

“Health and safety regimes in an era of multiple transformations: the contribution of comparative employment relations”

Special issue for the European Journal of Industrial Relations



Editors of the Special Issue

Barbara Bechter (Durham University Business School) & Nadja Doerflinger (TU Dortmund University, Social Research Center)

In recent years, the world of work has been shaken by transformations, such as digitalisation, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, demographic change, and geopolitical conflict (e.g. ILO 2025). These transformations have affected institutions and organisations at multiple levels and altered the subjective experience of workers, their working conditions, and job quality (e.g. Dobbins et al. 2026). Although a number of studies have investigated their impacts on national industrial relations (IR) systems (e.g. Baccaro and Howell 2017; Brandl and Bechter 2019), collective bargaining and employee representation (e.g. Witzak et al. 2026), social protection, and job quality more broadly (e.g. Berg et al. 2023; Mailand et al. 2026), much less is known about how they affect occupational safety and health (OSH), and how workers, IR actors, and institutions respond to the consequences.

In this call, transformations are understood as substantial technological, environmental, demographic, or geopolitical changes that reshape work and its governance. OSH encompasses physical safety, occupational health, psychosocial health, and wellbeing at work; broader aspects of job quality also fall within scope when they bear directly on these outcomes. While a hazard is a potential source of harm, worker protection refers to legal, collective, organisational, and individual arrangements that prevent or mitigate OSH risks. An OSH system comprises the laws, inspection and enforcement arrangements, employer duties, collective bargaining, worker representation, and specialised bodies through which such protection is governed. ‘Workers’ is used inclusively, while recognising that employees, self-

employed people, platform workers, and others may have different forms of representation and regulatory coverage.

Existing research demonstrates that transformations can affect workers' health and safety. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, made service workers' exposure to physical and psychosocial health risks highly visible (e.g. Cai et al. 2024; Doerflinger 2026). Comparative research has also increasingly addressed violence and harassment in interactive service work, particularly in occupations with predominantly female workforces (e.g. Ofe-Grant et al. 2025). Climate change is likewise expected to have adverse health consequences. For instance, Park (2024) associates rising temperatures with a higher risk of accidents, while van Daalen et al. (2024) identify outdoor workers, indoor workers without access to cooling, and frontline workers as groups particularly exposed to climate-related risks. Digitalisation has led to the emergence of 'technostress', which relates to the stress generated by information and computer technology (Tarafdar et al. 2007). Moreover, increased surveillance, digital control (also through algorithmic management) and a faster pace of work (e.g. Nilsson et al. 2025, EU-OSHA 2024) may also have negative consequences for worker's physical and mental health (Ertel et al. 2010).

Despite this evidence, recent employment relations research has paid limited attention to health and safety at work. This is surprising, as employment relations research has a long tradition of examining these issues, particularly the role of trade unions and employee representation bodies in making work safer and promoting human and health-promoting forms of work across Europe (e.g. Thomas et al. 2022). Hence, there is a need for theoretical debate and empirical research on how OSH systems (comprising actors and institutions) respond to transformation processes and how those responses affect institutions, organisations and workers.

With this Special Issue, we would like to re-establish health and safety as a central dimension in comparative employment relations research. It is essential to examine how structural transformations alter the nature of workplace hazards and exposure to them; how these changes affect physical safety, occupational health, psychosocial health, and wellbeing; and how employment-relations actors and institutions prevent, distribute, negotiate, and enforce protection against those risks. Consequently, ensuring the protection of workers is of critical importance. Transformations may operate through different mechanisms and timescales, and contributions may examine a single transformation, cumulative effects, or interactions among several transformations. Specifically, depending on the institutional system, employee representatives and representation bodies may hold rights to information, consultation and/or co-determination regarding OSH matters and may participate in specialised bodies such as Joint Health and Safety Committees (Walters & Wadsworth 2020). This underlines their

potential role in the governance of health and safety at work, which spans multiple levels. For example, at workplace and organisational levels, the focus is on how risks are managed and on the protection of workers' health and employment. At sectoral level, contributions may examine how OSH issues are integrated into and negotiated through social dialogue. At national, European and transnational levels, contributions may address the governance of OSH, including interactions across levels.

The Special Issue seeks contributions addressing, but not limited to, the following broad themes:

Actors and institutions:

- The role of national occupational safety and health regulatory frameworks, institutional capacities, and worker representation in shaping the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms for addressing emerging challenges
- The role and engagement of trade unions and employee representative bodies at different levels in strengthening worker' protection, including the drivers and barriers of successful trade union action
- The negotiation, implementation and enforcement of protective regulation at the level of the workplace, including power dynamics, and the translation of existing rights into actual influence
- Collective bargaining as a means for improving workers' health and safety, including examples of practices from different sectors and countries
- OSH within European Sectoral Social Dialogue, and the implementation of European regulations in practice

Health, safety and risks at work:

- Specific work-related hazards, exposures, and risks arising from multiple transformations (e.g. climate change causing extreme heat, or digitalisation causing technostress) and the ways to address them at workplace level
- The role of coordination and different forms of employee voice in identifying and mitigating workplace hazards and risks
- Inequalities in exposure, vulnerability, regulatory coverage, voice, enforcement and health outcomes among different (socio-demographic) groups of workers
- Work regimes and health, safety and wellbeing at work; including absenteeism and presenteeism

The protection of workers:

- The role of recent regulation in protecting workers' health and safety, including, for example, working time regulations or the 'right to disconnect'
- Ensuring protection in new forms of work, such as platform work, and in forms of work not necessarily covered by current regulation, such self-employment

We welcome conceptual, empirical, and policy-oriented contributions from scholars across disciplines and encourage submissions employing a wide range of research designs and methodological approaches. We particularly encourage comparative studies, including cross-national, cross-sectoral, and cross-occupational analyses. Authors proposing single-country studies need to articulate the broader relevance of their findings and discuss their implications for other European and international contexts.

Timeline:

- Submission of extended abstracts (up to 1,000 words): December 4th, 2026
- Notification and feedback on abstracts: January 2027
- Submission of full papers: May 31st, 2027
- First feedback on full papers: within three months of submission
- Expected publication date: Spring 2028

For any questions or queries, please feel free to directly contact the Editors of the Special Issue:

Barbara Bechter

Durham University Business School (barbara.bechter@durham.ac.uk)

Nadja Doerflinger

TU Dortmund University, Social Research Center (nadja.doerflinger@tu-dortmund.de)

References:

Baccaro, L., & Howell, C. (2017). *Trajectories of Neoliberal Transformation: European Industrial Relations Since the 1970s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brandl, B., & Bechter, B. (2019). The hybridization of national collective bargaining systems: The impact of the economic crisis on the transformation of collective bargaining in the European Union. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 40(3), 469-489.

Berg, J., Green, F., Nurski, L., & Spencer, D. A. (2023). Risks to job quality from digital technologies: Are industrial relations in Europe ready for the challenge? *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 29(4), 347-365.

Cai, M., Tartanoglu Bennett, S., Stroleny, A., & Tindal, S. (2024). Between mundane and extreme: The nature of work on the UK supermarket frontline during a public health crisis. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 35(9), 1626–1653.

Dobbins, T., Cooke, F.L., Prouska, R., Williams, S. & O'Brady, S. (2026). Theorising the Impacts of Polycrisis on Employment Relations: Complexity and Diversity at a Global Scale. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.7006>.

Doerflinger, N. (2026). Interaction-as-a-risk: Deconstructing experiences of extreme work in 'key' services during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23970022261428849>.

Ertel, M., Stilijanow, U., Iavicoli, S., Natali, E., Jain, A., & Leka, S. (2010). European social dialogue on psychosocial risks at work: Benefits and challenges. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 16(2), 169-183.

EU-OSHA (2024). *Digital technologies at work and psychosocial risks: evidence and implications for occupational safety and health*. URL: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0537e526-8b6d-11ef-a67d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

ILO (2025). *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2025*. International Labour Office, Geneva: ILO.

Mailand, M., Tros, F., & Hansen, N. W. (2026). Social partners' influence on job quality in care in Denmark and the Netherlands. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 32(3), 235-253.

Nilsson, K., Matilla-Santander, N., Lee, M.K. et al. (2025). Algorithmic management and occupational health: A comparative case study of organizational practices in logistics. *Safety Science*, 187: 106863.

Ofe-Grant, M. B., Ravenswood, K., & Macdonald, F. (2025). Reframing approaches to workplace violence towards Pacific homecare workers in New Zealand and Australia. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 67(3), 405-429.

Park, J. (2024) *Slow Burn: The Hidden Costs of a Warming World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tarafdar, M., Tu, Q., Ragu-Nathan, B. S., & Ragu-Nathan, T. S. (2007). The Impact of Technostress on Role Stress and Productivity. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 24(1), 301–328.

Thomas, A., Doerflinger, N., Yon, K., & Pletschette, M. (2024). Covid-19 and health and safety at work: Trade union dilemmas in Germany, France and Luxembourg (March 2020–December 2021). *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 45(1), 116-137.

van Daalen, K.R., Tonne, C., Semenza, J.C., et al. (2024). The 2024 Europe report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: unprecedented warming demands unprecedented action. *Lancet Public Health*, 9(7), e495-e522.

Walters, D. & Wadsworth, E. (2020). Participation in safety and health in European workplaces: Framing the capture of representation. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 26(1), 75-90.

Witzak, P., Hertwig, M., Frisone, A., Hauptmeier, M., Kahmann, M., & Lines, L. G. T. (2026). Brexit's impact on transnational employee representation. Regulatory changes and contested futures of European Works Councils. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 32(2), 137-157.