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THEME:
**New thinking
mobilising change**

Foto: Cata Portin

Fighting against prejudice / Labour shortage chokes mobility / Sustainability - a strategy for the future / A mental change for Finland

Mobilising change

Ours is a time of rapid change. Entire communities are challenged when what used to be rock solid businesses move all or parts of their production to low cost countries – or simply close down. This demands the possibility and ability to change. It is a positive sign when we see a decrease in the number of openly unemployed in the Nordic countries.

It is still a big problem, however, that far too many people of employable age are forced out of working life, while others never get a foothold. Being active in working life gives meaning and identity to people. Shutting people out does not only threaten the future of the welfare state, but it also undermines the individual's opportunity to take part in the development of society. It can lead to increased ill health, crime and protest movements, all of which threaten the greater society.

Strong forces are fighting to save our nature for future generations. It is necessary to exploit nature in a sustainable way. Could the term sustainability be applied to working life too? Could it prevent people from being expelled from working life, could it include more people into it and safeguard the health of present and future generations?

Under the heading 'New thinking mobilising change' Norwegian working life researchers argue the need for new thinking in the workplace and new thinking on working life. They say that looking at work in a sustainable perspective will challenge traditional solutions and mobilise change. "Sustainability is about making choices which take care of both people and material resources", says professor Bjørge Aase Sørensen, who led a Nordic project on a sustainable working life.

Researchers and trade unions in Denmark co-operate to develop sustainable workplaces. There are small steps being taken towards a sustainable working life. "I hope this is the beginning of the building of strong alliances between industries, trade unions and social movements", says Henrik L. Lund, one of the researchers who has taken part in this work.

Developing a sustainable working life will not happen just like that. What is needed is co-operation across the dividing lines, and strong powers pushing for change. Perhaps it will force its way to the fore, out of demographic reasons or by popular demand. Perhaps the labour researcher is right, arguing the term itself can mobilise change. After all, can we imagine a sustainable society where working life is not sustainable?




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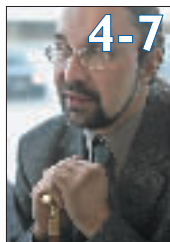
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4-7

NEWS

- Fighting against prejudice
- Foreign workers in Iceland - living on the fringe of society
- Labour shortage chokes mobility
- Lack of manpower - a problem for all



8-9

RESEARCH

- The Nordic Model of Labour Relations and the Vaxholm case
By Niklas Bruun, Professor of EU labour law at the Swedish National Institute for Working Life, and at the Hanken University of Economic and Business Administration in Helsinki



10

SIDELONG GLANCE

- Packing your bags is hard to do
By Gwladys Fouché, The Guardian, Oslo



11-21

THEME - New thinking mobilising change

- Sustainability - a strategy for the future
- Making production sustainable - The Danish experience
- Integrity - a new term in Norwegian labour law
- A mental change for Finland



22-23

PORTRAIT

- Fighting hidden unemployment - and modernising the Nordic co-operation
By Berit Kvam, AFI

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Fighting against prejudice

In an effort to tackle discrimination at all levels of society, the Norwegian government has appointed the first ever equality and anti-discrimination ombud.

The aim is to fight against all types of prejudice, be it on the basis of gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability or age.

By Gwladys Fouché, Oslo



Photo: Ida von Hanno Bast

The first holder of the job is Beate Gangås, 42, a former police officer who most recently headed the national police unit against organised crime. Gangås manages a 26.5m kroner budget and a staff of about 30. Her powers are widespread: she can not only conduct research on discrimination-related issues, but also intervene in individual cases.

For instance, she is currently dealing with a job ad for the Pakistani national airline, recently published in one of Norway's largest dailies, Aftenposten.

PIA was looking for female flight attendants and the ad only wanted applications from "talented young girls" who are single, aged 20-25 and are "medically fit as per international standards". The ad even specified that "candidates with skin problems need not apply". "This is the textbook example of what you are not supposed to do," she explains with a laugh. "It breaks at least two or three anti-discrimination laws. We contacted Aftenposten, who has acknowledged the mistake and promised it will no longer print the ad. We are now going to contact the airline to tell them they must do a new ad."

Before the ombud office was set up in January, an array of organisations specialised on a particular type of prejudice, such as the gender equality ombud or the centre against ethnic discrimination. Gangås believes the new, all-encompassing approach will be more effective in tackling discrimination. "We have different laws that are concerned with specific groups," she says. "But whether it is because of someone's gender, skin colour or age, the mechanism for discrimination is the same." It will also avoid the problem of overlapping types of prejudice, she believes. "If a black woman comes to me because she suspects she did not get a job promotion," she asks, "is it because she is black, is it because she is a woman, or is it because she is a black woman?"

One of the main challenges will be to

tackle Norwegian society's attitude towards ethnic minorities: "I think we have a lot to learn on this from other countries. We are a young nation when it comes to multiculturalism: we are not aware we discriminate against different ethnic minorities. They have a very difficult time getting jobs. Many employers won't even interview candidates who have a foreign name. Perhaps this is due to ignorance."

The ombud has currently two projects on her desk: one is to look into encouraging men to spend more time looking after children and have a better work-life balance. The other, also an EU-sponsored project, is to examine methods to measure discrimination. "It is a fascinating and very difficult subject," says Gangås. "Is it fair to measure discrimination by the amount of people who complain officially? Or is it actually a measure of success, because people feel confident they can complain? Should discrimination be measured through the people who never complain or the ones we never hear from?"

For the moment though, her key priority is to spread the word about her existence throughout the country. "It is really important that people know who we are and what we are here for. I want to reach as many people as possible so that they know we are here to help them."

"If we are not known, then we would have failed in our jobs."

Foreign workers in Iceland - living on the fringe of society

One out of four men living in Eastern Iceland is a foreign citizen. The majority of the foreigners come from Poland, work in large-scale industry and live isolated from the Icelandic population.

By Áslaug Skúladóttir, Iceland

"In general, there appears to be an underlying tendency to view foreign workers as an economic resource rather than as full members of Icelandic society, who are entitled to the corresponding rights," says Gudrun D. Gudmundsdottir, director of the Icelandic Human Rights Centre.

In January 2006 the population of Iceland reached 300,000, doubling from 1953. Last year 340,000 foreigners visited the country. Anna Karlsdottir, assistant professor in tourism studies at the University of Iceland, says that a large number of them are foreign workers or people related to them. "Many of those workers are working only temporarily in the country".

According to Statistics Iceland the number of foreigners with a legal residence in Iceland reached 4,6 % of the whole population, or 13.778 people, by the end of 2005. For the past decade this percentage has almost tripled, in 1996 it was 1,8 %. It may be noted that these statistics do not count all the workers who come to work in Iceland for a short term only.

The Directorate of Labour says that the majority of foreign workers are employed in large-scale industry, approximately 40 % of all work permits were granted to companies in that field. The majority work in eastern Iceland, in Karahnjúkar and Reydarfjörður.

Out of a population of 14.000 in this part of the country, about 2000 are foreign men and a little over 400 are foreign women.

Although a significant number of the population in Eastern Iceland are foreign born, Einar Skulason, managing director of the Intercultural Centre, says their impact on society is limited. The people are living and working in remote, isolated places, outside the Icelandic villages. They seldom leave the workplace, children go to school at the plant and the contact with the Icelandic population is minimal. Icelanders polled in the area say they find the impact of foreign workers is less than they had anticipated.

"Foreigners come to Iceland to work", Einar says. "Most come from Poland, where unemployment is high. Many leave children and spouses behind and plan to return." Unemployment amongst foreigners is less than 2 %. They are prominent in many fields where command of Icelandic is not necessary. In the food industry 15-20 % of the workers are foreigners, 10-15 % in fish processing, and 10-15 % in menial jobs such as cleaning. In general, foreigners work long hours and do not participate actively in Icelandic society.

Temporary work agencies (TWA) are a recent phenomenon in the Icelandic labour market. These are companies that hire out workers for a fee.

In the wake of several cases of abuse, a law on TWAs was passed in 2005, taking effect one month ago. From that day all operating TWAs had to be registered. Their exact number is unknown but to date 12 TWAs have registered. Halldor Gronvold, the assistant managing director of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASI), says ASI has good reasons to believe that not all operating TWAs have registered and have thus broken the law.

Einar says that although generally things are working quite well, much remains to be done. "For instance, the rights of foreign workers vary from one pension fund to another. These need to be coordinated."

Gudrun D. Gudmundsdottir says that the rights of foreigners in the workplace and daily life need to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. "It is problematic that no single actor is responsible for informing workers of their rights and duties before or after their arrival in Iceland. This is generally in the hands of the employer". A study carried out by the Multicultural Center showed that 62 % of the participants had signed an employment contract without understanding it, in whole or in part. "Furthermore, temporary work permits are issued to the employer, not the employee. This creates an unequal relationship where the worker is unreasonably dependent on the employer."

Labour shortage chokes mobility

Finland has decided to abolish the transition rules for labour from new EU member states from 1 May this year. Norway, Denmark and Iceland have still not decided, while Sweden opened her borders as early as 2004.

By Björn Lindahl / Carl-Gustav Lindén

The debate on mobility has changed rapidly - not only in the Nordic countries but also in the new EU states. The reason: the main problem in the coming years will be a lack of manpower, rather than old EU countries having to deal with a flood of labour from new member states.

During a meeting in Oslo, which gathered officials from the Nordic countries, Poland and the Baltics, the Baltic representatives said they were now encouraging their countrymen to return home.

"We want the transition rules to be abolished, but we don't want people to leave - we wish them to take part in the growth that we're experiencing ourselves", said Ine Elksne from the Lithuanian Ministry of Labour.

The Norwegian research foundation FAFO has been following the development in the wake of the EU enlargement and the softening or opening up of labour immigration from new member states. The work was commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Since the enlargement, nearly 60.000 work permits have been granted for foreign workers in the Nordic countries. That is not a particularly high figure, if you compare it to Ireland which has taken 125.000 workers from new member states. Norway, whose population is similar in size to that of Ireland, accepted 26.000 - by far the largest number out of all the Nordic countries. Sweden, where there are no temporary limits in place, even saw a

slight decline in the number of immigrant labour. This indicates that economic cycles are the deciding factor, not the rules for labour immigration.

Labour immigration from new EU countries consists of both individual workers and foreign sub contractors who bring their own work force. When the European Parliament discussed the Services Directive, which decides which rules apply for the latter type of mobility, the conditions were tightened.

"When choosing a foreign sub contractor means fewer social responsibilities and lower social costs for those who commission work, it is not surprising that many businesses choose to do that rather than hiring new EU-citizens", says Jon Erik Dølvik, responsible for the Fafo report.

He warns of the consequences of a services market which expands at the expense of those who have permanent employment. The most obvious example of this is Finland, where thousands of Estonians work as hired labour. They arrive on express ferries from Tallinn to Helsinki in the morning, and return in the evening.

It's a theme for discussion among the parties in the labour market and the government in Finland. They have made a compromise, in which the transition rules will be abolished while workers from new EU countries must be registered - similar to what is happening in the UK.

"Workers from new EU countries will be registered so that we know who works here, who the employers are and what their terms are. It's a wholesome approach which we can accept", says Matti Viialainen, who represents Finland's largest trade union, FFC, in the negotiations.

"We always felt the transition period was exaggerated. Now we can employ people directly from new member states", says Riitta Wärn, special advisor to the Confederation of Finnish Industries.



Photo:
Tuulikki Holopainen

Lack of manpower – a problem for all

Sergo Teider-Lastikka says it makes no real difference that his countrymen will soon be free to seek work in Finland, when the country opens her border to workers from the new EU member states. He has not seen much of the limitations which have been in place for the past two years either.

By Carl-Gustav Lindén

"For us it's all the same, the transition period has not meant any problems. Finnish sub contractors have hired labour from me, the law is like a Swiss cheese", says Teider-Lastikka, who has more than two hundred people working in Finland.

"We have 64 people in the construction industry, 37 in IT and the rest in various industries."

Sergo Teider-Lastikka is Estonian, but lives in Helsinki where he runs his group of businesses. And business is good. He says he has seven American Lincoln cars and one Chevrolet Suburban, as well as two private planes - which he is now selling to Russia. To celebrate his imminent pilot's licence, he's planning to buy a new one.

"I'm in such a hurry, it's easier to fly your own plane if you need to get somewhere quickly."

When Estonia became an EU member state in May 2004, he organised work for his countrymen via an 'association for foreign workers'. It turned into a manpower agency.

"There is a group of businessmen who are into short working contracts, they don't care about insurance and don't fix living quarters. When honest

workers try to get papers, these people get in the way, and the longer the time from the deal is signed until the job starts, the greater the risk."

Many workers are also tricked or given lower wages than they are entitled to. Foreigners who don't come from the 'old' EU will most often get a work permit in Finland, but the process can take several months. Labour authorities must first check whether it is possible to find Finnish unemployed who can do the job. No work permit is needed for jobs of less than six weeks duration. That also applies if the worker is employed by a foreign company and hired in to do the job.

But according to Teider-Lastikka, Finland can't afford to shut people out, since the lack of manpower is becoming acute everywhere, also in Finland.

"In Estonia the joke is that if you've got one arm and can sign a work contract, you're fit to work."

The shipyard in the capital Tallinn has applied for 1000 work permits for Ukrainian welders to replace the Estonians who have moved abroad. Workers who perform crucial tasks in for instance ship building, like specialist welders, are sought after world-wide. But there aren't many of them. In ten



Photo: Tuulikki Holopainen

years some ten thousand welders have been educated in Estonia. One third of them remain in the trade, but fewer than 500 are competent and some 50 belong to the elite.

"In Italy there's a great demand for Estonian welders. Yesterday I spoke to an employer who has 150 welders and a five year tender from Italy, but he's already tied up in Finland."

Most workers from the new member states go abroad with the view of making easy money, and then return home. On the other hand, the wages aren't necessarily everything. Sergo Teider-Lastikka mentions two welders who returned to Klaipeda in Lithuania after four years in Åbo.

"In Finland they got 1.900 Euro net, in Klaipeda 900 Euro, but they have no mortgages and wanted to go home to live their own lives. Nothing could keep them here. And then everything is cheaper in Lithuania."

The Nordic Model of Labour Relations and the Vaxholm case

Sweden was one of the few EU member states that did not introduce any transitional restrictions on the free movement of workers when EU enlarged with 10 new members in 2004.

It might therefore be surprising that a major conflict concerning the use of workers from Latvia at a Swedish building site has been referred to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in Luxembourg. In the following we try to explain the background and context of the conflict as well as the issues at stake in the court procedure.

The circumstances of the case

Laval un Partneri Ltd (Laval) is a Latvian company. Laval hires out labour from Latvia. A Swedish company was performing a contract for building a school in the town of Vaxholm. In performing the contract this company hired Latvian building workers from Laval.

Laval was not bound by the collective agreements of any Swedish trade union. Laval was bound by two collective agreements with the Latvian building workers trade union.

The local section of the Swedish Building Workers' Union contacted Laval in order to secure a collective agreement regarding the building work at the school in Vaxholm. In the month to come there was contact between the local section of the union and Laval several times, but no collective agreement was signed. In October, the section gave a written notice of industrial action, including a ban on all building and installation work at Laval's workplaces. The industrial action began on 2 November 2004. This action

was supported by the Swedish Electricians Union through so-called secondary action.

In December 2004, Laval brought an action before the Swedish Labour Court against the Swedish unions. Laval claimed that the industrial action broke EU law, and should be lifted.

The Labour Court decided to make a reference for a preliminary ruling to the ECJ. The court's ruling is expected late in 2007.

The Swedish model

The Swedish labour market is characterised by strong organisations. About 80 % of the employees are members of trade unions. There is also a high level of employer organisation.

The labour market in Sweden is regulated by laws and collective agreements. As regards pay and other remuneration there is no legislation, but collective agreements which are binding under civil law. The state takes no responsibility for ensuring that collective agreements apply; the trade unions must ensure that each individual employer is bound by a collective agreement based purely on the law of contract. This happens either with the employer joining an employer organisation with a collective agreement, with a trade union or through a direct agreement between the employer and the relevant trade union. Without a collective

agreement an employer might in theory agree on any rate of pay with his employees. In practice the employer will be forced by the trade unions to apply standards that are not unreasonably low.

Hence the state has transferred the rights to safeguard their interests to the employees themselves, through their trade unions. A basic condition for this is that the trade unions are representative and have effective means of inducing employers to sign collective agreements. When a collective agreement is in force between the parties there is in principle a total obligation to keep industrial peace. When there is no collective agreement a trade union is free to take industrial action, including sympathy action, to induce the employer to sign an agreement, regardless of whether the trade union has members at the workplace or not.

In EU member states there is a prevailing presumption that minimum labour standards must be maintained by all employers in a given industry or profession, regardless of whether they have concluded collective agreements or not. The methods used to achieve this vary, however. In some member states there is legislation on minimum wages. In many member states there are systems for extending collective agreements, making the general applicable or, in other words, giving them an erga omnes effect.



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Photo: Claus Gertsen/Scanpix

VAXHOLM: Swedish construction workers take action against the Lithuanian company Laval un Partneris in Nov/dec 2004. Here the workers are trying to stop a yellow van carrying Lithuanian construction workers.

In Sweden and Denmark there are neither systems of general applicable collective agreements nor a set minimum wage. Instead, the method used might be classified as the autonomous collective agreements model. According to this model it is de facto the responsibility of the trade unions to uphold a general level on wages and employment conditions and protect the workers from social dumping.

The problems in the Vaxholm case

The parties in the Vaxholm case agreed that the industrial action undertaken against Laval was fully in line with Swedish law and practice. Laval claimed, however, that EU law contained certain restrictions which took precedent over Swedish law.

The question posed by the employer Laval, which was using its right to free movement of services within the EU, was whether it had to enter into a collective agreement in Sweden in order to be able to fulfil its contractual obligations. The company also asked whether the trade unions could lawfully take industrial action and secondary actions in order to force it to sign the collective agreement. Then the company wanted to know whether the

company-level collective agreement they had would have any impact on their legal position in Sweden. Finally the company asked which wage level or content of the agreement it had to accept.

These issues were “translated” by the Swedish Labour Court to roughly three legal questions concerning the interpretation of EU law. The first one has to do with the relationship between the EC Treaty provisions on free movement of services and the right to undertake industrial action. The second one is related to the Posting of Workers Directive. The third issue at stake is whether the Swedish “Lex Britannia” is in conformity with EU law. In the following presentation we deal shortly with all these three issues.

It seems clear that the right to strike, protected by the Swedish constitution, only in very exceptional circumstances, were an industrial action is undertaken to pursue a clearly discriminatory goal, can be regarded to restrict the free movement of services in a way that is prohibited by the Treaty.

The Posting of Workers Directive enables member states to set a minimum standard on working con-

ditions that also foreign service providers must adhere to. Many EU member states apply minimum wages (either based on law or by extension of collective agreement). The issue at stake is whether the Swedish legislation that is silent on wages also can be seen as an acceptable implementation. The author finds a positive answer plausible, although there is room for an improvement of the transparency of the Swedish wage system.

“Lex Britannia” finally contains some special provisions concerning the right to take industrial action. If it is regarded as a problem in light of EU law it can quite easily be changed to fulfil the requirements.

Conclusions

In the Vaxholm case the ECJ has to assess some of the fundamental features of the Swedish labour relations model. A judgment can therefore potentially have a huge impact on the way this model functions. One can only therefore hope that the Court comes up with a balanced judgment that at the same time leaves the fundamental features of the Swedish model intact without opening up for a protectionist wave of restrictions for service providers within EU.

Packing your bags is hard to do

Two nights a week, over twenty foreigners like me gather in a classroom at an Oslo language school, determined to improve our faltering Norwegian.

It's a microcosm of the world. There's Yitzhak from Israel, who works in a graphic design company and is married to a Norwegian journalist; Teresa from Poland who works in a kindergarten; Nathalie from Mauritius Island who does shifts in a care home for the elderly. I am a French journalist, but lived nine years in London before moving to Oslo last March.

We are just the tip of the iceberg. My school alone runs dozens of classes, day and evening, every weekday. It is one of the many language institutions across Norway.

Walking the corridors of my school, it would seem that an ever-increasing number of us are jumping from one country to the next, easily swapping one job for another, or moving abroad to live with one's partner.

There is some truth in this. With the general decrease in air fares these past few years, an increasing number of us fly more often and to more places. Among other things, it makes it more common to maintain, say, a long-distance relationship.

I myself moved to Oslo to live with my partner after close to four years of constant commuting between Britain and Norway. It would never have been possible if Scandinavian Airlines and Norwegian hadn't offered reasonable fares. 1000 kroner is a lot of money when you fork it out every other week.

Or take my classmate Jessica from Peru: she met her Norwegian husband at a wedding in Lima. He was so smitten with her that he

flew regularly from Oslo to woo her, while she would take the bus from her hometown of Arequipa to the Peruvian capital to meet him. They are now happily married and she works in a bank. It is an extreme example, but reflects a situation that would probably have never happened thirty years ago.

However, this does not mean that you can pack up your bags and move in a heartbeat. To a great extent, only a privileged few are able to "cross-country" in comfort. Working in a trade that is in demand in your new country is essential; having gone to university definitely helps; but most important of all, is the support from closed ones in your new nation. When the going gets tough, they are the ones who really help you through it.

Of course, some people who do not have any of the above do move to Norway. But it comes at a great personal cost. One Ukrainian classmate, who is in her early twenties, last saw her parents more than a year ago. She works as an au-pair, so she cannot afford to visit her family, a working-class family living in a rural part of the Ukraine. Similarly, another classmate, a cancer researcher from Nepal, has not seen his wife and toddler son for over a year.

And countries are not exactly falling over themselves to open their borders. Just take Norway: even though EU citizens have the right to live and work here, we must explain why we come here and prove that we can support ourselves - having 100,000 kroner in the bank is

recommended. And that process is repeated every year. By comparison, Britain does not ask of any paperwork from EU nationals.

And the situation of EU citizens in Norway is a piece of cake compared to what non-EU nationals have to go through. At least, we hold on to the reassuring thought that it is more than probable that we will get that all-important residency permit.

And there's one last determining factor: as long as new immigrants do not become fluent in their new language, it is next to impossible to find a good, well-paid job. There are a few exceptions, such as oil workers in Stavanger, IT employees whose working language is English, or journalists who write for foreign media.

But as long as they cannot speak fluently, immigrants will be attending language classes two nights a week, determined to improve their faltering Norwegian.



By
Gwladys Fouché,
The Guardian,
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New thinking mobilising change

Is it time for a new approach to work and people's relationship with work? In the Nordic countries, work is traditionally highly valued. Employment rates for both men and women have for a long time been the highest in the world. But even if the term 'working joy' was coined here, something is seriously wrong in the relationship between the worker and the job. High levels of sick leave, unemployment figures and early retirement are all indicators of that.

How can work develop so we can go to work with joy - no matter if we're young or old, are able to work a

lot or a little, have got physical or psychological handicap or come from different ethnic backgrounds? There are good intentions about, but somehow it's no longer enough. Do we need a new approach to working life? Do we need a strategy for a sustainable working life?

Sustainability - a strategy for the future

Can society be sustainable if working life isn't? By valuing working life in terms of sustainability, we add a new perspective of forward thinking and inclusiveness which concerns people. Sustainability puts work in a context which challenges traditional solutions and players, and it mobilises fresh thinking. This is one conclusion from a report written by professor Bjørg Aase Sørensen and Christin Thea Wathne at the Norwegian Work Research Institute, on commission from the Nordic Council of Ministers Committee on Working Environments. The report will be published this spring.

"Sustainability concerns everybody. It's about the yet unfulfilled obligations we have to our unknown children and grand children. It is also about a chance to gather around a concept which is both inclusive and demanding", says Bjørg Aase Sørensen.

Future perspective

Sustainability is about making choices which protect both human and material resources. It's about understanding the various phases each individual worker goes through during his or her working life, and that the workers of today and the future are less homogeneous than the middle-aged, white men who have become the norm in working life. Focusing on sustainability and working life means creating a new strategy with a longer-term aim. It doesn't only exist to get rid of urgent problems, or to fix them. It's the difference between creating specialised working conditions for specific groups of workers, for instance the older ones, and to develop a working environment where you can grow older without the need for special conditions. But a future commitment demands co-operation between many different parties - individu-

als, businesses, organisations, industries, authorities and researchers.

"In some ways the actors are the same as today, but I imagine we'll want to reconsider which systems are the most relevant. Internet helps us exchange information fast, and technology can encourage co-operation between unorthodox parties. For instance, developed countries can be influenced by developing countries - and the other way around. By thinking sustainability, we also allow ourselves to be inspired by new ideas", says Bjørg Aase Sørensen.

She gives an example: in Lofoten they've got a women's bank, an idea from developing countries where micro credit systems are common. If sustainability gets a foot-hold, similar ideas can become more and more relevant.

Is the notion relevant?

Bjørg Aase Sørensen and Christin Thea Wathne have put down a lot of work to determine what sustainability means to different groups of people, and where the notion makes itself present on the Nordic countries' agenda, especially when it comes to working life. They

have interviewed researchers and authorities in the different Nordic countries, gathered advertising people, prison inmates, substance abusers, elderly people and athletes. All have been asked what sustainability means to them. They have visited businesses and studied various national projects which are deemed to be sustainable, no matter whether or not the notion is on the agenda. They have also looked at how sustainability in the work place is controlled and supported.

The researchers found that there are many interpretations and examples of what sustainability really is, what it can be and how it is linked to the development of working life. Finland, for instance, has developed a long-term strategy for the development of working environments. One example is the Well-being at Work Programme. Here, different parties co-operate systematically and long-term to create working environments where people want to and are motivated to work to a higher age than what is common today. Bjørg Aase Sørensen thinks the Finnish scheme is an impressive sustainability project, even if that is not what it is called. Finns



By
Gunhild Wallin,
Stockholm

she has spoken to claim sustainability does not play a part here, because the working environment concept contains the same values.

The Danes approach sustainability in many different ways. Denmark has, for instance, partnerships between researchers and trade union movements. Their vision is not so much to use the idea of sustainability as a way to solve a problem, rather than building on utopian ideas and developing the notion of sustainability through research and the willingness to try new things. Little by little, they give meaning to the notion sustainability, by being open to experimentation, she says.

“In Denmark, the term sustainability means a more ecological way of thinking. They're always open to new alternatives”, says Bjørg Aase Sørensen.

A local labour agenda

The biggest difference between the Nordic countries can be found in the relationship between the parties in the labour market, the authorities and researchers. In Denmark many work environment issues are regulated through deals and agreements on branch or local level, while the other Nordic countries to a larger extent use legislation. Bjørg Aase Sørensen concludes, however, that a sustainable working life is in

effect developed locally. The work place is where you must make laws and regulations work, and that is where people have to feel included in order to develop the local agenda for that work place.

Sustainability can be an ambiguous notion. One business can claim to contribute to global sustainability by moving its production abroad. A move creates jobs in the new country, and the business keeps its power in the market place. Seven businesses in the Grenland area of Norway have made a different choice. They decided it most valuable to keep production at home. Suddenly the most important thing was not that 'our business' should be all right, but that all businesses in the community should be all right. To make sure this happened, all of the employees in these seven businesses now belong to a common pool. It creates flexibility and increased security.

Bjørg Aase Sørensen stresses that to be open to interpretations of the notion of sustainability is in itself a strength.

“Thinking of working life in a sustainable perspective creates participation, and makes people feel both vulnerable and powerful. We still haven't got a final definition of sustainability and therefore no limits to ideas or possibilities. That means we realise that we are part of something bigger, and that there are limits to how much we can exploit both the nature which surrounds us and people in working life”, says Bjørg Aase Sørensen.

Work creates involvement

For the Nordic countries it is not new thinking to talk about sustainability. The term itself was launched more than 20 years ago in the report from the Brundtland commission. Sustainability has also long been on the agenda of the Council of Ministers, not least



Photo: Torstein Øen

“By thinking sustainability, we also allow ourselves to be inspired by new ideas”, says professor Bjørg Aase Sørensen.

when it comes to environment and companies. Now, in the latest prime minister's declaration, the notion has been widened. It says there that "present and future generations shall be guaranteed a safe and healthy life", and that "a sustainable society must be based on democracy, openness and involvement in local, regional and democratic co-operation."

Working life is a deciding factor in order to create this involvement. If people are left outside of working life, or if the labour force is classified into A- and B-teams, social differences will increase. Fewer will have the chance to contribute to the welfare state. "Historical and international experience shows economic growth fuelled by increased labour intensity, more working hours and an increased use of raw materials is never sustainable in the long term", according to the Swedish National Institute for Working Life's yearbook 2006, 'Roads to a more open labour market'. It establishes amongst other things that increased growth is not enough. Work is about more than money and growth. It is about financing public welfare, but it is also to a large extent about meaning and identity. "People crave involvement. We want to be needed. Social medical research shows that unemployment and being left outside leads to ill health, physically and psychologically. Being left outside creates individual and collective frustration, which can lead to crime, xenophobia and anti-democratic movements", writes Jonas Olofsson, senior lecturer in economic history, and author of the yearbook.

Working joy in headwind

It is easy to believe that the Nordic working life is already sustainable. Even the expression 'working joy' is Nordic. The players in the working life have been strong and there has been a solid

dialogue and willingness for mutual understanding between the parties in the labour market. Work has been highly valued, and the Nordic countries have topped statistics for high participation of both men and women. Work has also been associated with social togetherness, development and identity. Labour has been governed by laws, with strong ambitions to create security and safety, and an active labour market policy has been there to help out the unemployed.

Still, the Nordic working life is struggling with big problems, possibly with the exception of Iceland. Focus now is on those who for various reasons aren't included in working life, and not least on how people can have the strength to stay in work until they're older. Many people with foreign backgrounds also struggle to gain a permanent foothold in the Nordic labour markets, and a large group of young people also fail to get jobs. Despite having some of the world's top labour participation ratings, the reality in the Nordic countries is not as bright as the figures indicate. According to the book 'Roads to a more open labour market', 1.2 million Swedes of employable age are not working, and live off various social benefits.

A mobilising power

"We see clear signs that we're living in a time when the working life is better than ever, but at the same time more people remain outside any active roles in the working life. In countries like ours, where we are so enthusiastic about the value of labour, we're particularly vulnerable. Working life influences society, and if you're not part of it, you're also isolated from important aspects of democracy", says Bjørg Aase Sørensen.

There is no magic formula needed to explain what constitutes a working life you can live with

your whole life. The English writer John Ruskin wrote as early as 1850: "For people to be happy in their labour, three things are necessary: They must fit the work they do, they must not do too much of it, and they must feel that they are succeeding in what they do." The Israeli sociologist Anton Antonovsky coined the KASAM-concept, mapping what factors contribute to good health in people's working life. He concluded that a healthy working life was best achieved by creating a feeling of coherence, derived from understanding, the ability to master your work and to find meaning in what you do. Several research papers also map what is needed to create good health and wellbeing in the work place. There is no lack of knowledge on the subject.

"Perhaps we need to think of work in a new way. Opinion polls support the idea that people in the Nordic countries don't value personal wealth highest, as long as they have enough to get by. Instead, many reckon a good common economy is the important factor. Competition at any price has no basic value in the Nordic working life either", says Bjørg Aase Sørensen.

She underlines the power and possibility for change found in words. To lean forwards, to listen, to think new and to be encouraged to participate.

"Just think of what the works 'liberty, equality and fraternity' meant in France", she says.

Perhaps the notion of 'a sustainable working life' contains the same power to develop a future work place where we have the strength to keep working our entire working lives, and where the joy of working can have its renaissance.

Making production sustainable

The Danish experience

When Danes talked about 'sustainable' production in the past, they were most likely thinking of organic farming products. During the 1980s and 1990s the expression was given a wider meaning. Today it is associated with production, economy and working life.

Sustainability has also been given a new status, since the term has been gradually integrated into the daily running of many businesses, and not least integrated into their marketing and profile. There is talk about the 'double bottom line' - one for the economy and one for the environment. But that is not only the result of idealism and people being environmentally aware - it is also the result of a demand from the people, the consumers. Polluting businesses have been punished by consumers. They have been forced to change the way they work and re-market themselves as sustainable businesses. Over the years there has been a slow change in attitude.

This development has also had its influence on trade unions, not least in Denmark. Simultaneously there has been a marked increase in the standard of living, and unemployment has fallen dramatically. Young people no longer join trade unions, others change membership to cheaper ones. There are more and more individual work contracts, and if you're not happy, you simply find a different job.

This has become a challenge for Denmark's trade unions. The question now is whether the unions can continue to just deal with nothing but their members' wages



Smiling employees at The Mudspringer (Dyndspringeren) in Esbjerg, August 1995. The message on the t-shirts says 'Women or chaos!' The signboard reads 'The Mudspringer Industry & Joy. (Photo: Yrsa Jørgensen.)

and working conditions. And should they fight to keep jobs which are not sustainable simply to secure the continued employment and income for their members? In Denmark several research projects are underway to find answers to these questions, and to find out how best to create a sustainable production while pinpointing the future role of the unions.

The Mudspringer

The first project attempting to take on the task in a very hands-on way took place in Esbjerg. Researchers from the Roskilde University (RUC), and the Technical University of Denmark (DTU) started an alternative production of fish products. Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, professor of sociology at the Institute for Environment Technology,



By
Anders Jakobsen

was central in the project's development.

The project, which began in 1990, was to run over three years with support from the then Ministry of Fisheries. They also got support from labour unions, like the then Danish Women's Workers' Union (KAD) and the General Workers' Union (SiD) (both are now incorporated into the trade union 3F). Kurt Aagaard Nielsen told the story to NLJ:

“We tried to build the ideal workplace, and wanted to incorporate sustainability in all parts of production. We wanted to protect endangered species of fish, avoid transporting the product too far, to produce in as gentle a manner as possible both in terms of the product and our workers - all with an aim to create more stable production conditions for the fish industry. An important element was to democratise the working life and increase the involvement of the workers - their wishes for good working conditions should be crucial.

“We trained the 20 workers for a week, and together we created the ideal image of the 'dream factory'. We went through how they were to relate to the entire process; production, technology, education, labour organisation, marine biology, transport, waste, products, sales and so on. We knew that over-fishing and employment is linked - how do you solve that problem? Everything we had to relate to was anchored in one thing: a sustainable fishery production.

“The education was very practical, it took place on the business premises and in the middle of the working day. We sorted out the pecking order - and worked out rights for each worker in order to help solve conflicts. The workers agreed on choosing an external arbitrator.

“We simply created a co-operative fish factory in Esbjerg called 'Dyndspringeren' ('The Mudspringer'), and we hired premises and production tools. The fisheries ministry paid for one year at a time.

strophe struck. The rest of the fishery industry starts a boycott, arguing the trial factory represents unfair competition. The wider industry convinces the fisheries ministry. The yearly ministry support stops, and the project



Susanne Rasmussen from Dynspringeren (The Mudspringer) in August 1995 serving the newly developed dish, the fish rissole. (Photo: Yrsa Jørgensen.)

“We developed two fish dishes, one new fish rissole and one fish soup. Both were based on sustainable production, and both tasted good.

“All stages of the production were run on the principle of sustainability - for instance by never using species which were threatened by over-fishing. We conducted tasting tests with different groups of people. These tests were meant to be a continuing process involving the local population, in order to get continuous feedback”, says Kurt Aagaard Nielsen.

Sudden shutdown

But after only one year cata-

must close down.

“I believe that if we had been allowed to carry the project through, we would have had a far more sustainable fisheries production today, as well as a more sustainable agricultural sector. The fisheries industry's problem is that they are operating on a two year time scale, at the most. Over-fishing and EU quotas make this industry very fragile. But I believe we could have created a new and much more sustainable way, if we had been given the chance”, says Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, and adds:

“We developed two very tasty products, and the company Thor Fisk more or less stole our recipe for fish rissoles!”

The sustainable workplace

In 2001 another RUC-project on The Sustainable Workplace (DBA) was initiated with support from the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions: 'A trade union for sustainability - heading for a sustainable workplace'. Focus here was more directly on the role of the trade union in a future society.

The goal was to set the pace for creating sustainable, socially responsible workplaces and workplace democracies. For more than two years, a network of 15 workplaces and six educational institutions, as well as many researchers and union representatives, discussed how you can work to incorporate sustainability in a workplace scenario. In April 2004 a report and blueprint for debate was ready, which underlined the need for trade unions to re-define their role. It is no longer enough to stick to the traditional role of safeguarding income and working conditions for your members. It is necessary to get far more involved in production and social issues.

At the same time the report warns against trade unions taking on the role as the employers' business partners. There is a danger that members will no longer regard the trade union as an allied, and it will turn into an irrelevant accessory.

Amazing possibilities

The report points out that trade unions must re-vitalise in order to emerge as a social movement with the power to change society. They have an amazing possibility to use sustainability as a springboard to create a strong professional profile in a future society based on knowledge and information.

But trade unions must decide whether they want to be professionalized service organisations or a social movement anchored in society. Trade unions must rise above the old social democratic welfare model, characterised by

traditional thinking in terms of growth - which sometimes simply hinders new thinking in more sustainable directions, with their positive side effects of involvement and sympathy, the report says.

The report has also looked closely at the importance of creating networks to safeguard the sustainability process. You cannot create more sustainability through simple change - it requires a wide mobilisation of people in networks, with all of them working with sustainability as a theme.

The Danish Federation of Trade Unions (LO) tried through their DBA project to create networks on different levels. On a local level, project teams have functioned as networks between educational institutions, external consultants, top and middle management, labour representatives and other workers. The work of the LO focus groups has functioned as network activities centrally for the DPA-project as a whole.

Exciting ideas and initiatives

Henrik L. Lund is one of the main authors of the report and the blueprint for debate. He is a labour market researcher at the Institute for Environment, Technology and Social studies at RUC. We asked him to explain why so few businesses have begun to create a sustainable production: "It is my hope that this is only the beginning - and I hope it is not only seen as a fashionable thing to do. The thing is - the longer you wait before creating a sustainable production, the more difficult and expensive it will become to sort out afterwards, because it will play a greater role in the future", says Henrik L. Lund.

He mentions a few businesses which have carried through sustainable projects: The bank Middelfart Sparekasse has been awarded 'Workplace of the year' after spending ten years

seeing through a series of projects promoting self-leadership based on a very positive attitude to the individual. The cleaning firm Esbjerg Rengøring has been working with improving working conditions for their cleaners by giving them more individual freedom in the way they carry out their job. The cable company NKT, the pump manufacturer Grundfoss and the wrapping business Brødrene Hartmann A/S have all been seeing through a string of projects involving both the workers and environmental questions in the process.

"I hope this is the beginning of the building of strong alliances between industries, trade unions and social movements."

"It feels like we have a wheelbarrow full of exiting ideas and initiatives, but we haven't got someone to get it wheeling. We have the knowledge, but lack someone who can give industries a push. If the trade and social movements don't do it, nothing will happen - and it must happen through alliances, not by force", says Henrik L. Lund.

His colleague Henning Hvid is just finishing a PhD on how to make the daily work a dynamic factor in the development towards sustainability.

Integrity - a new term in Norwegian labour law

The Nordic countries set up labour inspection authorities to protect workers against accidents, dangerous chemicals and excessive spells of work. But how do labour inspection work when the work place is in transformation? During times of change so many things happen simultaneously that the employees' integrity is threatened.

"More and more workers experience that they cannot do their job without being forced to compromise on their own standards for how they want the job to be done", says Ole Jacob Thomassen, inspector at the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, division Østfold/Akershus.

"During recent years we've been investigating how reorganisations have been carried out in different companies, and how they influence the psycho-social working environment. We've looked at municipal administrations, hospitals and universities. Our investigations have shown that we must take very seriously the question of integrity in the working environment. The consequences for people's health can turn out to be significant."

It is easy to understand that nurses feel they haven't got enough time to give sufficient care to patients. TV-series come to mind, where patients are being wheeled through corridors with a team of screaming doctors and nurses around them. But in a municipality? What could be stressful there?

"It's the same feeling of not being able to stay on top of what needs doing. A handling officer can have a hundred applications in the intray. He or she knows that every single decision has big consequences for that person's life, but there

is not enough time to do the job properly.

"It's a huge mental strain on the handling officer who knows that his or her decision can have fatal consequences for the person concerned."

Staff are often down-sized during reorganisations. Those who are left are often given more to do, while at the same time having to learn new routines and participate in a lot of meetings which sometimes feel unnecessary. It turns into a race against the clock, and those small breaks which used to ease the pressure a bit, are lost.

"Nursing staff complain that they have no time to follow patients to the toilet. But often they don't even have time to go themselves", says Ole Jacob Thomassen.

Integrity is a new term within industrial welfare legislation. But the term has existed in slightly different shapes within Nordic research on work environments for the past ten years. The Work Environment Authority in Örebro have been among the pioneers. They started to study how changeovers affected the working environment as far back as in 1998. They launched the term 'frustration' in Sweden.

"By frustration we mean the experiences and feelings which emerge in organisations whose

employees perform more or less independent tasks. When the natural driving force behind taking responsibility, showing commitment and professionalism is taken away from the employee, you get psychological and social reactions which in the long run we feel are unhealthy and make people feel rejected. Frustration should not be confused with mental strains which you can recover from with the right support and time off", says the booklet "From frustration to complete exhaustion".

The research was launched when work places and various professions which usually enjoyed a low numbers of sick leave, suddenly began coming out top of the statistics. The experienced, informed and committed workers - the ones who were never off sick - were the ones who 'burned out'. Norway's new Working Environment Act, which came into force in January 2006, includes for the first time a chapter on integrity:

"The work shall be arranged so as to preserve the employees' integrity and dignity", it says. This means that the labour inspection authorities can take action when employees must compromise with their own conscience at work to such a degree that it leads to ill health.



By
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Oslo



Photo: Thor Nielsen / Scanpix

The Labour Inspection Authority in Østfold/Akershus have run several campaigns to focus on the consequences of reorganisations. The campaigns have highlighted the integrity issue and made it even more important.

"We work in a new way, where we talk not only with the managers and the health and safety officer, but also to the employees in groups. During these group conversations it is very common that people talk a lot about what a strain it is not to be able to carry out their duties in a satisfactory manner", says Ole Jacob Thomassen.

The Norwegian Work Research Institute has mapped working conditions nationally in Norwegian hospitals.

The survey shows that one in four workers feel their integrity at work is not being looked after. The survey analysis showed three factors that were perceived as being important to integrity:

social support from colleagues, the feeling of being part of the decision making process and to be respected as an employee.

The survey showed that 40 per cent out of the nearly 3.000 hospital employees asked, had suffered head aches, fatigue out of the ordinary, problems with falling or staying asleep, anxiety, uneasiness, nervousness, restlessness, depression, or felt sad or downbeat a couple of times a week or more often.

After its inspections at the Østfold hospital, the Labour Inspection Authority concluded the hospital did not have a satisfactory system to discover and remedy health-damaging time pressure.

As a consequence, the Labour Inspection Authority warns in a letter that it will demand that the hospital maps the experiences and causes of time pressure, and that it carries out what is necessary to improve conditions.

"Time pressure is the one biggest factor which threatens the

employees' integrity, hence our demands. This is still a new field for the Labour Inspection Authority. We must develop relevant ways of identifying problems surrounding the employees' integrity. We have an educational challenge to demonstrate how important this question is to the individual. But it is equally important to the company, if you were to look at it in a longer perspective", says Ole Jacob Thomassen.

"Unfortunately, there tends to be less focus on the working environment during times of change, while at the same time the psycho-social risks are increasing. That's why it is important for management to take responsibility for safeguarding the employees' integrity. Employees can legitimately demand that it happens. We will demand that the working environment act be followed in this area."

Older workers: A mental change for Finland

The number of employed people over 55 years of age has increased more in Finland than in most other European countries in recent years. A full three quarters of the 300.000 jobs created between 1999 and 2001 were taken by older men and women.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Finns were still talking about being allowed to become pensioners, rather than being forced to retire. Retirement was a reward: the earlier the better. Companies wanted young and energetic employees.

It has taken more than ten years for Finnish workers and employers to adapt mentally, but the fast approaching lack of manpower has forced a change.

Returned

Laura Hottinen, 68, is one of those who have chosen to stay in work for longer. If strong colours are good for you, that must be the secret behind her stamina and working joy. The work place, Eurokangas cloth shop in central Helsinki, is a dream of brightly coloured textiles in the middle of a grey and wintry Helsinki.

"I enjoy being with people and having an independent job."

A young woman, Laura Juslin, enters and chooses some material. She's going to sew herself a skirt and a dress for her sister. Laura Hottinen gives her advice; "hand wash only, iron carefully", and you can tell a professional is about. If you've been at it since 1954, the professional knowledge is deeply rooted. Who else today knows of Klingenthal number 1, an old



Photo: Tuulikki Holopainen

and popular gabardine fabric for trousers?

This is the kind of people we need, say Finnish authorities. The Finnish population is among the fastest ageing in the whole of Europe, and the lack of manpower is already felt in many trades - in particular where professionals are needed. When Laura Hottinen was 65 and newly retired, she went south to enjoy the sun. Then the phone rang. Her

former boss said they were short on staff and wondered whether, well, could she possibly come back and work?

"Skiing wasn't good here at home that winter anyway."

Taxes an obstacle

Work is sometimes quite heavy, even if she works a shorter week and five to six hours a day. Packs of cloth are heavy to lift. Laura Hottinen stays in shape running



By
Carl-Gustav
Lindén,
Helsingfors

and skiing, visits her masseur and spices up her existence with facials and pedicure.

The job is not good economically, however. Income tax is higher than if she were to take out her pension. Laura Hottinen thinks the tax system could be more flexible. She disagrees with those who claim she is taking jobs from young people.

“There is a lack of professionals. This is a demanding trade. We must be able to imagine what the customers plan to do with the materials, we must know different types of cloth, fashion trends, we must give advice on laundry.”

65+

The official pension age in Finland is 65, and Laura Hottinen hit that a long time ago. After 51 years in the textile trade, 30 of which she spent as marketing chief, some felt it was time for her to step down - not least her family and friends.

“Everybody is wondering, my sisters are worried. You who have worked for so long, how can you keep up, you don't have to? Some customers probably wonder, too.” Stop working?

“When I'm 70, maybe then. We'll see.”

Changing attitudes

There aren't many 68 year-olds who work, but people retire at an increasingly old age. Behind this change lies conscious work to transform attitudes. Finnish authorities have been running campaigns for many years to get people to stay in work for longer. The message has been sent out at least since 1996, when a committee suggested ways to improve employment prospects for older workers. The government took note of these suggestions when the national age programme was initiated (1998 - 2002). The key was to provide information and education, and the most impor-

tant task was to influence public opinion: after the depression in the early 1990s, unemployment was more than 20 per cent, and the oldest workers were the first to go. But there were already signs of an emerging lack of manpower. Labour authorities, workers' protection, health services within businesses and education were identified as important points of reference. In order to secure a positive development, a network of educational experts was created to pass on what had been learned - not least to business leaders and organisations. The age programme also initiated extensive research and the development of a measuring instrument, a Tykybarometer which measures work output. When the age programme was evaluated in 2002, there were some positive signs - unemployment was decreasing among older workers, the pension age was increasing, attitudes among employers were changing and there was a growing common understanding of the demographic change. But the real effect could have been delayed.

Turnaround

Now the trend seems to have turned for real, partly thanks to a pension reform which encourages people to stay in work longer. If last year's trend continues, pension age will increase by 2 - 3 years. In 2005 only one in four retired at 63, which is less than expected. The number retiring between the ages of 60 and 62 is also decreasing.

The average pension age is still just over 59 however - up from 57 when the age programme began. The low age is due to many early retirements among young people on incapacity benefit.

The pension reform came into force last year and appeal to people to work longer in exchange of higher pension pay, an extra 4.5 per cent of their

earnings. They can choose to retire between the ages of 63 and 68.

“The high employment rate among older workers has helped this development”, says Hannu Uusitalo, Director at the Finnish Centre for Pensions, the Finnish pension system watchdog.

More people are retiring than those who start work in Finland today. This will continue to be the case for several decades. As a result, employers are becoming more aware of the importance to hang on to their faithful workers.

“This demographic development creates a demand also for older workers, and the pension reform encourages people over 60 to keep working”, says Uusitalo.

It is still too early to say whether the pension reform has been a success. A clear picture will not emerge for another four or five years, but the pension reform is aimed at the coming decades until 2050. Apart from getting people to stay in work for longer, the idea is also to move away from the need to increase pension fees.

The future

The future of the national age programme is secured through the Veto-programme, which aims to reduce the large number of young people on incapacity benefit, as well as getting people to stay in work for longer. Project leader Ismo Suksi says the success of the programme depends on the previous campaign, which started the debate on the lack of manpower, and it depends on the pension reform. Businesses are also noticing that they are fast losing their competent, older workers. But all change happens slowly. Three to four years is completely normal.

“It looks as if we're on the right track, but a lot remains to be done.”

Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion Bjarne Håkon Hanssen

Fighting hidden unemployment - and modernising the Nordic co-operation

Work for all is one of the main aims of Norway's new left-of-centre government. "Super Minister" Bjarne Håkon Hanssen carries a great responsibility. He controls one in three of every krone in the budget. He has to make sure the government reaches its goal of a more inclusive working life. The hidden unemployment must be fought, and more people of employable age must be included in working life.



Photo:
Morten Holm /
Scanpix

It's a massive reform in the making: the entire labour and welfare system is being re-organised, along with a revamping of the pension system and a renewal of the instruments needed to develop a more inclusive working life. "Social inclusiveness demands a comprehensive policy", the minister says.

The Nordic co-operation is changing too. Since Norway chairs the Nordic Council of Ministers this year, Bjarne Håkon Hanssen heads the Nordic

co-operation on working life.

"What's exciting with the Nordic countries is that we have so much in common; history, political traditions, I'd even say ideology. The Nordic co-operation is like a giant lab where we can test various measures, see how they work in the different countries and then learn from that. The consequence is not that we should do the same thing everywhere, but that we should come up with safe solutions, anchored in Nordic experiences."

The minister says it is important that the co-operation is tangible, however.

"The Nordic co-operation is lagging a bit behind." He wants to do something about that.

More dynamism

Denmark started modernising the Nordic co-operation during its chairmanship in 2005. Bjarne Håkon Hanssen wants to take it further. He wants the co-operation on working life to be more dynamic. It means focusing more on current challenges. "The point of the Nordic ministers getting together must be to face topical issues that need to be discussed.

That way maybe the press will get interested too", he says.

There are several big topics on the agenda where cross-border dialogue is important. One such topic is the transition rules regulating the flow of workers after the EU/EEA enlargement. 1 May 2006 is the deadline for deciding whether these rules should still apply. "This is something we will be working with intensively in the time to come. I am going to listen to the Swedish experiences."

Social dumping is another theme where it can be useful to learn from what the different countries have done to prevent it, and whether it works.

"We'll stick to the Norwegian idea of universal tariff agreements as a principle, but we also want to make this tool more efficient. During the spring term we'll decide exactly how this is going to look."

More people in work

At home, Bjarne Håkon Hanssen must make sure the coalition government policy becomes reality. What used to be the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is now the



By Berit Kvam

Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, and has been given new areas of responsibility, like immigration and integration.

"We realise that we haven't succeeded with our work on integration. There are three times as many unemployed among immigrants as in the rest of the population. To succeed with integration, we must make improvements on integrating people into working life. Integration of immigrants must be seen in relation to a more general labour market policy. The change in the ministry's structure makes it easier to see the connection between labour market policy, welfare and securing people with an income."

There will be increased emphasis on active labour market measures; work is the road to integration and work is the way out of poverty. It must pay to work rather than to receive social benefits. Still, the chronically ill or others who cannot work because of ill health, do have the right to a decent life. As Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion, Bjarne Håkon Hanssen is responsible for one in three budget kroner, and for using it sensibly.

Change in the immigration law

When Denmark introduced the 24-years rule for family reunification - which prevents young immigrants from bringing over a spouse from their home country before they are 24 years old - it got lot of attention in the other Nordic countries. Bjarne Håkon Hanssen has publicly wondered whether a similar rule should be introduced here. A commission publishing recommendations for a new law on immigration has suggested introducing a 21 years age limit.

"We really want a debate on this, and we want to look to Denmark to learn from their experience. But it is too early to draw conclusions. There are arguments for and against this idea. We want to prevent forced marriages. We want young people to finish school, and for them to be mature enough to decide for themselves whether they want to get married. But at the same time this is a major infringement on individual freedom. You could, arguably, be a government minister at the age of 20. Also, the rule must apply to everyone, not only young people from immigrant backgrounds."

"Aren't you just trying to beat the opposition with this?"

"No, this is an attempt to develop a good integration policy. We must succeed in this if we're to be re-elected in 2009."

Renewal of tri-partite agreement

All the tools aimed at improving integration in working life must, according to the minister, be linked to the agreement the government has made with the parties in the working life on a more inclusive working life. The tri-partite deal was renewed in late autumn 2005. An evaluation of the former agreement (2001- 2005) showed only parts of the three main goals had been achieved; sick leave was down 10 per cent, compared to the stated goal of 20 per cent, there had been no increase in the number of physically or mentally challenged people in working life and there had not been any real increase in retirement age.

"We still need to get the agreement's final details in place. We have further meetings with the social partners during spring 2006 in order to

develop the tools we need to do this."

Do your duty

It's a controversial theme. Lack of press coverage is hardly the question here. He has had a lot of criticism already. With statements like "People on benefit must get up in the morning", he has provoked a debate with more than those who struggle to access the labour market. But there are still no clear ideas of what is in the pipeline, only signals.

The Labour Party slogan is "Do your duty, demand your right". The minister wants to make the slogan tangible with a welfare contract linking rights with real duties. There is hectic work already to review the entire mechanism to control the means at disposal, and a brand new labour and welfare administration is being established. The Labour Market Administration and the National Insurance Service merge into an Employment and Welfare Agency, and will be housed together with parts of the Municipal Social Welfare in each municipality. The main goal for the reform is to get more people in work and fewer on benefits. Users get one single point of reference, the service will be tailored to the individual and the labour and welfare administration aims to be wholesome and efficient.

"We have the greatest challenge. It is easy to believe that when the economy is doing well, the unemployed get jobs. But that's not the case, because of more pressure on working life and more import of manpower. The great challenge is: how to get the hidden unemployed into work, and to include more into working life. We have to succeed", says Bjarne Håkon Hanssen.

Facts:

Bjarne Håkon Hanssen, Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion, Norway, since 17 October 2005.

Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's government is a majority government representing the Labour Party (Lab), the Socialist Left Party (Soc) and the Centre Party (Cent). The Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion, mr. Bjarne Håkon Hanssen (Lab) assumed responsibility for the following fields: Labour market policy, Working Environment and Safety, Poverty and Welfare, Integration and Diversity, Sami and Minority Affairs and Migration. Main objectives: to establish a new employment and welfare service, to reform the Norwegian pension system to present a comprehensive re-think of our policies in a white paper on "Employment, welfare and inclusion."

Mr. Bjarne Håkon Hanssen has been a member of the Storting (Norwegian Parliament) since 1997. In 2000-2001 he was Minister of Agriculture in Jens Stoltenberg's first government.

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