

Heat stroke at work : the invisible ordeal of climate change

“Impact of climate change and heat stress on worker’s health and productivity: A scoping review” is an article written by Amoadu et al., published in the *Journal of Climate Change and Health* in July 2023. The article highlights the intensification of heat waves provoked by climate change and the major risks that they pose to workers’ health. Three key points have caught the attention of “La Fabrique Écologique”:

#1 « Heat stress » is the term used to describe a human body submitted to an excessive heat charge, due to external temperature or physical effort. According to the World Health Organization, heat stress occurs notably during summer heat waves, which are characterized by out-of-norms temperatures during several days and nights successively. The frequency and the intensity of these waves is expected to multiply because of climate change. The article warns of the danger of heat stress, which can lead to dehydration and exhaustion, and even heart and kidney problems. Workers are on the frontline of this phenomenon. By 2030, it is estimated that roughly 2.2 % of working hours will be lost worldwide because of it, according to the International Labour Organization.

#2 Not all workers are affected the same way. In fact, some of them are particularly vulnerable: women, young people (under 24 years-old), the elderly (above 40 years-old), working immigrants, temporary workers, farmers, construction workers, and so on. Some other factors must also be taken into account, such as socio-economic factors (low revenues), professional factors (working outside) or behavioural factors (drinking sodas). As a result, inequalities intersect and amplify the risk of heat stress.

#3 The article identifies several preventive strategies: adapt working schedules; ensure easy access to shady and ventilated areas, water and toilets; train people to recognize the warning signs of heat stress. On an institutional level, the article regrets a lack of preventive

public policies and adaptation of working conditions. It also underlines the reluctance of some employers towards those measures, which they perceive as hampering productivity. Beyond the health dimension, this is also a social issue: the most exposed workers are often in a position of weakness in the corporate world. Unless they explicitly tackle these structural inequalities, public adaptation policies are bound to miss their target and reproduce current domination dynamics.

In France, a paradigm shift is needed

Europe, hitherto relatively unaffected by this phenomenon, is now particularly vulnerable. Since 2000, work injuries cause by heat stress have increased by 33.3 %, according to the International Labour Organization. In France, the situation is especially worrying: with an average of 4.38 fatal injuries for 100 000 workers (Ministry of Labour), the country sits at the bottom of the EU ranking. The intensification of heat waves will only make it worse, notably in manual jobs, which are already very prone to injuries. To counter this rising threat, several unions are calling for an ambitious review of labour laws. They namely advocate for maximum limits of exposure to heat and humidity (as it is already the case for some chemical substances), and to introduce a temporary cessation of activity in the event of a heatwave. Lastly, we can also cite the model of social and environmental protection developed in the 2020s by researchers Eloi Laurent and Bruno Palier. This model intends to include social and health risks caused by the ecological crisis in the framework of social insurance.

Pauline Bureau’s opinion, vice-chair at LFE

A crucial article, one that offers concrete and reachable measures to address an issue that is too easily ignored, and one that does not forget that social justice and environmental justice are two sides of the same coin.