## Strengthening social dialogue on active ageing: basic tips

In coordinated market economies social dialogue and industrial relations institutions have the role to reconcile subordination and economic freedom with workers wellbeing and dignity. The industrial relations approach is perceived as the best way to reconcile sustainability with productivity in the field of active ageing. Social partners should use social dialogue to promote changes in legislation, by asking for a greater flexibility regarding some legislative measures that nowadays are an obstacle to active ageing, for example.

It is important to promote social dialogue on active ageing in a preventive way and in a long-term perspective. Discussing an issue when the problem has not materialized yet gives the possibility to find more sustainable solutions. As workers’ need and ability to work changes over time, the balance between the interests behind the employment relationship should not only be adjusted consequently, but it needs to be anticipated, adapted and re-regulated, in order to reduce distributive tensions within the workforce, and between workers and management, in a life course perspective.

Social partners should promote the coordination between active ageing measures presented in collective agreements and public policies. Public policies have great importance in the implementation of active ageing policies. Population aging is an issue that do not concern only social partners, but legislation is central because social partners do not have the possibility to implement comprehensive active ageing policies in collective agreements. A public system of welfare that promote active labour market policies, both regarding outplacement and vocational training, is necessary to guarantee the inclusion of older workers in the labour market.

In order to strength social dialogue on active ageing, social dialogue has to find alternatives to the idea of early retirement and intergenerational relay as these are not active ageing measures.

When trade unions have a collaborative and proactive approach to this topic and not a conflictual one and are keen to collaborate on active ageing policies, their support for the implementation of active ageing measures becomes fundamental as they better know the needs of the workforce. Trade unions have a key role in convincing the management and the works councils to apply statutory legislation, collective agreements and bilateral funds in a useful way to manage ageing problems. Yet a favourable context for sustainable active ageing policies is where the integrative approach to social dialogue and industrial relations prevails. Cooperation implicates that agents involved in the regulatory process coordinate and collaborate to make coordination efforts effective. Effective active ageing policies might be framed as a mutual interest of both workers and firms, and they can cooperate to achieve such common goal. This proposition is consistent with the European Social Partners’ Autonomous Framework Agreement on Active Ageing and an Inter-Generational Approach, which is based on the idea that “ensuring active ageing and the intergenerational approach requires a shared commitment on the part of employers, workers and their representatives” (BusinessEurope, UEAPME, CEEP and the ETUC, 2017).

Social dialogue with territory and community is also key for a successful implementation of active ageing measures. When negotiating active ageing policies, social partners should consider the ecosystem in which the company operations are based, as well as the distance for the commuting. A good practice was reported regarding a company based in Nuoro. Once the public fund to support working time reduction to tackle the economic crisis finished, a group of workers aged around 55 became redundant. In order to avoid their collective dismissal, their company, trade unions and local institutions came up with the idea to reemploy the redundant workers in social utility activities related to the conservation and care of the urban commons and the community.

Social dialogue should focus on case-by-case strategy along with an approach to active ageing that takes into account the overall conditions of the workforce and the single worker, irrespective of their nominal age. For example, there is consensus that training and lifelong learning programmes are positive instruments for active ageing, provided that they are focused on the need of the single worker or groups of them. However, due to cost and efficiency pressures, training courses are often general and impersonal: companies tend to involve as many workers as possible in training course. For older workers the biggest challenge is to “learn to unlearn”. This means that it is much more difficult to train over 50 workers as they have 20-30 years of experience and change their behaviours is tough.

Social dialogue is also key in order to promote the management of active ageing policies through sectoral bilateral bodies and funds. However, these instruments are transversal: it is up to the single companies, their workers’ representatives and the workers to activate those instruments to deal with age-related problems.

It is important to increase awareness about the importance of active ageing among trade unions and employers in order to promote social dialogue on that topic and the introduction of ageing measures in collective agreements. Generally, the approach of employers to active ageing tends to strike a balance between sustainability and productivity of an ageing workforce. The policy rationale is to combine the needs of older workers, in terms of work-life-balance, health and safety and motivation, with the need of the companies to keep workers productive. These aspects are seen as two sides of a same coin in principle and social dialogue is the best instrument to find the balance between older workers’ and employers’ interests. However, in some contexts is much more difficult to combine them because short-termism tends to prevail in HRM. Workers wellbeing, in general, is considered as a cost: the return in terms of productivity is not immediate. Active ageing, in contrast, necessitates investment and a long-term perspective: this is the high-road to productivity.

On the other hand, in some companies, active ageing is managed unilaterally by the company as an HRM policies without the participation of trade unions as they are not interested on the topic. In these cases, active ageing policies are implemented by the company decision as some firms look interested in extending working age because older workers have skills that are not available in the labour market and that cannot be developed within the organization in a short time.

It is also important to promote social dialogue on active ageing at European level as the ageing of the population is an extended problem in Europe. In response to the challenges deriving from demographic change, the European social partners, BusinessEurope, UEAPME, CEEP and the ETUC (and the liaison committee EUROCADRES/ CEC), agreed in the context of their 2015-2017 Work Programme to negotiate an autonomous framework agreement on active ageing and an inter-generational approach. The framework agreement is based on the principle that ensuring active ageing and the inter- generational approach requires a shared commitment on the part of employers, workers and their representatives.