

## **The dual system of vocational education and training: A chance of combating youth unemployment in the Baltic Sea region?**

*A lecture by Uwe Polkaehn (DGB Nord) at the XII Union of the Baltic Cities General Conference Mariehamn on the 2<sup>th</sup> of October, 2013*

„In Europe one young person in four is unemployed“ – this is how the headlines of the media read, when reporting on the problem of youth unemployment. The financial crisis has affected especially those who are not to blame for its outbreak. The high unemployment among young people is one of the major political problems of our time. It is all at once a challenge for the companies and an economic order that promises economic participation to all people.

In the European Union 22 % of all young people are out of work. In Greece and Spain more than half of the youths is affected. And in some of the Baltic Sea states youth unemployment is alarmingly high as well:

In the first quarter of 2012 the unemployment reached:

30 % in St. Petersburg

30,8 % in Lithuania

28,1 % in Latvia

26,2 % in Poland

22,9 % in Sweden

22,3 % in Estonia

19,3 % in Finland

15,1 % in Denmark

7,9 % in Norway

7 % in Germany (depending on the statistics between 5,4 and 7,9 %)

From a formal perspective, we in Germany are therefore affected the least by the phenomenon of youth unemployment: when compared with the other countries of the European Union the youth unemployment is at its lowest level.

The discussion among the German public reflects these results: Not unemployed young people are at the focus, but the problems caused by a lack of qualified employees. We talk about „skilled worker shortage“, politicians work on „skilled employee alliances“ and „skilled employee initiatives“. Thus, the image drawn in the public debate in Germany stands in direct contrast to the situation in Europe.

Germany compares favourably to other European countries due to specific national features:

These are, apart from the relatively good economic situation, the demographic development and the dual system of vocational education and training.

The demographic development:

While the number of elderly people and pensioners constantly increases the number of younger people declines. Following the reunification of Germany the birth rate dropped especially in the eastern part of the country, in some cases by as much as 70 %. More than 20 years after the reunification this decline is making itself felt on the labour market.

However, our biggest advantage in the dual system of vocational education and training:

Young people are factory-trained, receiving a training contract and an apprentice's pay, they become employees of an enterprise whilst training. At the same time they take subject teaching in state-run vocational schools for two days per week. The occupations' training schedules and framework curriculum, are controlled by regulation throughout Germany, making them uniform nationwide. This ensures reliability for the young people and makes it easier to compare vocational trainings. The contents are defined by trade unions and employers and are closely connected to the realities of the working world.

As a result at an early stage young people quickly gather experience within the enterprise and come in contact with employers. Thus, the chances of post-training employment are increased.

However, there is a downside that I, as a trade unionist, do not want to withhold. The access to the dual training system is effected by means of the training contract with an enterprise. In practice this creates some problems:

The employers decide on the recruitment of the young people. Evidently, it is in their interest to hire preferably talented youths. This increases the chances of motivated and flexible young people. It is a problem for many other groups though: Young people with low or no school-leaving qualification, youths with a migration background or young people from socially deprived areas often have a rough ride.

As a result the state has consistently created educational offerings or charged educational providers with such offerings. This does not only cost a lot of money, but has also proved to be an insufficient solution.

Let me illustrate this using Hamburg as an example:

In Hamburg most of the young people with poor chances on the labour market see no alternative other than continuing with school education in order to improve their school-leaving qualifications and career opportunities. As a result more than 10.000 out of 16.000 annual school-leavers attend so-called „waiting loops“ offered by vocational schools. In Hamburg the average starting age for vocational trainings has risen to over 20 years. However, most of the actions taken are insufficient to actually help improve the chances of

young people. Instead most of the youths living in socially deprived areas cannot aspire to a paid training place in a company.

Since 2010/2011 the city of Hamburg has realised a massive and within Germany highly respected reform of offers for young people who cannot directly start with their training. The guiding principle of this reform: „No young person shall drop away“. Purely school-based measures are drastically reduced and replaced by offers that are based on the structure of the dual training system. These activities alternate between education at a school and traineeships in an enterprise, focussing the individual performance of the young people. The aim is a swift transition and successful integration into the training system and employment. The revised offers are accompanied by an intensive career orientation in grades 8-10 of the secondary general schools as well as by an „Employment Agency for Young People“ that systematically records all youths and assists them through targeted support in training and employment.

What matters is that the transitional educational system focuses on the principles of the dual training system to the end that the transition from school to vocational training or employment progresses quickly. The young people experience working in an enterprise and establish contacts to the working world. Enterprises are expected to provide tailored offers to young people with deficiencies. The following principle applies: „We need anyone and everyone.“ Successful concepts of post-qualifications exist and afterwards these young people are often an essential pillar of support for their company.

It has been already pointed to the demands of the European employers' federation BUSINESSEUROPE to incorporate the dual system of vocational education and training all over Europe and to specifically promote this process. The lower youth unemployment in countries with a dual training system in comparison to countries with a school-based system is an important argument.

As a trade unionist from Germany I can – in spite of all difficulties – support such considerations.

From the German trade union standpoint, the dual training system with its combination of a vocational school and on-the-job training is the most convincing system. Working in an enterprise enables young people to cover against the risks of sickness and occupational accidents and allows them a maximum of social participation because of the co-determination rights of employees.

However, from our point of view it is very important that the extension of the system takes place within a framework of defined quality standards.

By way of example I now would like to name 5 quality characteristics and quality criteria that I consider indispensable:

1. The goal of the training has to be the following: After completing the vocational training, the qualified employee needs to have the skills to carry on the learned profession according to the qualifications determined in the outline of the profession. The trainee needs to demonstrate his abilities in an exam according to uniform standards. Generally, the duration of training for a profession should take 3 to 4 years. We reject abstract concluded qualification modules.

2. The vocational training takes place in a school and in an enterprise. The learning content is determined according to a framework curriculum. The time spent in the enterprise shall not be less than 50 % of the entire training period.
3. In the training company trainees have a contractually defined status of professionals-in-training. Thus, they are not pupils who serve an internship but they are employees who are subject to specific regulations that concern their apprenticeship. They receive a remuneration by the company and they have a complete welfare, sickness and accident insurance.
4. A single set of rules such as the German Vocational Training Act must provide a reliable framework for everyone involved.
5. It is also important to include social partners, vocational schools and science in the vocational training dialogue: A coordinated pluralistic supervision of the dual vocational training ensures that the agents participate in the vocational training dialogue on a national, regional/intermediate and local level.

By using this guideline and these quality standards the development of a dual training system can be put forward all over Europe. Young people need to gather experience within the enterprise and come in contact with employers. This is the only way how the transition from school to work can be successful. Besides, the companies have to position themselves in a way that makes it possible to „pick“ the young people up from where they are.

Finally, let me be clear on this: It remains the responsibility of an economic system to provide its school-leavers and young workers with a personal perspective and to enable them to participate in the prosperity. Our democratic society will only be recognized by young people if social participation can be experienced, making this an issue of legitimacy for our democratic system. The economy is there to serve the people, and not the other way round. In the field of vocational training, companies all over Europe are challenged to demonstrate this.