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## Minimum wage for workers in sheltered workshops finally agreed

From January 1999 the legally guaranteed minimum wage in Belgium has at last been extended to cover workers with disabilities employed in sheltered workshops. The federal government and the regional governments have thereby carried out their promise made in July 1998.

In Belgium, the "guaranteed average minimum monthly income", or minimum wage is set in line with an intersectoral collective agreement, concluded within the National Labour Council (National Arbeidsraad/Conseil National du Travail) NAR/CNT) dating back to 1975. The guaranteed monthly minimum wage is today about BEF 43,000 (EUR 1,066) before tax. Under the terms of the collective agreement, every private sector employer should guarantee payment of this minimum income over the course of a month. The minimum includes the wage itself as well as certain bonuses payable on top, but does not include overtime or holiday premia paid at double time.

Sectoral [joint committee](#) s (paritair comités/commissions paritaires) are allowed to vary the minimum wage, and most of them do indeed pay more than the basic. Recent figures reveal an average minimum wage of about BEF 47,000 (EUR 1,185) across all such sectors covered by joint committees. It is not known, however, how many workers are actually in receipt of the minimum.

Until now, workers with a disability employed in a [sheltered workshop](#) received only 80% of the minimum wage. Raising it to the full 100% has been the trade unions' demand for years. However, the answer remained as constant as the demand: who would pay for it? The federal or the regional government? At last, following a promise made in July 1998, on 23 December 1998 the federal government and the regional governments signed a cooperation agreement on the financial aspects of the problem.

### Definition of an employee with a disability

Employees with a disability are one of the many groups targeted by the government's labour market policy. Most of these groups can be identified by a simple criterion such as age (young workers and older workers), gender (women), level of education (basic), duration of unemployment (long-term), nationality (migrant workers), and so on. For workers with a disability, however, this is not such an easy thing to do. The word "disability" may almost spontaneously conjure up the image of somebody in a wheelchair, a blind person, a deaf person or somebody with Downs syndrome. It is, however, much wider and so it is not so easy to define the target group of disabled workers. The government uses a set of diagnostic criteria used by doctors, psychologists, educationalists and social workers. These criteria emphasise such issues as "reduced potential to earn income", "loss of ability to live independently" and "reduced chances for social integration". These criteria make it rather difficult to give an exact description of this group.

The number of people in receipt of an incapacity for work allowance gives a starting point for gauging how many disabled workers there are in Belgium. The numbers show that this group represents about 60 out of every 1,000 people in the economically active population. This means about 65,000 people in Flanders according to 1994 data.

However, this group also contains those without a "labour market disability". This concept is in fact closely linked to conditions on the labour market. Changes in technology, for example, do not have the same impact on different groups of workers with a disability. Some people with physical or sensory disabilities now have opportunities thanks to technology. Mentally disabled people, however, risk becoming "disposable employees" in a knowledge-based society.

### The number of workers with a disability

It seems obvious, then, that it will always be difficult to calculate the exact number of disabled people. A recent estimate based on those employed in a sheltered workshop - which is the group now to receive the full minimum wage - comes to about 20,000 workers in Belgium. This includes about 12,000 in Flanders and 8,000 in Wallonia. The estimates for the European Union as a whole are about 400,000. In Flanders they are employed in 70 sheltered workshops.

The sheltered workshop sector has recently come through a crisis period. For a few years it has witnessed dwindling economic results, resulting in annual losses. The same holds true for employment in the sector. Starting in 1997, however, there was a positive change in the

direction of better economic results and increasing employment, partly because of increases in government subsidies. Nevertheless, about 25% of sheltered workshops finished 1997 without any profits from economic activities.

Little is known about the employees in sheltered workshops. In 1997 in Flanders, one in 10 was older than 50 and two in 10 were younger than 30 years old. Two-thirds of the workers were mentally disabled.

## Labour market policy for employees with a disability

In Belgium, employment in sheltered workshops is, as in other countries, a rather controversial theme. During the 1960s, these workshops were an important part of the inclusive labour market policy of the government. On the one hand, it was believed that they served a group of employees who would never be able to function in a normal working environment. On the other hand, sheltered workshops served as a means to provide transition into employment for those who could still be integrated in the normal labour market under favourable conditions and greater guidance.

The workshops were encouraged to emulate the example of free market enterprises and so to drop activities with a low or negative rate of profit. According to some, they were in a way the "low wage countries of Belgium" because of the low wages and the large proportion of supply company-type activities in which they specialised.

The government is slowly directing its labour market policy in favour of people with a disability. The policy is expected increasingly to reflect the guidelines adopted towards other target groups. The premium that they receive will be used to encourage them to enter the regular labour market. People with a disability will be integrated more into normal companies by means of supported employment.

## Commentary

The issue of workers with a disability remains a difficult one. Technology is facilitating the integration into the regular labour market of large numbers of people with a physical disability. One of the issues remaining is then the position of the mentally weaker or disabled worker. It seems that they are seriously disabled on the labour market as well. Giving them the minimum wage, which should allow a worker to function financially in society, is one small and long overdue step in a process that in a sense is the Litmus test for Belgian society. How is modern society to treat those who lack all the facilities to defend themselves in a competitive labour market? (Peter van der Hallen, Hans Bruyninckx, Steunpunt WAV)

Sources: "Ongeslacht of ongewenst, het arbeidsmarktbeleid ten aanzien van gedisabilityten", E Samoy, in Nieuwsbrief Steunpunt Werkgelegenheid, Arbeid en Vorming, 3/1998; "Disability en arbeidsmarkt in Jaarboek over de Arbeidsmarkt in Vlaanderen", E Samoy, Steunpunt Werkgelegenheid, Arbeid en Vorming (1997); and "Een halve eeuw arbeidsmarktbeleid voor gedisabilityten", E Samoy, Doctorale skriptie Departement Sociologie, KU-Leuven.

Page last updated: 28 January, 1999

## About this document

- **ID:** BE9901258F
- **Author:** Peter van der Hallen, Hans Bruyninckx
- **Country:** Belgium
- **Language:** EN
- **Publication date:** 28-01-1999
- **Subjects:** guaranteed income, Belgium, worker with disabilities, employment policy, Belgium