



ASPIRE – Active Ageing through Social Partnership and Industrial Relations in Europe *

“Age Discrimination Carrying on Regardless” finds UK Parliament Committee on Equalities

by Chris Ball

Age discrimination was made unlawful in the UK in 2006, but it continues today as discretely as an ace up a card-sharper’s sleeve. This at least is the gist of a [report](#) issued recently by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee. At one level you could be forgiven for thinking that everything is *hunky-dory* regarding older workers. Everyone recognises they have a vital part to play, particularly if Brexit chokes off the supply of skilled migrants for key jobs. The Government has been promoting them in its *Fuller Working Lives* strategy. Employers should be bending over backwards to keep skilled older workers, but in reality there is not much sign of this.

Instead there is a ritualistic banging of drums each time the burgeoning numbers of older workers in the labour force are announced. “There are now 10.2 million workers over 50,” Ministers tell us, “and the numbers are growing.” Not *all* of this is gilding the lily. More of our 50-64 year olds *are* in work than ever before, many happy to work and doubtless some are reasonably able to find new jobs. But many looking for work confront unspoken ageism and subtle barriers that can make working difficult. A sort of “low key ageism,” to quote one participant in a workshop organised in conjunction with the ASPIRE project.

Research suggests there are over a million unemployed people over 50 who are *willing* to work if only the right opportunity were to arise, for example to work in a less than “full on” way in later life. But changed personal circumstances, growing skills gaps, negative attitudes to giving an older person a try in a new job, can make getting back to work exceptionally hard. Rapid changes in state pension ages have *forced* many women to rethink their retirement plans, with a record 487,000 women now working beyond 65. Women born in the 1950s are particularly badly affected – some having to wait six years longer for their pensions.

On the other hand, a quarter of all people between 50 and state pension age (65) are “economically inactive,” neither in work nor seeking it. Most have *given up* the idea of work though many would seize an opportunity if it came up. We may have made some progress since 2011 when mandatory retirement at 65 was abolished but age discrimination remains rife in the job recruitment process. So, you were turned down for a job you *knew* you could do? You may have your suspicions but it is hard to *prove* that age was the hidden factor.

What can be done about it? I spoke to a recruitment specialist about this. “Are employers nowadays *age blind* in job recruitment?” I asked. “Far from it,” he said. “The age of an applicant is the *first* thing that many of them look at.”

The Select Committee notes that, “...neither the Government nor the Equality and Human Rights Commission... are intervening in the recruitment sector where so much evidence demonstrates unlawful ways of working.” One problem is that career pathways are entrenched in the past. Anyone thinking of starting out in a new role at 50 something, has a tough challenge ahead. Skills training is the preserve of younger people, and despite talk of “older apprenticeships,” quality retraining in a new trade is not generally available for older people.

People are living longer and more of us have infirm parents needing support. Being a working carer is tough and may be a trigger to retirement, but a little more choice and flexibility could make a massive difference. Being able to reduce one’s hours or come back to work after a period of carer’s leave, for example, would help greatly. But there is an absence of rights and working carers often resign their jobs and then find it hard to pick up the threads later on.

Other forms of ageism include contriving redundancy for older people, who may find it very hard to get another job afterwards. The prospect of a lump sum payment can be tempting but it may hit your career below the water line. One piece in the jigsaw which MPs seem to have forgotten to mention, is consultation with workers themselves on the subject of extended working. Whilst legislation underpins workplace discussions on health and safety issues, there is no obligation to consult with employees on active ageing. Specific solutions for *specific* jobs however, can help enormously.

In the ASPIRE project, an international research partnership by four universities covering Italy, Poland and Spain as well as the UK, we have found numerous adaptations that can make a difference to the “do-ability” of jobs ranging from NHS paramedics to construction workers. All of them were identified through *talking* about the issues.

In some countries this need to consult on active ageing is being filled effectively by good practices. A “framework agreement on active aging,” between the European Social Partners covers workers in pretty well all organisations throughout Europe and describes the scope of consultation over demographic changes, working conditions and the organisation of work which could make it possible for all workers to work healthily until retirement. One suspects however, that it may be one of the unsung sacrificial lambs of Brexit. No-one will know about it and so we won’t care very much, even though it could still be very helpful.

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