



WORKING WITHOUT BORDERS

Why free movement of labour should be untouchable

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The free movement of EU citizens and workers within the European Union is one of the cornerstones of European integration. It is enshrined in the European Treaties.

In a free and integrated Europe, there is no place for first and second-class citizens. And yet, individual member states and interest groups are currently contemplating to turn back the clock and to restrict citizens' rights to accept jobs wherever they like within the EU.

Even if supported only by a minority within our single European market, this development must be viewed with growing concern. The intent to restrict the free movement of labour as a fundamental right runs against Europeans' well-understood interests for a dynamic and prosperous economy.

The calls for restricting this freedom are especially poisonous in the context of the ongoing political debate, aimed as they are to influence the results of the 2014 elections for the European Parliament.

A genuine European labour market – one without borders – is also a prerequisite for a functioning single market economy and the stability of the euro. Without it, growth prospects are hampered – as is any hope for a Europe which manages to balance the laws of supply and demand.

Actively embracing the unrestricted movement of labour has therefore many benefits. Beyond installing a new economic dynamism in the European Union, and helping to overcome

serious economic imbalances among EU member states, it also dampens adverse demographic developments.

As a matter of fact, free labour mobility does not end in any welfare seeking migration but serves as a means to better allocate shrinking human capital capacities within the EU.

In short, the free movement of labour can lift all boats, promote economic growth and advance the competitiveness of our countries.

Tackle remaining restrictions

This is not the time to turn back the clock. Instead, the moment has come to tackle all existing obstacles that stand in the way of a truly free and integrated European labour market.

Only when we make that goal a reality will the core promise of the European Union – to continuously raise the standards of living of all of our citizens, wherever they live – not ring hollow.

To fulfil our commitment, we must strive to take a number of specific measures:

First, we need to adjust our tax and social security laws where needed – and better coordinate occupational and private pension systems.

Second, we need to introduce an effective Europe-wide job placement system, so that workers can find opportunities in sometimes far-away places.



Third, such a system also requires that we have transparent and effective rules to determine the benefits which job seekers are entitled to while looking for work in another EU country.

Fourth, we must enhance Europe-wide mobility by designing affordable language and relocation services. One critical way to encourage workers to take a chance outside their home country is to enhance exchange programs for trainees and workers, and further boost the successful models of international student exchange.

Fifth, we must agree on standards that allow the EU-wide recognition of professional qualifications and degrees, so that those which such recognized degrees can seek work wherever they choose to.

Sixth, we must open our minds to a European Union where even public-sector jobs in any member state may be filled by qualified candidates from another EU state.

And seventh, we must do a better and more convincing job about informing EU citizens of the advantages of working abroad and receiving labour migrants at home.

“... the free movement of labour can lift all boats, promote economic growth and advance the competitiveness of our countries”

It is, therefore, that a number of leading European labour economists have joined me in calling for an EU Charter that serves as a joint commitment to *‘Working Without Borders’*.

To move the agenda forward decisively and irrevocably, an action committee should be composed of policymakers, representatives from the private sector and academia.

We need joint forces to expand the European dream, rather than narrow it down well before it has reached its full potential. ■