

THE LIMITS OF WORK

POVERTY AND EXPLOITATION IN TODAY'S EUROPEAN UNION

ARTICLE BY

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The 2017 documentary *The Limits of Work* (*Hranice práce*) confronts the viewer with the terrible reality of work for many. Investigative journalist Saša Uhlová spends six months working a series of low-paid agency jobs equipped with a camera throughout. Casting a light on the conditions that some endure to keep society ticking on, the release provoked a fresh debate about work in the Czech Republic and received international acclaim.

Over the past few years, more and more people have been telling me about bad working conditions, about not being paid properly, about working too many extra hours, and being mistreated at work. I realised that poorly paid work and bad working conditions were important topics in the Czech Republic that deserved more coverage and discussion. However, my sources did not want to feature as the heroes of articles. Sometimes they even refused to be quoted anonymously.

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**HRANICE PRÁCE:
CHUDOBA A
VYKOŘIŠTĚNÍ
V DNEŠNÍ
EVROPSKÉ UNII**

Saša Uhlová vybavena videokamerou pracovala po dobu šesti měsíců po celém světě v řadě špatně placených, agenturou zprostředkovaných zaměstnání.

It became clear that the only way of uncovering the world of appalling working conditions was to work in it myself. Inspired by Günter Wallraff, Barbara Ehrenreich, Florence Aubenas, and George Orwell, I sought to testify to these conditions without endangering those who work in them to make ends meet.

Our work highlights how there are people employed in very poor conditions, doing jobs that are often physically demanding, yet whose pay is so low they can hardly provide for themselves, let alone their families. We did not have a clear idea of what the result would be. However, we knew the type of jobs we were looking for: jobs we

benefit from every day but that are hugely undervalued in status and pay. We buy food, expect streets to be cleaned, and consumer goods to be produced, but rarely see who provides them or at what price.

We wanted to stimulate a society-wide conversation about how such working conditions can still exist in the 21st-century European Union. The debate on the working poor is not only important for those involved. Pay is low even in skilled professions in the Czech Republic. 80 per cent of employees have a monthly wage of between 400 and 1700 euros and, in 2017, median pay was 900 euros. Up to one million Czech citizens are in danger of becoming working poor. Any unexpected expense, such as a new washing machine, could force them into a debt trap.

During the seven months I spent in low-paid jobs, I was so consumed by work that it did not allow reflection on the impact it was having on me, my family, and my relationships. Nevertheless, I realised that I was losing people close to me and that my children and husband were missing me badly.

I worked in five different positions: a laundry owned by the Czech Republic's largest public hospital, a chicken processing plant owned by oligarch Andrej Babiš (now incumbent and embattled Czech prime minister), a supermarket checkout, a razor factory in

North Bohemia, and a recycling plant in North Moravia. The labour code was violated in four of them. Pay ranged from the then minimum wage of 2.50 to 6 euros per hour. While hospital employees were confronted with pay discrepancies between in-house and agency workers, the chicken plant's main problem was constant overtime that meant you never knew when you could go home. Agency workers often had higher hourly wages, but nobody covered their health and social insurance and they worked 12 or more hours a day. In the supermarket, the biggest issue was the working hours. Some colleagues spent up to 17 hours a day on the till.

Health and safety training was not given for any of these jobs, and some – such as at the chicken processing and recycling plants – were potentially dangerous. Not providing employees with such training is a violation of the labour code.

A common feature of all these jobs was the lack of respect for employees' time and energy. Management at the recycling plant only provided staff with next week's shift schedule at the end of the week, damaging employees' private lives. At the supermarket, checkout staff were not allowed to leave at agreed times and had to wait to be replaced.



Saša's first job. Public hospital laundry in Prague.

The second job in a firm owned by Prime Minister Babiš. Chicken processing plant in Vodňany, a small city in the south of the Czech Republic.



Saša meets her colleague from the hospital, Marie. They became close friends.



Halfway through the project and depression is coming. Saša is working at the supermarket, lives in Prague but because of working hours she cannot see her family.

Working in a Prague supermarket for 3 euros an hour.



The fourth job in the north of the Czech Republic. Saša is at her friends' place but she is tired. She works 12 hours per day.

A colleague from the razor factory in Krupka, North Bohemia.



It's 5:00 am and Saša is going to work. It's her last job in Ostrava, one of the biggest towns in the country. Shifts at the recycling plant run from 5:30 to 14:00 and she lives in a squat.

Rats, an everyday experience. Saša's boss told her: "Sometimes you can see rats all around there. But don't worry, nobody has caught Weil's disease for three years."





Colleagues taking a smoking break at the chicken plant in Vodňany, the second job.

Saša's best friend from the laundry.



Saša and husband Tomáš having a rare moment together watching TV.

The conditions of people working in low-paid jobs are alarming, but employees in many skilled positions such as education, healthcare, and social services face similar problems. Questions such as automation or ‘Industry 4.0’ are only dealt with by trade unions – there is no political discussion. Crucial topics such as the future of labour are often pushed aside by the media as well. Organisations representing workers have gained bad reputations – unions are perceived as a ‘Bolshevik hangover’ taking us back to before 1989. Strikes and protests are mostly covered in a negative light, sometimes even labelled as ‘immoral’ or with strikers described as ‘whinging failures’. These labels have spread to public discourse, reinforcing a reality that makes marginalised people feel unrepresented, forgotten, and lacking the courage to change things.

In the past few years, the union-led ‘End of Cheap Labour’ campaign has highlighted the problem of poor pay. Our project built on this campaign’s success and helped deepen the discussion. It received a surprisingly positive response, both in the media and from people directly affected by precarious, low-paid work.

The articles reached approximately 200 000 people and the documentary was watched 300 000 times, so the project’s overall impact is huge. The articles were published before the parliamentary election in October 2017 and became part of political discussions – left-wing politicians referred to them, although not very convincingly. Discussion of marginalisation, labour, low pay, exploitation, and labour code violations has long been lacking in the Czech Republic. No political party has managed to raise these issues properly.

People’s dissatisfaction with developments after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, deepening social disparities, and general frustration shaped the election results. In the October 2017 election, anti-system parties scored major successes. These parties purport to stand against the status quo, although in fact they benefit from it. The current (caretaker) Prime

Minister is an oligarch who owns factories where workers are given disgracefully low wages and terrible conditions, who misuses EU subsidies, owns key media, and is one of the country's richest people. Another successful politician is far-right businessman Tomio Okamura, who – despite being part-Japanese – attacks people from other ethnic and national backgrounds and only supports welfare for Czech citizens. Recently, he questioned the existence of a World War Two concentration camp for Romani people, 90 per cent of whom died in the Romani Holocaust. Okamura used a narrative around work to question whether the camp existed. Like former Czech President Václav Klaus, he claims that this facility, where hundreds of men, women, and children died, was actually just a place where “unadaptable” Roma were sent to learn how to work.

Although the Czech Republic has seen economic growth in the last four years, ordinary people can hardly feel it. Wages have increased only modestly, but living costs have grown rapidly. People with low incomes find it difficult to pay market rents and there is no alternative such as social housing, so the number of people depending on housing benefit keeps rising. Ultimately, all of us pay dearly for low wages and expensive housing, as state money is used contribute to private rents for hundreds of thousands, thus subsidising exploitation. Low incomes are also devastating

for families – children can be taken away from very poor families and placed in state institutions where the costs of raising them are several times higher. There is basically no systematic help for vulnerable families. The situation is even worse for single parents who are four times more prone to poverty than other people. The Czech Republic has very few public nurseries for children aged under three (and the private ones are very expensive), and the average parental allowance is only around 250 euros a month, so single mothers need to quickly return to work. At the jobs Saša worked, there were many mothers who said “I didn't see my child grow up.”

Education usually fails to help children from poor families escape poverty. As their families typically need another source of income, poorer students opt to attend vocational schools, get their vocational certificate at 17 or 18, and start work immediately, usually for low pay.

Last but not least, the matter of alarmingly low wages is also connected with ethnic and gender discrimination. People of colour are discriminated against in the labour market and it is difficult for them to find reasonably paid work. Women have a lower median income, and many unskilled jobs are gendered. Cleaners, receptionists, and sewing machinists are typically women and the jobs are among the worst paid in the country.

When hundreds of thousands of people are not living in dignified conditions, there are obvious social consequences. When confronted with charts and figures, many people cannot picture the actual stories of the marginalised – working while ill, suffering from fears of eviction or dispossession, or struggling under debts that are impossible to pay off. Disadvantaged in access to good schools and housing, their work, often done by night on an irregular schedule, has a brutal effect on health in the long run. However, our project could not go that far. As Saša mentions in the film: “It would only be real research if I did it for years.” Although we could not go so deep, at least we managed to draw attention to the demeaning, marginalised positions of so many. The huge reach of the project – the hundreds of thousands of people who read the articles, public discussions, full cinemas, tours around the Czech Republic, and dozens of interviews in all the major Czech media outlets and many foreign ones, as well as interest in documentary screenings abroad – shows it made sense.

We can only hope that our project will result in an actual improvement in the situations of those who it features. It was them we had in mind throughout.



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SAŠA UHLOVÁ

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