claims of neo-liberalism (Fernández Steinko, 2002). Such claims have served to step up processes to disarticulate the workforce and discredit trade unions and collective action with a view to structurally reorienting the rules of the game in the labour market. The immediate effect is that both successes and failures become a personal issue, the labour market environment is viewed as being natural and necessary, and technological and labour determinism becomes an accepted destiny. As a consequence, workers are forced to adapt to the situation and accept their professional career as a Darwinist and lonely adventure overshadowed by the fear of failure and unemployment. The outcome, as many case studies have shown, is that workers must accept poor working conditions (which are always preferable to unemployment), especially in a context where labour relations are viewed subjectively as an exclusive contract between the individual and the company and processes of delocalization have come to be the norm. As a result of this increasingly competitive environment, workers have no choice but to accept these precarious working conditions (Castillo, 1998: 169). From an organizational viewpoint, post-modern management culture places stronger emphasis on employees' autonomy, thus allowing the progressive spread of an authoritarian style of company management (Willmott, 2007).

This labour model, which reflects the opposition between capital and work, has an obvious effect on the type of contract obtained and the professional career itself, both of which are viewed as the responsibility of the individual at a time when powerful business organizations are pushing to modify the legislation in a manner that favours their own interests. A similar process occurs in terms of occupational risks. Occupational diseases and accidents are perceived to be personal problems that must be resolved by the workers themselves. Moreover, many of these problems are systematically underestimated, particularly in the case of new risks such as those of a psychosocial nature which are difficult to measure given the lack of appropriate statistical instruments. Yet although such risks cannot be measured using traditional instruments, there is no doubt that they exist (López & Pinilla, 2006) and will occur more frequently in the future (EASH 2008). For example, new types of osteomuscular injuries, chronic tendonitis or back problems have adverse effects on the lives of workers in both the professional and personal sphere. Furthermore, many workers must pay for the cost of medical treatment despite having acquired the injury in the workplace. This increasing individualization and job precariousness are clearly destructive processes in terms of workers' overall well-being. Indeed, there are numerous cases of workers who withstand extreme pain for long periods of time to avoid losing their jobs, income or buying power. Both the physical and psychological consequences of such trends are severe, difficult to solve, and often become chronic: "young people, for example,

see how a dynamic and active life is cut short, but from the moment suffering is multiplied throughout their lives, the idea of chronic and threatening pain is assumed" (Betrisey, 2006: 47).

Business strategies that place the blame on workers for occupational accidents in order to exonerate the organization from any responsibility are not new in the history of industrial societies: "in the early days of the railway, companies claimed that accidents were solely the result of the negligence and incompetence of their workers. This notion formed part of a deliberate strategy to make employees, the main victims of accidents, responsible for them, and also to clear the company of any responsibility it might have for accidents in which travellers were involved" (Cobos Artega & Martínez Vara, 2005: 150). However, many occupational accidents were related (and continue to be related) to three factors: the available technology, work methods, and a desire to increase profits by cutting costs related to occupational risk prevention. Bitter trade union disputes (Knox, 2001), which attempted to hold railway companies in the United Kingdom responsible for the prevention of accidents and injuries, were unfruitful until the enactment in 1900 of the Railway Employment Act. While occupational risk prevention has now been recognized as an issue of utmost importance, we are immersed in a privatization process based on subcontracting and the diversification of companies and labour, thus threatening the correct implementation of prevention measures.

Similar to what occurred during the privatization processes that failed in the 20th century in the United Kingdom, both new and old risks are once again being brought to the fore. Neo-liberal approaches, which place no constraints on competitiveness, have been successful in exporting a model of fierce competition to the railway sector through an organizational strategy of subcontracting. The railway sector finds itself trapped between the traditional culture of occupational safety and health, and the technical and psycho-physical demands derived from new technologies and forms of organization as well as the need to guarantee freight and passenger safety (Ramos Melero, 2004).

PRIVATIZATION, PREVENTION AND OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH: EXPERTS' AND WORKERS' VIEWS ON OLD AND NEW OCCUPATIONAL RISKS IN THE RAILWAY SECTOR

The supposed advantages of the privatization discourse at the core of managerial literature over the last two decades have found support in the paradox of the Collingridge dilemma (Collingridge, 1980). The consequences of a new technological model (where organization is considered a form of technology) are not visible in the first phases of application, when it is easier to modify its course. Once the model is fully developed, however, it is very difficult to introduce changes. Due to the initial lack of results, neo-liberal approaches hold that it is best to wait until the end of the process to analyze its impacts. In the meantime, they argue, those affected should take a passive attitude. In the end, it is claimed, the privatization process will produce the expected results.

The groups that benefit from privatization processes fervently support extending such processes to all spheres of activity. Naturally, the arguments in favour of implementing a privatization process usually centre on specific aspects that can be improved through it (i.e. increased competitiveness), but disregard other basic aspects that may have negative consequences for citizens, such as safety and health. According to this approach, it is necessary to wait until the end of the process to assess the results given that a final good will eventually be obtained. If not, it is always possible to return to the starting point. In practice, however, it is not possible to turn back because the newly adopted organisational model has long-lasting effects. Hence, the neo-liberal argument is, in reality, a fallacy. Indeed, once the privatization process has finalized, and despite the errors made, it is a very difficult task to return to the initial point of departure. In economic terms, we should wait until the "cake" is baked (wait for it to rise, wait to privatize) before serving up the slices. Obviously, however, the "cake" is already being sliced up as it is rising, and so, when it is done, it is not possible to cook it all over again (Torres, 1998).

Defending a passive, wait-and-see attitude in privatization processes places privatization on a par with social welfare; it is a new version of the automatic link between private self-interest and public benefit: the basis of liberal thought. It is a "link" whose "automatism" has been widely questioned from different theoretical perspectives (Steinko, 2002: 4). According to the Collingridge dilemma, to avoid finding ourselves immersed in a fully-developed technological and organizational model that is difficult to change in spite lacking initial results, it is important to contrast the consequences of the privatization model in its first phases of implementation, as is currently happening in railway transport. In this sense, an analysis of the opinions of experts and workers permits us to open the *black box* of railway privatization. By doing so, we are able to identify the negative effects that such a process may have not only on railway transport, but on the safety and health of its workers and users and take measures to mitigate them. If we do not open the *black box* (in which all technology is converted in so far as it is a product of a society that is itself transformed in the process; López & Kyriakou, 2008), we will be forced to play a passive role regarding its possible negative effects, thus eliminating our capacity to *know in order to predict and anticipate* – one of the main goals of the social sciences. Indeed, the lack of a critical analysis of the potential negative effects of financial engineering in the 1990's has proved to have dramatic consequences: the widespread acceptance of a financial model that has led to the loss of wealth, employment and welfare, as attested to by the current global financial crisis triggered by subprime mortgages in the US in 2007.

Railway experts and workers focus on three main issues in their discourse. First, the organizational model resulting from privatization and the challenges such a model poses in terms of occupational safety and health. Second, the employees' own working conditions, which are characterized by increasingly heavy workloads that must be carried out at a faster pace and higher intensity (in line with the general evolution of working conditions in the European Union according to the EFILWC, 2005); and finally, workers' training and their ability to deal with new and old occupational risks in the context of privatized railway transport.

New challenges of a model of liberalized railway transport

The privatization of railway transport has drastically modified management models and job culture in the sector. Following the division between ADIF and RENFE in Spain, new companies, new operators and new actors have entered the railway market. This greater organizational complexity, together with a widespread policy of sub-contracting, has led to problems of coordination between companies, as well as between workers with differing profiles (in terms of contracts, training, and careers). These two processes (new operators and a managerial model based on subcontracting to reduce costs and increase competitiveness) and the lack of coordination that has resulted from them have made it difficult not only to define what constitutes a risk, but to solve problems derived from the very complexity of the new model.

According to the experts interviewed for this study, coordination has become increasingly difficult due to three factors. Firstly, it is unclear which company is actually in charge of the workplace, how safety and health regulations can be enforced or the best manner to implement appropriate preventive measures for their workers.

> "Coordination is currently the main problem we have in the new situation compared to the previous one. Although we have made a great effort to reach consensus, several aspects must still be worked out - a procedure that we hadn't agreed upon in the previous stage that has to do with coordinating activities under the new regulations (*Royal Decree 171)* […] in the future we are going to be and are responsible for a series of workplaces and, as such, we have a series of duties. The entry of one or several operators in the sector is just another issue affecting the large number of companies working in a place such as a railway station" (E2).

Secondly, coordination must be aimed at supervising and monitoring the activities themselves, not only ensuring that safety regulations are implemented in a formal or theoretical manner. The entry of new operators is further complicated by the subcontracting of other workers to perform certain duties. Given this enormous complexity, it is easy to justify on paper that risk prevention measures have been implemented when in fact they have not.

> "In the area of occupational safety, the problem with privatization is the lack of coordination between companies. It is only on paper, the companies only act on paper, but they don't go any further and you have to believe what they say or show on paper, and you find the case of Polish workers who don't know a word of Spanish, and you ask them about the meeting point [...] The issue of coordination is just a question of paperwork for them, they only worry about having their documents in order, they don't care about the actual problem" (E3).

Thirdly, when the working premises are not owned by one company but shared jointly by several companies, coordination is essential to clearly define the roles and duties of all those involved.

> "If we are the owners, which we are not in all places - in some places we share the premises - we have defined each worker's role, our own duties and other people's obligations towards us - which is a problem that big companies like us have in terms of coordination, that in the case of a company of our size and a small one, it seems that the tendency is to assume that the other is in command, well no, we have clearly stated that in some places we share responsibilities, in those places where we share premises" (E1).

The workers also coincide with these opinions. What worries them most is the wide diversity of companies and workers on the premises, and the difficulties that arise in terms of coordination. Indeed, the larger the number of workers, the more difficult it is to come to agreement about a given course of action, particularly when several companies are involved in the process. In their opinion, the growing diversity of workers is detrimental to the working culture of the sector as the traditional process of learning based on senior workers transmitting their experience and know-how to younger workers has become practically impossible. This has led to a working environment in which workers vary greatly in terms of their contracts, qualifications and training depending on the company for which they work.

> "How is it possible to coordinate prevention measures between workers of different companies who are going to start working now? Badly, the colleague just said it. For example, in the *Móstoles* line we work with employees hired by a private company and if they are told to jump onto the rails, they do it. We, for prevention and safety, aren't going to do it. In these companies, working or not can depend on a guy jumping onto the rails…" (GD5)

> "You take the regulations seriously but the companies, the subcontractors, pass the buck all the time… That's a real problem. This means that there's a lack of safety, the greater the number of subcontracts, the less safe it is to work…" (GD4)

In their discourse, the workers expressed concern about the management model currently being implemented and the negative effects such a model could have on occupational risk prevention. Their concerns are in line with criticisms of the limitations of the neo-liberal managerial model from a theoretical perspective, linked to labour sociology (Castillo, 2007: 39-42) or from the viewpoint of international institutions such as the World Bank or the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2005). According to the workers', lack of coordination is one of the most negative consequences of subcontracting and the existence of such a large diversity of companies and workers. They also point to the

deficient occupational risk prevention policies of many subcontractors and the fact that, due to their job instability, many workers do not demand that prevention measures be implemented. This job precariousness means that many workers do not comply with the minimum safety standards, work overtime and do not take breaks.

> "What do you want me to say? In the past we learnt from the subcontracted guys, right? The way they worked, and now they come and have no idea, you have to tell them everything, many of them have no idea…Look, not long ago they were changing the sleepers, right? Well, I was impressed, 8 or 10 guys, 80 sleepers in one night, it was mind-blowing, they don't even stop to take a breath and were working under the machines, that's just the way it is. I don't know if they get paid by the hour, by sleeper or I don't know… And they fight, they fight to work overtime - they didn't install the light signals - Hey, you gotta put in the light signals- and the next day, they went to sleep at 7:00 and at 8:00 they were back again" (GD1)

> "We can be seriously affected by these infringements, in fact, I don't know, because there are statistics but in most cases, fatal accidents happen to people with subcontracts, at least in this company" (GD5)

> "The supervisors don't coordinate their workers well because when it comes to crossing the rails and having access to the trains, they don't do it right. And in a way, we can do it better but because of the demands…We don't have any contact at all with the people at RENFE to do the paperwork, the cut-off or whatever, nothing…We haven't got anything, it all depends on whatever the supervisor tells you. If we aren't in a hurry we can do things more or less right, but then we're told to hurry up and cross the rails wherever we want" (GD3)

New duties and old risks in occupational safety and health?

Similar to what occurs in many other spheres, the new work environment in the railway sector continues to be characterized by old occupational risks associated to activities such as the handling of materials, the crossing of rails and workshop labour, in addition to new ones, especially those of a psychosocial nature due to new organizational patterns. As regards the so-called "traditional risks", experts coincide in highlighting a key question: the lack of specific health surveillance protocols. With the exception of protocols concerning the duties of train conductors, these protocols are too general and do not take account of potential risks. In order to prevent severe risks that could compromise workers' physical integrity, the respondents insist on the need to implement protocols on exposure to asbestos, electrocution and being run over.

> "The main risks that we have, such as being run over, electrocution, and falling, are well dealt and assessed issues, and there is a working protocol (…). Health surveillance is specific, with different protocols, for example, for asbestos, noise, vibrations, and the health services take care of it" (E5).

> "Electric risks with catenaries, risk in coupling and uncoupling manoeuvres in a reduced space where there are two buffers and a traction hook with the risk of being run over, and of overstrain" (E4).

The traditional division between fatalities or very serious accidents (electrocution and running over) and minor accidents associated to railway infrastructure work continues to be operative, and has reduced fatal accidents. Nevertheless, psychosocial risks must also be addressed. In diversified organizational contexts such as joint maintenance schemes or new management strategies (based on meeting objectives, increased competitiveness and heavier workloads), can lead to stress or interpersonal conflicts resulting in a deteriorated work environment.

> "We focus on the higher risk jobs, and develop the suitable preventive measures in our risk evaluations. We try to tackle the problems through information and training sessions, getting the managers involved, who are the ones directly in charge of dealing with the problem. It should be pointed out that two not only severe, but fatal risks, such as electrocution and being run over, are being reduced, and we consider them solved, since the work methods are highly organised into procedures" (E1)

> "The causes are due to changes in working methods, the introduction of targets leads to changes the way people work, more competitive, faster pace of work.... " (E7)

The workers repeatedly comment on problems such as job instability, obligatory freelance work, and the difficulty of enforcing safety standards in a context of deregulation. They are aware that companies use turnover and dismissal as tools for disciplinary control, sometimes to the detriment of their own safety measures. Once workers become accustomed to this type of working environment, they do not need to be pressured: no constraints are put on their work and risk prevention becomes a secondary concern.

Particularly in the case of immigrant workers, this attitude (in addition to the lack of a culture of culture of prevention) leads to serious problems for both risk prevention agents and the workers themselves. Actions aimed at disseminating a culture of prevention must take into account this changing job environment in which the pace of work has stepped up, workers are required to work split shifts, the workload has increased and job instability has became the norm.

> "We're improving but the problem right now is contracts, they hire many immigrants and you explain things to them clearly and they think that they don't have to comply with

the safety measures because their contract might expire and they're going to be fired; man, if you have a contract and they want you, they're going to renew it, or if you're permanent staff and they want to fire you, they're going to get rid of you anyway, but they don't get it…I'm saying that they're not going to fire you or anything, but the thing is your safety, something can happen to you and then no work, nothing, you can't even send money to your family, or anything …. " (GD3)

From the workers' viewpoint, it is necessary to differentiate between two main types of work. One type is infrastructure work which involves physical risks such as electrocution, being run over, crossing the rails, slips and falls, and other physical conditions that are not fatal, such as deafness.

"The noise especially... here the majority of motormen, and now many people of Madrid, are deaf, most of us are deaf. And it has never been considered an occupational disease. There have been 20,000 reports, it has been measured, and no... nothing happened "(GD1).

 "The risks I see are falling at different levels because we work between the rails, electrical risk because we work outdoors…" (GD3)

A second type refers to the work in the train itself and at the stations. The new working methods and interaction with users have given rise to psychosocial risks that overlap traditional ones. The workers specifically mention two types of problems: those arising from scheduling issues, punctuality and the intensity of railway traffic, which affect mainly commuter train drivers; and those caused by interaction with users, which affect people working at ticket offices, conductors and ticket inspectors.

"The word 'stress' is also affecting motormen very much, especially in commuter trains. The dynamics of the work itself, a lot of people getting on and off the trains all the time, then the schedule, the shifts aren't organized well" (GD2)

"In commuter trains we are falling ill one after another. People pass the signals all the time because we are always under a lot of stress" (GD1).

"You have to fine those who don't do it well and that brings about problems: aggressions, insults, almost every day. I see that it is not contemplated, it's not only the physical thing, if someone gives you a punch, well it's ok, it's the psychological thing, the psychological stress "(GD1).

"The help that we have on the part of the safety agents, well it doesn't solve your problems. If it just so happens that they are there, well, they can probably save you ... but

> 90% of the time we are on our own, we have to deal with it and I think that, psychologically, I talk to many mates, and yes, they're having a rough time"(GD2).

Training and prevention: railway workers in the 21st century

Due to the wide diversity of professional profiles amongst workers, risk prevention managers must redesign their strategies to provide specific training that is related to the duties and functions actually carried out by them. Because such a large number of organizations and workers come together in the same workplace, it is necessary to address the issue of coordination in safety and health training programmes. Indeed, railway employees have stated that coordination is one of the most serious problems related to occupational safety and health. Risks such as high voltage lines or being running over can only be controlled by ensuring that workers have the proper qualifications and training and that the different companies operating simultaneously in the same workplace coordinate their activities.

In this regard, it is necessary to develop training courses that take into account the specific needs of the workers, for example, those who do not speak or understand Spanish. The companies that own the working premises or those who subcontract workers should specifically request training courses that meet these requirements. While in the past RENFE provided its own internal training programmes, training must now be provided by external companies or be included in secondary education, vocational training or university curricula. In short, it is necessary to develop training programs in both the educational sphere and in the workplace to ensure that workers have the appropriate qualifications and training to do their work in a safe and healthy manner.

> "In order to avoid job instability and the fact that managers can change their workers, companies should demand that the workers have undergone training in qualified centres" (E6).

In their discourse, the workers point to some key issues; issues which must be taken into account in the training programs. Firstly, workers whose first language is not Spanish should be given specific training to improve their language skills. Secondly, more importance should be given to regular medical check-ups as occupational disease is one of the greatest problems involved in privatization. However, because workers are often afraid of being diagnosed with an illness or disease, they tend to avoid medical check-ups and prefer to visit their general practitioner rather than the company doctor. In an environment of job precariousness and subcontracted work, it is a difficult task to ensure that workers' rights are upheld. Paradoxically, their demands in this regard, namely a culture of integrated risk management, improved regulations and greater support from trade unions, contrast with the progressively lower number of trade union members in companies that subcontract their work. Given this situation, the workers' discourse turns into a sort of vicious circle, whose final result is the increase of objective risk of suffering occupational accidents.

"Yes, the results of the check-up are private, of course they are, but if they classify you in the AO blood group and then see you have hepatitis, your salary will be cut. You have to be careful because it has negative consequences. And that's just the way it is. Because, of course, at the company you are specialized in doing a certain job, and the company doesn't want to know anything apart from you doing your job, you get me? And then, if, for any reason, illness, or any health condition, you cannot do your job, they put you in another post in which conditions, particularly in terms of salary, are not the same. You understand what I mean?" (GD3).

"They get you out of the way for good, and then, yes we'll see how this affects us, because before, well, they used to send you to the ticket offices or to certain posts, but there are fewer of those, and sometimes they are already under the control of subcontractors, so you become something to throw away by the company, you got it? I think the medical check-ups are a good thing, I think they are good, aren't they? They give you a medical check-up and that's a positive thing, logically, but the consequences can be negative, huh? In terms of the company, I mean. I prefer my doctor at the National Health Service to give me a check-up instead of my company, you understand me? And that's the way it is." (GD2)

Thirdly, it is important that workers become aware of the importance of the recommendations made by the company's risk prevention manager. In many cases, workers do not do so due to poor training or the fact that they are lacking a risk prevention culture.

"I can tell you I have had long and tiring debates with my colleagues and I haven't managed to convince them, and it hurts, because with the handle, at 3,000 volts, if you work it from the bottom upwards, that's your death, no kidding, and I don't do that, no sir, I don't do it." (GD4)

"Clearly, depends on each case, right?. In my workshop for example, it is quite nice, I don't have any complaints, everything goes just fine, they warn you when they are taking out the train, all fine there. However if someone is going to sharpen a knife and doesn't wear gloves it's a problem, you know? The same if he doesn't wear glasses; that's what happens here. To do things 30 seconds faster, instead of using the stairs on the platform, they just jump, you know? Half of the time it happens like that, that's how I see it." (GD3)

Conclusion: is it possible to build a safe working model in the railway transport sector?

Citizenship and employment cannot be divided: they constitute the foundation of our technologically advanced societies. For this reason, the debate remains open on the *future of employment*. The *employment of the future* will depend on making the market-oriented logic compatible with the redistribution of wealth and equality among all (Alonso, 2007b: 89). In this sense, it is necessary to analyze a key issue such as occupational safety and health, since health is a basic requirement for achieving social integration.

The analysis of the discourse of experts and workers in the railway transport sector sheds light on the main challenges of the current process of privatization. By understanding such challenges, it is possible to develop strategies to improve occupational safety and health. The analysis of the evolution of occupational safety and health conditions has shown that three large challenges lie ahead: greater diversity in the workplace leading to a greater lack of coordination; the degradation of the job market with an increasingly greater number of workers with poorer contracts, larger workload and lower wages; and, finally, the lack of specific training that takes account of the enormous diversity characterizing the workforce (in terms of language, culture, previous risk prevention training).

Contrary to the prescriptive discourse of management literature, our study focuses on the impact of the current privatization process in terms of occupational safety and health. Our study has allowed us to draw three basic conclusions that are consistent with the results of previous research studies on employment building processes in neoliberal and postmodern societies and the strategies of conflict and cooperation engaged in by actors in a context of change (Amblard, Bernoux, Blacksmiths, Livian, 2005).

- Firstly, it is impossible to effectively manage such a large diversity of workers and companies through an individualistic model. Greater social articulation is therefore needed amongst workers in terms of trade union action, amongst companies in terms of better coordination and within the public administration in terms of legislation and monitoring.

- Secondly, the increasing emphasis on flexible work schemes, the precarious nature of employment, and shift work, especially night shifts, have given rise to new occupational safety risks, while exacerbating traditional, well-known risks. To address these issues, new prevention strategies must be developed and workers provided the appropriate training.

- Thirdly, greater coordination is needed not only within and between companies (to avoid ambiguous situations and the eschewing of responsibility), but also amongst workers who must act collectively to ebb the tide of individualistic proclamations that discredit trade unions and their role in the workplace.

In short, building a model of safer employment involves better coordination, a stronger capacity for association and joint action, and the defence of the rights and obligations

of workers to mitigate the negative effects of a neo-liberal discourse aimed at increasing competitiveness within the European Union and which threatens the culture of safety in a strategic area such as the railway transport sector.

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