



Europe on the edge

There are almost 100 million workers in the European labour market who are at risk due to their low level of qualifications. A total of 20 million unemployed and 70 million non-qualified workers is just too much in a Europe Union which is asserting its excellence while struggling for better employment and competitiveness.

Boosting the skills, competencies and qualifications of these almost 100 million citizens is crucial to Europe's survival and prosperity. After all, most of the new jobs in Europe will be filled by adults. Since we expect these new posts to demand higher skills than traditional ones, the question is simple: How do we ensure that Europeans are qualified to meet the rising demands of the labour market?

In principle, the answer is very simple. As the knowledge-based society can only be achieved through the skills of citizens and workers, lifelong learning can be the catalyst of change. Individual access to training offers the opportunity to improve professional skills or to change professions. For national economies, investment in training and lifelong learning is a way to prepare for the future.

The workers needed to replace those that retire are not waiting outside European borders - they are here among us. Has Europe got the patience to train and retrain workers to enable them to stay employed?

The high number of non-qualified adults in Europe is a warning signal that education and training systems are not capable of handling the learning needs of adults. This is confirmed by statistics. On average, less than 11% of adults in the EU participated in lifelong learning in 2005. The most worrying factor is that those with the lowest level of basic education are least likely to participate in learning later in their lives.

Inefficiency in education and training is not limited only to the adult level. Statistics show that almost 16% of young people in the EU leave school early. Nearly 20% of 15-year-olds continue to have serious difficulty with reading literacy. Only 77% of 18 to 24-year-olds complete upper secondary education. These figures demonstrate that European education systems do not provide the necessary foundations for employment and lifelong learning for all. The participation rates in initial and further learning after basic education are

shamefully low in Europe. Obviously the need and demand for lifelong learning outstrips supply.

Access to training for young people and especially for adults is a cornerstone of Europe's efforts to raise employment and be more competitive. Skills and qualifications are citizens' passports to employment. The ETUC considers vocational training to be a permanent element of the lifelong learning process of individual workers and citizens. It emphasises that the role of vocational training is crucial in several contexts. First and foremost, its task is to train skilled employees. Secondly, vocational training sustains and updates the skills and competencies of workers in changing environments. Training enables individuals to build a good life, and to be active in society.

Training needs must be assessed from the point of view of individuals, as well as from the macroeconomic angle. This does not detract from the fact that lifelong learning should also promote the creation of new jobs in Europe.

One peculiarity is that ageing employees with no qualifications are often experienced workers or skilled craftspeople. They do not possess any paper or diploma, but long experience has taught them to be real professionals in their work. When factories are closed down or personnel cut back, these practical skills, without qualifications, become invisible and unappreciated. National education systems should be flexible enough to recognise and validate such skills for further employment purposes. Validation of learning must be a cornerstone for lifelong learning policies.

*

It seems obvious that the knowledge-based society and economy can only be based on skilled citizens and workers. This call for higher quality in the provision of education and training at all levels, from basic education to higher education.

Nowadays, it is widely accepted that education and training are key elements for Europe's social and economic success. Employment and competitiveness depend on the skills of the workforce at all levels. They also play a role in promoting social inclusion, giving everyone the right to participate as an active citizen. The ETUC regards labour market needs and active citizenship as two sides of the same coin.

The ETUC's key message is simple. Europe needs to invest more on education and training at both national and European levels. Investment in education and training is a necessity and not a luxury for Europe. Governments need to invest in lifelong learning and skills development. Companies also have a responsibility for developing the skills of their staff, while individual employees and citizens play their role by making lifelong learning a crucial part of the management of their (working) lives. The European social partners recognised this principle of divided responsibility in February 2002 when they adopted a framework of actions for the lifelong development of competencies and qualifications.

Within this framework, the social partners defined four priorities:

- ⌘ the identification and anticipation of skills needs;
- ⌘ recognition and validation of competencies and qualifications;
- ⌘ information, support and guidance;
- ⌘ mobilising resources.

Whether we talk about national reforms, or support for workers who face unemployment due to industrial restructuring, these priorities are relevant.

The social partners must be involved in the different actions and processes required to make these priorities a living reality. Their capacity to bargain collectively on the rights and conditions that will allow access to and time for training must not be ignored.

What can Europe do?

Insecurity within the labour market is increasing as manufacturing keeps up its ongoing search for the best possible locations. To industrialists, this might be an example of restructuring the economy, but for individuals it often represents a personal catastrophe. To maintain employment and support individual workers in overcoming such shocks, initiatives like the Globalisation Fund are needed. At the same time, the European Structural Funds will continue to play a part in the development of human resources after 2006.

Employment and productivity demand constant and regular investment in training. Improving the skills and competencies of workers is a joint responsibility for the workplace and public authorities.

John Monks ETUC General Secretary