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Recession in Switzerland

On the concept of a “reasonable” job

The ancient Greeks and Romans thought that productive work was degrading. This underestimation of work was radically revised at the time of the Reformation by Zwingli, Calvin and Luther. They declared quite simply that humans were to working as birds are to flying. Nowadays it is not work which is thought degrading but worklessness. The latter can also lead to personal disaster, since it is often difficult to judge objective economic factors independently of one’s own personal position.

On September 26, an urgent Federal Council decision on adjusting unemployment insurance was approved. One of its central points covered the concept of a “reasonable” job, which has been a subject of fierce de-

Heidi Willumat

bate in recent months. But one thing ought to be said before going into the matter any further. No free citizen is forced by the government or by a labour office to take up (reasonable) work to obtain unemployment benefits that he does not want and does not need. Every free citizen has the right not to work if he does not wish to and can afford not to.

The damage limitation duty

We are discussing here the normal case where an unemployed person has paid his insurance premiums and now has the right to claim benefits from a labour office. Such a person is under an obligation “to do everything possible to avoid or cut down his period of unemployment”. This means that an insured person has a damage limitation duty to do everything possible to remedy his unemployment problem by his own efforts. The basic principle is very clear that “the insurance scheme provides full benefits only if the unemployed person behaves as any reasonable person would if there were no unemployment insurance”.

How are decisions made?

The provisions defining a “reasonable” job (see Article 16 of the Federal Law on Unemployment Insurance) take into account professional and local condi-



tions, the capacities of the unemployed person and when possible his previous jobs. Age, personal circumstances and health also play a role.

Each economic branch has guidelines on minimum wages. For example, in Switzerland today a monthly salary of Sfr. 2,500.– would not be considered reasonable for a sales assistant with a professional diploma. But labour offices have more room for manoeuvre about an unemployed person’s previous job because of the use of the umbrella words “when possible”.

Change of work, pay, commuting

There must also be a possibility that the unemployed person could in fact find a job in his old profession. If this is not (or no longer) the case, a change of profes-

sion, perhaps with retraining, may be thought “reasonable”.

The old idea that a “reasonable” wage should not be lower than the unemployment benefit no longer holds. The new provision on this says that even a low-paid job – not of course permanent – should be taken, since unemployment benefit is now up to 80% of the previous wage. “An excellent provision, perhaps unique in the world”, says Peter Strahm

Not every job is “reasonable” for every person, even in difficult economic times. (Photo: RDZ)

of the Berne City Labour Office, “because this means that disqualification from benefits is avoided in a relatively simple way, since even the most modest temporary job prolongs the period covered by the unemployment scheme”.

Another criterion is that of distance to work. Daily travelling time by public transport should not be more than two hours. This probably reflects Switzerland’s size.

One curious element is that in cases of industrial action – which may occur in branches not covered by collective contracts – unemployed may not be used as strike-breakers. ■