

This Summer's Airport Chaos shows that Security Guards and Cleaners Remain Essential

On Telegram and WhatsApp groups horror stories of [long queues](#) at airport security counters are circulating, with some travellers having to wait in line for more than three hours. At the same time, photos of overflowing garbage cans and dirty airport toilets are quickly turning into holiday memories. And in many countries the highpoint of the summer season hasn't even started yet. While the [lack of airline pilots](#) is leading to flight cancellations, the bigger issue are a shortages of cleaners and security guards.

Airports, Climate and the Covid-19 crisis

During the last two years of the global pandemic, airports resembled ghost towns. This begged the question whether this was momentary or whether this foreshadowed the future of airports in an era of runaway climate change. With airplanes grounded, airlines and contractors pursued cost-savings and placed workers on early retirement, furlough schemes, moved them to other contracts or simply laid them off.

Simultaneously, the Covid-19 pandemic also changed the way that governments and society-at-large regard outsourced security guards' and cleaners' jobs. Having been labelled '[essential workers](#)' or 'key workers' endowed them with a special legal status in situations of lockdowns but also offered these low-wage workers a chance for higher recognition.

Despite greater environmental awareness and an increase extreme weather events, many travellers are opting to resume air travel as the Covid-19 safety rules have been relaxed. As our European societies return to 'normal', the promise of turning 'essential' jobs into good union jobs however remains unfulfilled. For that reason, the so-called '[Great Resignation](#)' hasn't made halt at airports, with more and more security guards and cleaners leaving their jobs. Even the industry web page [Airport-technology.com](#) asks 'Are ground staff under-valued?'

That is why UNI Europa Property Services has run the [RETAIN project, an EU co-financed project \(VS/2019/0292\)](#) on labour shortages, staff retention and labour turnover in cleaning and security over the last two and a half years.

Companies' responses to labour shortages

The current labour shortages pre-date the Covid-19 crisis. Already back in 2018, worker representatives, shop stewards and works council members were reporting that labour shortages and turnover were a pressing issue. Their companies couldn't recruit sufficient workers for their contracts. Already then, one company representative from the Netherlands reported that there were ten times as many open vacancies as applicants.

Digitalization and robotization are not panaceas to the current labour shortages. For years, security and cleaning companies prided themselves with [investing into digital technologies](#) and solutions without raising workers' wages, even though security, cleaning and facility management remain a labour-intensive industry. It should be clear by now that robots will not replace cleaners and security workers any time soon. After all, even airports with large surface areas require workers to clean seats, empty garbage cans, and clean toilets. The automation of large parts of airport security makes it [more prone to cyberattacks](#) but it also require the human eye to check and control digital systems as well as frontline staff with multiple language and cultural skills.

Many companies have been seeking to meet increase demand for services and the labour shortages by seeking to enlarge the labour pool. In the past, companies could rely on students for the summer, but this belongs to the past as wages have risen quicker in other sectors. Nowadays, you can visit any large security company’s website and will see their programs for traditionally under-represented groups, such as [women](#), [persons with disabilities](#) and [LGBTQI](#) person. To ensure a steady flow of labour, security companies however have had to go beyond diversity, inclusion and symbolism and reach into their pockets. Free licensing training, meal vouchers for weekend work, or tax-free vouchers for those who recruit someone have become commonplace. It remains questionable though whether these strategies are more than a quick fix in light of our findings.

Why labour shortages continue to plague security and cleaning

Trade unions have long campaigned for a [reduction in working hours](#), yet too often workers in these sectors struggle to survive on the hours that one job provides, due to the dominance of involuntary part-time work and split shifts. Additionally, interviewees report an increase in workloads and tasks arising also from clients’ demands. During [the 2019 strike of airport security workers](#) in Frankfurt, women working on the early morning shift recounted having to sleep in the break room, due to train scheduling, unsociable hours and staff shortages.

The majority of our project interviewees report low wages in the industry as a dominant reason for labour turnover: workers consider the industry a stop gap before finding a better paid job. The main reason for low wages in the sector is that public procurement tenders in the sector are often awarded according to the criteria of lowest price, leading to low wages and creating what my colleague Jelena Milos and I label a ‘vicious cycle of labour turnover and labour shortages’.



According to our project’s findings based on more than 35 interviews and numerous meetings with worker representatives from across Europe, staff shortages and turnover create pressure

on the existing employees who consequently suffer from work stress and burnout and leave the sector themselves. High turnover and understaffing then weaken trade unions' capacity to represent workers and consequently lead to further deterioration of working conditions. Consequently, this leads to the inability to attract new workforce to the sector and to a decreased quality of services.

Thus, we see that high CO₂-emitting industries such as air travel are fundamentally flawed, as they contribute both to the degradation of our environment and climate, as well as people's livelihoods. These workers have not been 'bought off'. Two and a half years of Covid-19, subsequent chaos at airports and mounting evidence suggests that it requires a radical transformation of how cleaners and security guards' work is organized, structured and remunerated. Nonetheless, employers and governments will argue in unison that [the lack of productivity increases](#) in cleaning and security renders wage rises impossible.

The solution: Stronger unions, family-sustaining jobs and climate justice

Building on [academic research](#) and interviews with worker representatives, our project has further found that high labour turnover makes it more difficult for unions to represent workers. In fact, it is a major obstacle for organizing workers in the sector. Unions that defend workers' interest and give workers a voice at work through collective bargaining can play an important role in decreasing labour turnover and addressing the dangers associated with labour shortages. This is especially the case where a dense network of union representatives are active on-site, pointing to a crucial role for organizing and union representation at the workplace. Consequently, stronger unions would be able to bring environmental and workplace issues together in their organizing and provide for and projects to construct an alternative economy that puts humans and the planet first.

Such trade union action is more necessary than ever as workers are feeling the squeeze due high inflation rates and soaring cost of living. This is disproportionately affecting low-wage services workers, many of whom aren't able to fly on vacation this summer, and who will be forced to make tough choices between buying food and heating their homes this winter. Thus, for millions of workers energy and climate policies are no longer abstract but daily realities. Unions need to ensure that workers should not be made to pay for this twin crisis but are centred in the coming [socio-ecological transformation](#).

For that reason, our recent UNI Europa Property Services Conference in Madrid set up a working group whose objective it will be to centralize information on the working conditions and wages of cleaning and security workers in airports, as well as use cleaners and security guards' union power at airports as a lever to improve the wages and working conditions of all workers, including those in small workplaces. Building on the [agreement of our Dutch union FNV with Schipol airport](#), the long-term goal is to create a European-wide Code of Conduct (European Airport Agreement) on Airport cleaning and security. This will commit airports to paying higher wages, ensuring higher safety standards, and decrease workloads. Moreover, it will guarantee individuals career pathways, as well as improved educational and vocational training which will be necessary for a ['just transition'](#).

In the short-term, trade unions have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to improve the working conditions and wages of cleaners, security workers and all other outsourced workers and set new sectoral standards through organizing and collective bargaining. In the medium-term, airports need to rethink their purchasing practices which have only accelerated the race-to-the-

bottom over the last few decades. In the medium- to long-term, governments ought to use the airport chaos as an opportunity to plan more long-term investments into high-speed rail which are less carbon-intensive. It is in such comprehensive policy packages that unions offer a pathway to break the vicious cycle of labour turnover and shortages, and workers are offered a perspective of working in family-sustaining and environmentally sustainable jobs.