

Standing out among the invisible

An early thirty-something with already more than a decade in cleaning behind him, the young Moroccan landed in the capital of Europe with dreams of becoming a lawyer. He clearly has drive, but for now has to settle for using it to help the unseen workforce.

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Despite the risks, some union officials force a showdown.

Image: © Vincen Beeckman

He passed his first year's studies in Belgium with little difficulty, despite having little interest in the course. But it is not in the Moroccan tradition for men to live off their parents after a certain age and anyway, Anass had meanwhile met the woman who was to become his wife and the mother of his two daughters.

"In Morocco, a man has to provide for his family. So I had to work at the same time as studying. I started out washing dishes in a restaurant, but the pay was very poor and sometimes the owner didn't pay at all. Someone I knew pointed me towards cleaning where the pay was a bit better, but mainly you have a proper contract and the certainty of getting paid at month-end", said the young man.

Union steward and chargehand

A regular pay-packet, but also physical constraints that soon forced him to drop his studies to build up overtime, going from one site to the next. One of his worst memories is cleaning a supermarket. "There were just two of us to clean up the store – obviously – but also the warehouses and car park. And it all had to be done between 6:00 and 9:00 each morning. The customer toilets were the worst. Some people are just filthy - I can't tell you what we had to clean up ... And then there were the snide remarks from some supermarket staff reading their paper and coming out with: "Another mugging. Oh look, a Moroccan again."

The supermarket in the morning, the offices of big multinationals in the evening. Coming in as a student "dental technician", within a few months Anass had become a "hygiene maintenance technician", as they call it in the trade nowadays.

It's a job where you have to buckle down to it, and never answer back under any circumstances. While the former is no problem, the latter just isn't really him. "I put the caretaker of an office building who was bossing me around in his place. He complained to my

At 32, Anass Nadi has already done the cleaning industry from A to Z. Starting out as a cleaner while still a student, he has since 2005 been a chargehand for the company contracted to clean the Berlaymont - the European Commission's famous star shaped building in Brussels. A "good job" for an industry where he seems never to have wholly fitted in, however. A sharp shirt unbuttoned to below the neck under a black leather jacket, sporting a silver-plated watch, a cheeky grin for a pretty passing face, the young man is a million miles

from the stereotypical cleaner, apart maybe from the fact of being Moroccan. By far most workers in this sector in Brussels are immigrants or with immigrant backgrounds.

He arrived in the European capital as an 18-year-old in the early 1990s with a modern literature degree hoping to study law. "But my uncles, who had been living in Brussels for several years, had actually enrolled me in a dental technician college because the fees were much lower than the university", he says, still regretfully.

"This business is all about power games; it's pretty behind the times."

managers and I was transferred elsewhere straight away. The phrase 'the customer is always right' still applies in this game."

But a strong character can also help open doors. "Looking presentable, being able to put my point across clearly and even my pugnacious side have played in my favour", he admits.

His aunt, a union steward of 30 years' standing, seized on her nephew's education to get his help in reading the documents she gets from her union. "Barring the odd 'special case' coming to Belgium to pursue their education, like one colleague who is doing his doctorate in mathematics, there aren't many educated people in our industry. And if you are, there's every likelihood that the unions will try and get you to stand in the workplace elections."

Union steward and chargehand, the "double duty" is common in the industry. Being appointed to a union office often results in being given bigger responsibilities or benefits by the employer. Anass Nadi readily admits, "You wear two hats. You get in the loop despite yourself. Nobody's going to turn down promotion, a company car, bonuses, a pay rise. The problem is when people go into union activity just for their own benefit or protection."

Undercutting

There can be a fine line between "perks" and "dodgy dealing". The cleaning sector is a fiercely competitive marketplace. And in order to win contracts, especially those with European institutions, companies quote artificially low prices. And to still turn a profit on the contract, bidders may be tempted to overstep the bounds of legality. Anass Nadi vividly remembers the "moonlighting" scandal uncovered in the Commission in 2007. The cleaning firms which then had the contract to clean the EC's offices had set up a fraudulent scheme, contracting the work out to a firm that employed undeclared workers.¹

"The outsourcing thing would probably never have happened if the tendering rules

hadn't been so ultra-free market that the one who bids 10 when the competition quotes 15 wins the contract", fumes the young union steward.

This undercutting war eventually rubbed off on the workplace relations between EU officials and the outside firms' employees. "Some Commissioners' private staff want cleaners at their beck and call, i.e., working exactly when they want. They want their office cleaned at 6.30 am on the dot and not a second later or they lodge an official complaint. Some people think we should be as invisible as possible", he says. That said, the young man doesn't find EU officials any more difficult than private sector customers.

"It's all about the person. Some are pretty stuck up. For instance, some officials put in a complaint because they found some of the cleaners having a coffee from the machine reserved for Commission staff. Others are quite friendly. We chat, they tell us about their holidays, we tell them about our worries, but there's no over-familiarity. Professionalism is the main thing."

Quality standards, the new trend

There isn't much time for water-cooler gossip anyway. The offices of the Berlaymont beehive are cleaned by just over 80 people today, compared to over 100 before the contract was renegotiated. Fewer staff and ever-rising demands. The shop steward is particularly critical of the emerging trend towards quality standards in the industry: "Outside firms do quality audits on our work. They hand you a report, and if you score less than 90%, for example, the cleaning firm has to pay back a percentage of the price paid by the customer."

Eco-products are the current big thing, so the contract requires "green" cleaning products to be used. "But the cleaning firm buys the cheapest, so you have to use twice as much elbow grease as before, and as everything has to shine..."

The steadily rising workload is an even bitterer pill for the workers in that not all face the same requirements. The steward notes that it is those who work unsociable hours that are subject to the highest productivity constraints. Some "favourites" chosen by EU building management officials on the basis of criteria as "objective" as physical appearance, do an easy 8-to-4. "This business is all about power games; it's pretty behind the times", complains the employee rep.

When asked about his future, Anass seems split between the remarkable zeal that typifies him and a kind of resigned acceptance. He sat exams to join the Brussels police, but a computer glitch meant his results could not be validated.

"I speak all the Maghreb dialects, I'm a people person and I like helping others." You can easily see him as a community mediator, not least because he is deeply concerned about the lack of bearings and low-level crime among his community's youth living in Belgium. But he is still unsure about resitting the exam. A recently recruited friend has told him that the police force isn't entirely a bed of roses. Until a more appealing future career comes along, he will stick with his "bread-winning" job, but with the promise to himself never to keep silent. "I've always said, if I have to die, it will be on a battlefield." ●

¹ As reported in "Nouveau scandale à l'Union européenne" (new scandal in the European Union), in the Belgian daily *Le Soir*, 2 June 2007.