

Public sector unions help immigrant labour integrate into Finnish society

(13 December 2010) The question of immigrants and immigration has become an important issue in the discussion and debate leading up to the April 2011 parliamentary elections. And the trade unions have also been doing their bit. They have reacted in a positive and responsible fashion to what has become an emotive issue subject to somewhat overheated handling.

Two goals govern the union agenda on immigration and immigrants. Unions have created a multitude of activities that aim to help and speed up the integration of immigrant labour into Finnish society and its labour market.

The first and number one goal is to prevent immigrant employees from becoming victims of social dumping. This seems to be particularly acute in the private construction and catering industries, where thousands of foreign employees have been abused by shady entrepreneurs, according to several studies and reinforced by exposes in the media.

The risk of social dumping is growing also in the public sector, warns Jarkko Eloranta, the Vice President of the Union for the Public and Welfare Sectors. When public services are increasingly subcontracted out to private companies it becomes more difficult to control how effectively the legislation and collective agreements are being respected, Eloranta claims.

"The recruitment of foreign labour shall not be allowed to create two parallel labour markets", insists Fipsu in its statement on the recruitment of foreign labour. Fipsu is the association for international interest-promotion of nine public services unions.

"Foreign employees must have the same rights and obligations as the native population, such as the right to organize and the right to the same pay and the same working conditions", Fipsu's statement affirms.

Trade unions regard the current legislation as too slack in tackling and preventing abuse of foreign employees. The unions have worked hard for more effective

legislation in this area but thus far have not succeeded in gaining the results they want and deem necessary.

Ralf Sund, the economic policy expert of the union confederation STTK, is cautiously optimistic that the employer side will become more active in demanding, together with the unions, more effective control. "Law abiding companies would benefit from more effective control as the abuse of immigrant labour weakens their own position in respect of competition", Sund argues.

Courses, network, discussion forum, support people ...

Regardless of the state of the legislation that exists to forestall and combat social dumping, unions are committed to promoting, at grass-root level, the integration of employees from an immigrant background. Here are some examples of the action taken by unions that organize public sector employees:

Tehy, the Union of Health and Social Care Professionals has formed a network for immigrant employees living in Finland. Under way is a study on immigrant labour in the health care sector.

Super, the Union for Practical Nurses, provides information and guidance events for immigrant members.

JHL the Union for the Public and Welfare Sectors has some 4,000 rank and file foreign or immigrant members. They are offered (at the union's educational institute) courses especially tailored to their needs. The union has published its trade union guidebook not only in Finnish but also in Russian, Estonian, English and Spanish.

The Federation of Salaried Employees Pardia has trained support persons for the rank and file members with immigrant background. The support persons offer them "first aid" and direct the needy people to Pardia's experts or to the authorities and other relevant sources.

Jyty, the Federation of Public and Private Sector Employees pays attention to the special needs of its immigrant rank and file members in all of its interest-promotion and organizing work.

OAJ, the Trade Union of Education in Finland has a special organization for rank and file members with various language and cultural backgrounds. The organization offers a joint discussion forum for teachers originating from abroad.

Learning Finnish and/or the other official language Swedish is vital in finding proper

employment and for integrating into the society, the unions underline.

Read more:

- [Recruitment of foreign labour](#), Fipsu 3 March 2010 (Fipsu is the Finnish Public Services Unions' EU Working Party)
- [Unions adamant: Same rules as for Finns must apply to immigrant labour](#), Trade Union News from Finland 9 March 2010

For FIPSU by Juhani Artto

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