

Young Spaniards moving to Germany get trapped in dismal jobs

February 26 2015, by Kirsten Grieshaber



In this photo taken Monday, Feb. 2, 2015, Edur Ansa poses for a photograph in Berlin, Germany. When Ansa graduated from the University of Barcelona in 2011 with a degree in nursing, he couldn't find a job for over a year _ not as a nurse nor in any other field of work. Young people from Spain and other struggling southern European countries are finding themselves trapped in jobs they accepted in Germany in order to escape the financial crisis back home. (AP Photo/Ferdinand Ostrop)

(AP)—Edur Ansa couldn't find work for a year after he got his nursing

degree from Barcelona University. Like many other Spaniards, he started looking for work in Germany and ended up with a job at a private hospital.

That's when he found himself trapped.

He said he got lower pay than German counterparts even though he worked longer hours and was better qualified. But when he tried to quit, he found himself locked into his contract until he paid off the language lessons and accommodation his employer provided when he arrived.

"It really upset me that they treated us differently, worse, than our German co-workers," Ansa said. "I just couldn't stand that."

Young people from Spain and other struggling southern European countries are finding themselves trapped in jobs they accepted in Germany in order to escape the financial crisis back home. They had been lured by aggressive recruitment drives by Germany companies desperate to plug an acute skilled labor shortage. What seemed like a match made in heaven turned into a hellish deal for many southern Europeans—who claim they were tricked into signing contracts that made it all but impossible to quit what turned out to be miserable jobs.

Dire economic straits and poor German language skills combined to make many of these young workers easy targets, critics say. Spanish unemployment for those 25 and younger is at 53.3 percent; Italy's youth unemployment rate is 44 percent; and in Greece it's 50.6. Since the beginning of the [financial crisis](#) in 2008, some 30,000 Spaniards moved to Germany.

Germany's shortage of skilled workers has hit the health sector especially hard. According to the German Health Ministry, the country needs some 30,000 nurses to fill vacant jobs. Many of the southern European

migrants ended up in nursing and geriatric care—only to find out, they say, that their German co-workers often got more money, worked fewer hours and got more days off.

Many wanted to quit when they found out. But there was no way to leave without a heavy penalty. They didn't know that they signed contracts for several years, and that they would owe thousands of euros in German classes, board and accommodation if they quit early. It's unclear exactly how many of the thousands of young southern Europeans who are lured to Germany by promises of work find themselves trapped in jobs.

Many got job offers through recruitment agencies that showed them contracts in German they couldn't understand or generic Spanish contracts that did not include the clauses about having to stay with the companies for years. Other, like Ansa, say they read the fine print, but felt they had no other choice but to sign anyway.

"I saw that there was demand for repayment—but what was I going to do?" Ansa said. "It was my only chance for a job."

Phone calls and emails sent to Ansa's former hospital went unanswered. Thomas Bublitz, head of the Federal Association of German Private Hospitals, said he had heard of cases in which Spanish nurses, because of their university education, had problems adjusting to the requirements of German hospitals. He stressed, however, that all nurses receive salaries based on their qualifications, not their origin.

Bublitz also defended the measures preventing employees from leaving early, if the hospitals invest in German lessons.

"It's legitimate that these hospitals, if they pay for the language classes, tie their employees contractually for a certain period of time," Bublitz said. "After all they're paying for an education that otherwise the

employees would have to spend money on themselves."

Officials at the Spanish Embassy in Berlin say they are aware of the difficult situation many Spanish employees face in Germany—but that there's not much they can do. Labor contracts with special clauses demanding back payments for quitting early are legal in Germany, they say.

"It is a problem that worries us," embassy official Angel de Goya told The Associated Press.

Nobody knows exactly how many young Europeans are stuck in dismal working conditions across the country. But both of Germany's labor unions say they've also been approached by many young Spaniards asking them how they can quit their jobs without having to go into debt.

"We've had cases in which companies demanded up to 12,000 euros after the employees left their jobs early," said Kalle Kunkel, an activist from the ver.di union. "We're dealing with a modern version of indentured servitude here."

"This is the downside of the European Union's freedom of movement," Kunkel said. "Other countries pay for the education of these people and then German companies bring them here to exploit them."

Sylwia Timm, who works for the DGB union's "Fair Mobility" project, said her group started printing booklets in Spanish and handing them out to potential job seekers in Spain: "Since it's too late once they're in Germany, we're now trying to warn them of all the risks before they sign the contracts," Timm said.

A spokeswoman for Germany's labor ministry said German labor law applies to foreign and domestic employees in the same way.

"As for the concrete design of the contracts, the German government cannot influence these," said the spokeswoman, who spoke on condition of anonymity because she was not authorized to speak to the media.

Some young Europeans stay in their miserable jobs until the end of their contract, which is mostly after three years. Others try to borrow money from friends and family to buy their way out. Then there are those who just quit and leave, hoping the companies won't be able to track them down.

Ansa quit five months into a three-year contract with the private Brandenburg Klinik. The Spaniard said it upset him that he had to work longer shifts, was better qualified and still got a lower salary than his German co-workers. But what really pushed him over the edge was when he was told he could request vacation time only after all the German employees had put in their requests.

Unlike Spaniards, who study for four years at a university to become nurses, Germans need only to go through a three-year vocational training and are usually less qualified than their Spanish co-workers. Salaries vary across the country, but it is not unusual that German nurses earn 30 percent more than their Spanish colleagues, said Kunkel from ver.di union.

"It is just so unethical what they're doing to us here," said Ansa. "These companies are taking advantage of our difficult situation in Spain, exploiting us and keeping us here against our will."

Two weeks after Ansa quit his job, the Brandenburg Klinik sent a letter to his parents' address in Spain, demanding a repayment of 3,222 Euros within the next 14 days. Ansa has not yet paid, nor responded to further letters from lawyers and a Spanish court demanding he reimburse the money.

He has stayed in Germany and worked for a few months in a different job at a Berlin nursing home, but quit recently quit that job as well. Now he's looking for a new job, again.

"I'll try one more time to find a decent job here—third and last time," Ansa said. "If that doesn't work out, I'll go home."

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Citation: Young Spaniards moving to Germany get trapped in dismal jobs (2015, February 26) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-02-young-spaniards-germany-dismal-jobs.html>

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