

Hire disabled or pay

Nine years after the collapse of communism a labor market institution is finally getting on its feet

BY JESSE REEVES AND MARTIN FINNEDAL

KRAKOW, POLAND - In a room piled with boxes, two blind women, Elzbieta Káčzmarczke and Rozalia Kasprzyk, feel their way in counting the correct amount of toothbrushes onto trays. After that, they pack the trays into cardboard boxes to be shipped out to clean Polish mouths. Sanel, the company employing them, also makes other kinds of brushes, such as nail and hair brushes.

"Is it monotonous work? Not really. We have to count every item we send out and I get to chat with my colleague," Elzbieta Káčzmarczke says while her co-worker nods.

Here, Elzbieta Káčzmarczke works ten days a month. For this, she makes between 200 and 300 zloty a month (US \$60-90). Besides this, she receives a small supplementary pension since she has worked for more than six years. Sanel has one of the few job opportunities for blind people in Krakow. With 232 blind employees out of a total of 474, it is the biggest workplace for blind people in Krakow and has been since 1952. In the Communist era, blind people were part of a monopoly of making brushes. Now, the factory is threatened by competition in the market economy.

Sanel is subsidized by the National Fund for Disabled People Rehabilitation,

Panstwowy Fundusz Rehabilitacji Osob Niepełnosprawnych, (PFRON).

Right and duty to work

When communism collapsed in 1989, high unemployment occurred. By 1996, 31,189 disabled people were registered as waiting for a job. "Before 1989 no such thing as unemployment existed," says Dr. Anna Knobloch-Gala, psychologist at the Jagellonian University in Krakow. "It was the right and duty of all people, disabled or not, to work and so jobs were created. But a lot of the enterprises were costly and ineffective and were not competitive enough to survive in a market economy."

"There was a lack of everything in these places because they were centrally run. The system needed to be changed and it was," says Jan Lach, head of the government department for disabled people. "The role of the state nowadays is to create the mechanisms that encourage the employers to hire the handicapped. And the state does it well."

Since the foundation of PFRON in 1991, every Polish company must employ a certain percentage of disabled, or pay a fine of about US \$175 per person short of this. The money collected this way goes into PFRON's fund. Companies employing more than 40 percent disabled get a special status and become sheltered workplaces. These companies pay no income tax, which is around 40 percent. Ten percent of the money they save like this goes into the National Fund. The rest they hold in a company fund

with the same purpose. At the moment, the National Fund holds around US \$3 billion. The money is spent on re-education of people who lost their jobs because of disability, education and running of the job centers. PFRON also gives loans to handicapped people wishing to start their own business and supports 400 therapy centers throughout the country. Finally, the funding for transportation of handicapped and the elimination of architectural barriers comes from the fund.

Lost subsidies

At Sanel, Slanislawa Krol, manager in charge of blind employees, was satisfied with the benefits brought about by PFRON. "Since 1989 we have been losing a lot of subsidies but for the last two or three years PFRON has really been doing some good things - for instance, giving courses teaching handicapped people to walk, education in Braille and training in how to get around."

Slobomir Bisowski, president of Threshold, an organization fighting for the human rights of the disabled in Poland, agrees that things are looking up. "In the old days people were employed under bad, bad terms. Sheltered workplaces were run by

members of the Communist Party, and they were really not interested in improving the situation for the employees - only in making a political career for themselves. And the disabled were not living under normal conditions. To separate disabled from the rest of the population in special

'Companies will not take on handicapped unless they get huge profits'



PHOTO: JESSE REEVES

Sanel has been employing disabled since 1952. Currently 232 blind people are working in the factory

workshops is not treating people as human beings. Hiring disabled on the normal labor market is much better," he thinks. Still, he thinks the new system also brings on a lot of problems. "At least everyone could get a job before and was secured. Now, a lot of people have to live on a pension of 28 percent of the average wage - about 300 Zloty (US \$90) per month. That is below the poverty limit."

He says the job centers are highly ineffective in getting jobs for disabled people. "The job centers are really no help at all. All they can do is connect the employer and the disabled person. Other than that, no guidance is given," he says. "The development of the job centers is definitely one of the least successful parts of the new system". One of the biggest problems is getting jobs for people with severe handicaps such as blindness, mental diseases, epilepsy, mobility problems and deafness.

Many tasks

Even though the subsidies from PFRON increase when hiring these people, most businesses consider the people with severe

handicaps too much trouble. Instead, people with spinal diseases or cardiovascular problems are more likely to be hired.

"I see it all the time. If a company hires a blind person it usually only lasts a week until one or the other parties realizes that it doesn't work," says Henryka Kizka from Krakow Voivodship Job Center.

The job centers have neither the staff nor the education to give guidance to the private companies. That should be financed by PFRON but a lot of other tasks are equally important. "There are so many suggestions for what the fund should be used for. Every ministry wants its hand on that money," says Henryka Kizka.

According to Andrzej Natkaniec, one of the big budget expenditures is paying the private enterprises. "Companies will not take on handicapped unless they get huge profits."

Improvement for some

Psychologist Dr. Anna Knobloch-Gala thinks that PFRON has been making progress. "The situation has definitely improved for the mildly handicapped who

are easily integrated into the labor market. Because of the tax reductions, the companies see a point in hiring them. But for the more severely handicapped things are worse than they were before. The businessmen simply do not know how to design their workplaces for them," she says.

Dr. Knobloch-Gala is working together with PFRON to solve the problems of counselling the private companies and the handicapped. "What we need is to educate job counsellors better. The aim is to start a mixed education of psychology, marketing and economy especially for handicapped people themselves. But of course that doesn't start solving the problems for another three or four years, she says shrugging her shoulders.

The difficulty in employing handicapped is exemplified by Slobomir Bisowski of Threshold: "We were trying to start a small company and hired this woman in a wheelchair who was quite an expert on the Internet. But she was so used to working at home planning her own time that she couldn't get up in the morning," he says. "So we had to fire her."