



**EPSU Collective Bargaining and Social Dialogue Conference**  
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**with the support of the European Commission**

**Collective bargaining policies on older workers**  
**Background Briefing**

The collective bargaining resolution at EPSU's 2004 Congress in Stockholm set out a number of important themes that affiliates agreed were the main ones to tackle in the period up to the next Congress in 2009. One of these themes is the recruitment and retention of older workers in the public services. The aim of this short briefing is simply to highlight some of the main issues that might be taken into account when drawing up an EPSU policy on older workers.

The ageing of the labour force across the European Union is affecting all sectors and raising questions about employment policies and how they affect older workers who are making up an increasing proportion of the workforce. This issue is being discussed in the social dialogue in each of EPSU's four main sectors. For example, a report for the hospital social partners, *Promoting realistic active ageing policies in the hospitals sector*, notes that the health and social services sector has experienced the largest increase in the numbers of 55 to 64-year-old employees in the EU-25, rising around 600,000 between 2000 and 2004.

A recent report from the European Commission, *Ageing and Employment*<sup>1</sup>, argues that there is an urgent need to tackle age discrimination and to get the social partners to change their approach: "...for many years social partners have pursued two strategies: (a) they followed a seniority-based approach to bargaining over wage structures and redundancy rules protecting older workers and at the same time, (b) they encouraged the early exit of older workers from the labour market when unemployment was high generally and especially for young people." The challenge for trade unions is to regulate and control the adoption of new policies on pay, pensions and training that will reverse these trends but without then creating new forms of discrimination against older workers. For example, the move from pay structures based mainly on seniority to ones more closely related to skills and competence is all very well if the employer is providing the right kind of training for all groups of workers. Any changes also have to recognise that there may be very good reasons to retain existing pay and pension arrangements where there is limited scope to change job content and early (earlier than normal) retirement is entirely justified because of the arduous nature of the job.

*Ageing and Employment* investigates good practice by employers in taking on or retaining older workers in employment. The 11-country survey includes case studies of public and private sector organisations, which have implemented policies adjusting the way they approach the employment of older workers, pointing out that in many cases these policies have to be introduced across the board in order to ensure that employees are in a better position to deal with the challenges facing them as they get older. The report identifies a range of areas where policies can have an impact on older workers: work organisation,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ageing and employment: identification of good practice to increase job opportunities and maintain older workers in employment*, Warwick Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick and Economix Research and Consulting, Munich March 2006

mobility management, career development, design of tasks, recruitment, working time arrangements, continuing training, health-related measures, and outplacement.

*Ageing and Employment* highlights, for example, the importance of internal mobility within organisations, which it argues can make it easier to find appropriate work for older workers as their needs and capabilities change. It also makes a case for greater internal mobility in general to increase motivation and to get workers, particularly older workers, used to a changing work environment. Clearly there is a risk that employers can take advantage of this level of multi-skilling and redeployment to create a flexibility that suits their needs and for trade unions it is to negotiate appropriate policies and then monitor their implementation to ensure that employees get more control over their working lives and not less.

The report cites the example of the environmental services department of the City of Groningen where there was a high proportion of older workers doing physically demanding work. The employer started to provide more training to create a multi-skilled workforce and reduced seniority rules for wage increases. Workers in the department were also offered preventative and curative physiotherapy and there was increased mechanisation of the refuse collection process so that there was much less heavy lifting. Other examples highlighted in the report include: Finland – City of Helsinki, Public Works Department – work development plans drawn up for all employees aged 45 and over and provision of health check-ups; Hungary – PSZAF Financial Supervisory Authority – achieved higher participation of older workers in language training and computer courses; and UK – energy sector – recruitment of more apprentices aged 40 and over and plans to offer alternative job roles to (older) staff in physically demanding jobs

An important role for trade unions can be in helping to pose: “challenges to conventional thinking” that “may help to reduce employer discrimination against older workers over the long term and prepare them more for adapting workplaces and practices accordingly.” The case for training is compelling and not just training and retraining of older workers but training of managers and negotiators to ensure that they are aware of the key issues. The City of Helsinki Public Works Department has an age management policy that promotes training on age-related issues to all levels of management, shop stewards and adult trainers.

### **Drafting an EPSU policy on older workers**

A draft policy on collective bargaining and older workers will need to identify:

- The challenges – have public service employers introduced policies that appear to address the needs of older workers but have negative effects, such as excessive flexibility, and did this result from the policies themselves or the way they were implemented (without proper trade union control)?
- The successes – are there examples of public service employers who have adopted new policies that have clearly had a positive impact on older workers, such as training policies that have boosted the skill levels and employability of older workers?

A draft policy would then consist of a number of action points both in terms of co-ordination of policy at European level and for implementation by affiliates at national level which would then be monitored as part of EPSU’s annual report on collective bargaining and social dialogue. In the light of the debate at the collective bargaining conference, the Secretariat will carry out further research on older workers during 2007 and draft a more detailed policy document for submission to the Executive Committee.