

MEMBER STATES PONDER LIFTING LABOUR MARKET RESTRICTIONS

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The spring deadline is approaching for EU member states to declare whether or not they will remove controversial restrictions on the free movement of labour. The latter is a fundamental principle of the Union.

Attempting to ward off the widely predicted influx of cheap labourers and 'welfare tourists' from the east, 12 of the EU's 15 'old' member states introduced 'transitional restrictions' on labour movement at the time of the EU's fifth enlargement round in May 2004. Three other 'old' members (Britain, Ireland and Sweden) chose to refrain from applying such restrictions. The restrictions apply to eight new member states only (EU-8) as Cyprus and Malta have been exempted.

The 'transitional restrictions' can be maintained for a maximum of seven years (commonly known in EU circles as the '2+3+2-year arrangement').

At the end of the first two-year period, ie by 30 April 2006, the member states have to declare whether they aim to ease, lift or keep the restrictions in place for another 3-plus years.

Analysts tend to agree that the EU as a whole needs migrant workers to help counter-balance the negative labour market effects of low birth rates and rising life expectancy.

Alongside the restrictions and the formal and informal barriers which are imposed by the national governments, a series of other, more general, factors also determine the inclination of EU citizens to work outside their home countries. These include knowledge of languages, the awareness of the relevant rights and obligations and the knowledge of the national labour markets, the recognition of the professional qualifications and experience, as well as the diverse cultural and psychological barriers.

Meanwhile, in order to encourage EU citizens to seek new jobs and work abroad, the Commission is set to launch its 'European Mobility Year' initiative in February.