



At the end of the golden age in southern Europe, many direct their gaze to the north.

Youth unemployment in Southern Europe is exceptionally high, reaching 40 percent in certain countries. Today, 5.5 million Europeans aged between 16-24 are unemployed. Among Europe's 27 states, the youth unemployment rate is at 22 percent, more than twice as high as the general unemployment rate. A whole generation might go to waste.

Norway, however, is a promised land for those willing to work. With a youth unemployment rate of 7 percent, and a general unemployment rate of 2.8 percent, the Minister of Labour wants to attract qualified workers to Norway. In January 2012 more than 25,000 jobs were vacant, a rise of 12 percent since January 2011.

26-year-old María Fernández from Madrid, Spain is a graduate engineer with a master's degree in petroleum economy. She was featured in an article in the newspaper E24.no stating that she had escaped from Spain to look for a brighter future in Oslo, Norway.

"There are two types of young people in Spain. Some are ambitious and willing to move to get a good job. The others care less for their career and prefer to live close to family and friends. Almost everyone in the first category has already moved from Spain to try one's luck in another country", said Maria Fernández to E24.no.

Maria Fernández is only one of many Europeans looking for a job in Norway right now. The number of Greek immigrants registered as employed by the tax authorities in Norway has increased by 82 percent since last year. Spanish by 33 percent and Italians by 6 percent official figures show.

“Numerous Greek and Spanish workers have contacted us to know more about what the opportunities they might be in Norway. It has never been like that before”, said Almedina Jahre, a manager at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration to the newspaper Aftenposten.

After several years of what Kjell Gunnar Salvanes, a professor of economics at the NHH business school in Norway has described as “mass immigration”, foreign nationals made up 15 percent of Norway’s workforce in 2011, official figures show. It is expected to continue to increase in the future.

Waste of resources

Norway is a country with a high degree of cooperation between the different sides of industry. In a meeting at the United Nations Association in Oslo the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, and the Ministry of Labour, together with MPs from the Labour Party and the Conservative Party met at a panel debate to discuss “Europe’s lost generation” at the beginning of February 2012.

“Youth unemployment is a waste of resources. Labour is the most important action to fight poverty. Young people in Norway usually get a job, but we are worried about those who are left outside. And it’s more likely that those who don’t graduate from high school will be left outside. Education is a key”, said Gina Lund, state secretary at the Minister of Labour.

Lund also referred to the World Youth Report, published by the UN, stating that young people question why it is only formal competence that counts. What about life experience?

“That is why we need to listen to this UN report and take action towards a brighter future” she added.

End up on the street

But even though Greeks, Spanish and Italians have flowed to Norway not everyone gets a chance to use their tax cards. Many are generally unemployed for several months.

"The reality is very different", said Gonzalo Marina from Spain Norway's leading news agency NTB.

He left a wife and two children to get a job in Norway after he lost his job in Spain. But he doesn't speak Norwegian and survives by living on the street and takes advantage of free food handed out by Robin Hood House and the Church City mission in the city of Bergen.

Since March last year, Robin Hood House hosted 250 others in the same situation. Some are highly educated, some are skilled workers and some are unskilled.

"A young boy from Spain was sleeping on the street for three weeks this fall. A man from Germany was sleeping in a cave under a bridge", told CEO Marcos Amano at the Foundation Robin Hood House in the city of Bergen.

He points out that the labour market in Norway requires language, formal qualifications, certificates and references.

"There are few jobs you can walk right into", according to Amano.

"If there is no job, they should go home"

Minister of Labour, Hanne Bjurstrøm (Labour party) wants qualified workers from all over Europe to apply for jobs in Norway, but also emphasized that those who cannot find a job in Norway should go back to their home country.

"We are part of the free labour market in Europe. It means that people are free to travel around and look for jobs. But if it is not working, then we as a state have no obligation beyond ensuring that job-seekers from the EU do not suffer acute distress. Then my view is that they should be in their home environment rather than go for cold water in Norway", Bjurstrøm told reporters in Norway.

Why Norway?

María Fernández from Madrid, Spain is now doing her best to learn the language and adjust to the climate. With her previous experiences and educational backgrounds she is looking for a job in the petroleum industry.

“My high school friends have either moved to the UK, Germany, France or the Netherlands to look for jobs there. Only a minority is left in Madrid, and most of them have poorly paid internships and live at home with their parents”, Maria Fernández told the newspaper E24.no.

Her friends were shocked and asked why she wanted to move to a cold and unfriendly country like Norway?

“I know from my exchange program in Oslo that Norwegians are pleasant and that it’s not that many days with minus fifteen degrees Celsius”, said Maria Fernández to E24.no.

Nordic Model

The Nordic countries have long been characterized by effective management of social risk, meaning a safety net of education and unemployment benefits, which has led to high levels of economic competitiveness, social cohesion and well being in the Nordics. Norwegian children are taught in school that Norway was one of Europe’s most impoverished countries in 1905. A hundred years later, the five Nordic countries form an economic cluster, sharing similar living standards, with Norway leading the pack. Norway is fortunate to have a wide range of natural resources. But despite all the oil, gas, hydropower and fish, in actual fact, people are the most important resource. It has been estimated that labour counts for almost 90% of Norway’s national assets.