

RESEARCH

**REPORTS**

RECOMMENDATIONS

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# THE WASTE SECTOR IN CROATIA

## CHALLENGES OF ORGANISING AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

INSTITUTE OF  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
Social Policy Programme

This report is one in a series presenting the findings of research carried out in Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia as part of the project CEE CAW ‘Challenges for Organising and Collective Bargaining in Care, Administration and Waste collection sectors in Central and Eastern European Countries’, which was led by the Institute of Public Affairs (Warsaw). The other partners were the: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Sofia), Central European Labour Studies Institute (Bratislava), Lithuanian Centre of Social Sciences (Vilnius), and Centre for Democracy Foundation (Belgrade).



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## 1. Methodological preface

The subject of this report is the analysis of the waste sector, i.e., climate adaptation of that sector and workplaces within that sector, with particular attention to the role of social partners and collective bargaining. Waste management is considered one of the sectors more vulnerable to climate change, in which it is necessary to reduce greenhouse gases by implementing so-called green transitions. Like transitions in other sectors, significant infrastructural interventions and technological adaptations may be necessary that could affect jobs and employment. The waste sector includes complex activities incorporating different market mechanisms and legislation. As a consequence, the emphasis is usually placed on the development of technologies and processes of sustainable management of the sector, and proper separation, collection and disposal of waste with the aim of recycling and reusing as much as possible.

The goal of this report is to examine the current implementation of green transitions in the waste sector in Croatia and to analyse the role and impact of social partners and collective negotiation on green transitions. Moreover, it should provide recommendations for social partners' activity required for successful green transitions in the waste sector. The preparation of this analysis was carried out through the study of relevant literature, research and scientific analyses on sustainable waste management and interviews with various stakeholders, primarily the representatives of social partners, decision-makers and the academic community. For this report, interviews were conducted with the President of the trade union, *Sindikat Čistoća Zagreb* (the company responsible for waste management in the City of Zagreb), the President of *Sindikat prometnih i komunalnih službi* (Trade Union of Traffic and Communal Services — which is affiliated with other trade unions in the waste sector), the Executive Secretary at *Nezavisni Hrvatski Sindikati* (Independent Trade Unions of Croatia), the trade union federation that includes all trade unions of waste management, the Vice-Mayor of the City of Zagreb responsible for negotiations with representative trade unions in the City of Zagreb and two experts for the workers' organisations and collective negotiations.

## 2. General characteristics of the sector

According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2024), in the waste sector on 31 March 2023 in Croatia, there were 17,136 employees, of which 3,796 (22.2%)

were female, while 13,340 (77.8%) were male. In waste management, working conditions and wages often reflect the demanding nature of the job. Workers face physical risks from handling hazardous materials and exposure to pollutants. The environment can be harsh, with long hours spent outdoors in all weather conditions. Despite these challenges, wages in waste management in Croatia are typically modest, especially for frontline workers. Many endure low pay, lack of benefits, and minimal job security, with injuries at work quite often happening. Due to this, as well as young workers only staying for a short period, it is estimated that there is a lack of needed workers by 25-35%. A serious lack of workers is missing from operational parts, primarily, street cleaners, communal workers, drivers, and workers for the removal of bulky waste and recyclable waste (Kučinac, 2023). According to Rajković and Lucić (2023), about 40% of respondents are considering or want to leave their job, i.e. waste management. This percentage is significantly higher in the category of waste removal and disposal (52%) compared to other work units.

The government of Croatia controls waste management, and the ministry is responsible for environmental protection by prescribing measures for waste management. The executive bodies on a national level are the Croatian Agency for the Environment and Nature and Environmental Protection (CAENEP) and the Environment Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund (EPEEF). The CAENEP oversees the collecting and harmonising of data and information on the environment and nature to ensure and monitor the enforcement of environmental and nature protection legislation and sustainable development. The EPEEF was established to finance the preparation, implementation and development of programmes and projects and similar activities in the fields of conservation, sustainable use, protection and improvement of the environment, and in the field of energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources. Local and regional governments are obliged to enforce the conditions and implement the prescribed waste management measures on their territories. However, common implementation of waste management measures can be contractually secured among several of them.

[The Act on Sustainable Waste Management](#) (OG 84/21, 142/23), stipulates the measures for protecting the environment and human health by preventing or reducing the generation of waste, reducing the negative effects of waste generation and waste management, reducing the overall effects of the use of raw materials and improving the efficiency of the use of raw materials. Furthermore, the Act demands an increase in recycling and reuse of

recyclables, which is necessary for the transition to a circular economy. This Act regulates the waste management system, including the priority order of waste management, principles, goals and methods of waste management, planning documents, responsibilities and obligations in waste management. Moreover, it normalises locations and buildings for waste management, waste management activities, cross-border waste transport, waste management information systems, and administrative and inspection supervision over waste management.

The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted waste management in Croatia. Increased usage of single-use personal protective equipment led to a surge in medical waste, straining disposal systems. Lockdowns disrupted recycling programmes, escalating household waste. Heightened sanitation measures generated more hazardous waste. Innovations in waste handling emerged, emphasising safety and sustainability amid the crisis.

Croatia has 48MW biogas plants, generating electricity sufficient to sustain approximately 100,000 households. Typically, a single biogas plant, with a 1MW capacity, yields 8,000 MWh of electric power annually. Collectively, Croatian biogas plants produce 384,000 MWh of electric power, a significant contribution that spares Croatia the need to import and spend millions on energy. Nonetheless, market conditions have pushed nearly all of Croatia's biogas plants to the edge of viability. Since the end of 2021 and amid the onset of the conflict in Ukraine and the energy crisis, the operational expenses of biogas facilities have surged significantly. The expenditures for all inputs, notably raw materials, have escalated by 100%. Consequently, numerous biogas producers unable to afford these raw materials have been compelled to reduce production to ensure the continued functionality of their plants (oie.hr, 2023).

### 3. Major problems and challenges in the sector

Although Croatian legislation on waste management is aligned with European Union legislation, the problem is implementation, primarily the late adoption of key documents such as [The Strategy for Waste Management of the Republic of Croatia](#) (OG 130/05, hereinafter: the Strategy), [The Waste Management Plan of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2017-2022](#) (hereinafter: Plan 2017), and its latest implementation document, [The Waste Management Plan of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2023-2028](#) (hereinafter: Plan 2023). One of

the key goals of the Strategy is the development of infrastructure for waste management, which includes the construction of recycling yards, biowaste processing facilities, such as composting and biogas plants, waste sorting facilities, and mechanical-biological treatment facilities.

The basic task of Plan 2017 is the a) establishment of a complete waste management system; b) rehabilitation and closure of existing landfills; c) development and establishment of centres for waste management that process waste for final disposal; and d) establishment of complete computerisation of the waste management system. Data shows that 19 years after the adoption of the Strategy, the infrastructure needed to achieve the goals of circular waste management is drastically lacking in Croatia. For example, by 2022, 21 centres for waste management should have been built, but only 3 were built. The number of recycling yards, as well as sorting, composting and recycling centres is unsatisfactory.

Plan 2017 envisages the establishment and enhancement of the central digital application for the conducting of procedures related to cross-border waste shipments. It should be achieved through a) managing the waste creation and flow register; b) designing and improving a waste management activities register in which waste management permit requests are applied for and given/rejected, as well as requests for inscription into the appropriate registers and other documentation related to waste management activities; c) creating and improving the central digital application for transboundary movement of waste; d) designing an application for abandoned waste locations; e) designing a central digital application register for management of special categories of waste, to report the quantities of matter and materials put on the market, data necessary for the coordination of supervision of quantities put on the market and other prescribed data. According to Plan 2023, the mentioned activities should be completed by 2027.

Due to hard work in unfavourable conditions of heat in the summer or cold in the winter, noise and exposure to injuries at work, the interest in employment in this sector is very low. Thus, there is a serious shortage of workers, which is being alleviated by hiring foreign workers, yet they do not stay in these jobs for long but move to other sectors or go abroad. In Croatian legislation, there are currently no prescribed minimum conditions for protecting the health of workers who work in high temperatures, but only non-updated guidelines and recommendations that are not binding for employers. As far

as standardisation is concerned, Croatia has the international *ISO 45001:2018 Quality and Safety Management System at Work*, but there is no information on how many employers have adopted it and how they have implemented it. Apart from issues of health, safety and security at work, and working conditions, the future for workers in waste management is also uncertain due to other risks. It is expected that the level of employment will be affected by digitalisation and automation of work processes, which are not yet widely accepted in this sector in Croatia.

## 4. Characteristics of social dialogue organisations in the sector

Social dialogue in the waste sector is recognised at the level of the municipal companies, which are the founders of companies responsible for waste management. In the capital, Zagreb, the municipal waste management company *Čistoća Zagreb* (<https://www.cistoca.hr>) is part of Zagreb Holding, so its representative trade unions negotiate and sign collective agreements with the city administration as an employer. The biggest trade union is *Sindikat Čistoća Zagreb* which has 750 members of the 1750 employees in the company. In the city of Split, representative trade unions of the municipal waste management company *Čistoća Split* (<https://www.cistoca-split.hr/>) negotiate with the local government. The Municipal Company *Čistoća-Rijeka* is in charge of maintaining cleanliness and waste management in the city of Rijeka and its surroundings and its trade unions negotiate with the local administration. Most of the companies' trade unions in the waste sector are members of the *Sindikat komunalnih radnika* (Trade Union of Utility Workers) which is affiliated with the largest trade union federation, the Union of the Autonomous Trade Union of Croatia (UATUC). Some companies' trade unions like *Nezavisni sindikat Čistoća Split* (Independent Trade Union *Čistoća Split*) and *Sindikat Čistoća Zagreb* (Trade Union *Čistoća Zagreb*) are members of the second largest trade union federation *Nezavisni hrvatski sindikati* (Independent Trade Union of Croatia).

### 4.1. Challenges of organising employees

According to the interviewed trade union representatives, it is relatively easy to organise the members because they work mostly in one company in the municipality. Therefore, trade unions have quite a strong membership basis



in the sector. The trade unions have good relations and collaborations because they are fully aware of the importance of common goals, primarily the desire to provide better working conditions for their members. Trade unions suffer from legal and organisational barriers, employers' hostility, spatial dispersion of workers, mobility of workers, multi-nationality of workers and any others identified by national stakeholders.

However, organising employees in waste management presents multifaceted challenges. Firstly, ensuring safety protocols amid hazardous materials demands rigorous training and vigilant supervision. Coordinating schedules for collection, sorting, and disposal requires efficient logistical planning to optimise resources. Employee turnover and retention pose continual hurdles, necessitating comprehensive recruitment strategies and robust incentive programmes. Moreover, the diverse nature of waste necessitates specialised expertise, prompting ongoing skill development initiatives. Balancing environmental sustainability with economic viability adds complexity, mandating innovative approaches to waste reduction and recycling. Additionally, navigating regulatory frameworks demands constant adaptation and compliance efforts.

#### 4.2. Good practices for organising employees

In the municipal waste management company *Čistoća Zagreb*, 160 workers worked for up to 6 years through temporary employment agencies. They were in a precarious form of employment relationship, deprived of many workers and financial rights, like a supplement for Christmas and Easter, and adequate covering of travel costs. Due to their insecure position, they were not able to take a bank loan. However, with persistent and dedicated work the Trade Union *Čistoća Zagreb* negotiated with the city's government and enabled the mentioned workers to become employed for an indefinite time with all legal workers' rights.

#### 4.3. Characteristics of employer representation

In all cities, the employer of the municipal waste management company is the city administration, represented by the mayor. There is *Udruženje općina* (The Croatian Union of Municipalities — <https://hzo.hr/>), which is a non-profit organisation, based on the principle of voluntary association that was founded by the Croatian municipalities to promote and protect

their interests. There is also *Udruženje gradova* (The Croatian Union of Cities), which has 127 members. Both mentioned Unions aid their members in various tasks related to waste management and collective negotiations related to waste management but do not directly participate in collective bargaining. There are some private sector waste management companies, but their number and roles are almost negligible. Thus, there is no organisation for private companies in this sector.

## 5. Collective bargaining and other forms of social dialogue in the sector – characteristics

In Croatia's waste sector, collective bargaining plays a pivotal role in shaping labour conditions and industry standards. With an increasing focus on environmental sustainability and regulatory compliance, negotiations involve a complex interplay between workers, trade unions, government bodies, and waste management companies. Key issues often revolve around fair wages, working hours, safety protocols, and job security, amidst technological advancements. Collective bargaining in the waste management system is carried out at city level and involves the trade unions of companies that perform these tasks, and the city administration represented by the mayor. The success of collective bargaining varies greatly between individual cities. For example, in the city of Zagreb there is a positive atmosphere and very encouraging results of collective bargaining, yet the situation in the city of Zadar is quite hostile often with conflicts and strikes.

### 5.1. Content analysis of collective agreements

The three largest collective agreements, with the largest number of employees in the waste sector, are the Collective Agreement for Employees in Zagreb Holding (*Kolektivni ugovor za radnike u trgovadkom društvu Zagrebaeki holding d.o.o.*), followed by the *Kolektivni ugovor Čistoća d.o.o. Split* and *Kolektivni ugovor Čistoća Rijeka*. The mentioned collective agreements are quite similar and define the rights and obligations of the contracting parties. Chapter I contains explanatory statements, related to the concluding, content, and termination of employment contracts, wages and other issues related to labour relations. Chapter II contains the procedure for accepting an employment contract, while Chapters III and IV prescribe trial work and work for an indefinite period. Working hours are determined by Chapter IV, and daily rest

and annual vacations by Chapter V. Night work is determined by Chapter VI, while Chapter VII explains in more detail protection and safety at work and issues of employee privacy protection. A relatively extensive Chapter VIII determines wages, and there is also a table with the job complexity coefficients and supplements for difficult working conditions. The protection of workers who are temporarily or permanently unable to work is contained in Chapter IX. Chapter X defines in more detail the inventions and technical improvements of workers, while Chapter XI is devoted to the prohibition of competition between workers and employers. Before the conclusion statements, there are also rules which determine the right to strike.

## 5.2. Other forms of social dialogue

At the company level, trade unions have the right to designate representatives known as shop-stewards, who are safeguarded by legal provisions against discrimination or termination based on their trade union activities. They are empowered to advocate for the interests of union members when dealing with employers. The specifics of their role, such as the allocation of working hours for union-related tasks, are typically outlined in collective agreements. Additionally, there exists a secondary avenue for representation at the company level, which includes workers' representatives such as work councils (mandatory in companies with over 20 employees), representatives focused on health and safety, and those serving on governing boards. These representatives are democratically elected by the entire workforce and are granted rights pertaining to information, consultation, and in some cases, decision-making. They are also entitled to time off to fulfil their duties. In the majority of waste management companies, work councils have a very limited role.

## 5.3. Impact of European sectoral social dialogue

According to the interviewed persons, the impact of European sectoral social dialogue on social dialogue in the waste sector in Croatia is very limited and does not have a significant influence. Membership of national social partners participate in European federations, but information about their activities is quite sparse.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

Proper waste management is crucial for protecting the environment and public health. However, it is not just about environmental concerns because improving waste management can also create new job opportunities and boost the economy. The importance of trade unions should remain in line with its historical role, which as a rule relies on the instrument of collective bargaining. An additional variable of collective bargaining may also contain requirements related to environmental protection and climate adaptation.

In this sense, the current involvement of trade unions needs to be strengthened when planning educational programmes and determining the skills needed for the expected changes at the level of individual companies and the level of sectors. As a part of these activities, the level of awareness and knowledge of the green transition, the consequences it will have, and the opportunities offered to them should be enhanced among workers and trade union members.

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