



# The European Union Steel Industry: Disabled Workers' Experiences of Diversity and Equal Opportunities

**The steel industry employs a minority of disabled workers, including workers with learning difficulties and/or a physical disability. Evidence suggests that disabled workers are vulnerable to discrimination and bullying. More particularly, some companies pursue recruitment policies that militate against the employment of disabled people.**

The level and conditions of employment of disabled workers in the steel industry varies from country to country and from company to company. Many countries operate a quota policy with regard to employment of the disabled (variously defined); whereby national legislation requires that company workforces comprise a percentage of disabled people. Some companies observe this legislation more closely than others. In some cases, companies prefer to incur a fine than recruit disabled workers; thus: "This Company has a policy of not recruiting disabled people" (EDLESI Project).

There is moreover, a difference between the recruitment of disabled people and the employment of workers who become disabled whilst employed to the company. Most companies make efforts to find alternative employment for the latter, but direct recruitment of disabled persons is less evident. It is also important to note, that disability encapsulates more than physical impairment and long term chronic conditions. Disability covers mental impairment too – including stress, depression, psychiatric complaints and learning disabilities. Indeed, the debates about what is recognised as a disability and employment as a disabled person are complex.

**Disabled workers steel industry experiences:** Disabled workers' needs and experiences of employment differ according to the nature of their disability, but it is worth noting that disability puts particular obligations on employers. The absence of an equal opportunities policy at many companies means that those with disability might not receive the protection they need or indeed to which they have a right.



Disabled workers face particular types of discrimination and in a number of instances bullying/mobbing. For example, one company ran an intensive restructuring programme, with the aim of reducing costs by 40 per cent. This process involved cutting 1,618 jobs via early retirement schemes, voluntary redundancy and reductions in working time. This was achieved without a single forced redundancy, but has had particular implications for disabled workers, who now found themselves in more vulnerable situations because of the restructuring programme. A number of disabled

workers were relocated as part of the programme's broader strategy. These workers ended up doing 'less important' jobs, which were often perceived to be demeaning by disabled workers. Often these jobs were not adapted to their disability.. Such moves increased the sense of insecurity amongst these workers. These workers felt that they were no longer valued by the company.

In other cases, disabled workers felt insecure about their future and therefore said nothing when the workload was too much for them (resulting in accident or illness) or did not go to the doctor when the need arose. Indeed, one worker who became disabled through work and received a certificate from a doctor outlining what he could and could not do, heard the supervisor say: "What am I supposed to do with him? A one-year apprentice can do more than him".

In a further case, there was clear evidence of bullying of disabled and vulnerable workers. Production workers with learning and physical disabilities at one plant were bullied and verbally abused by a team manager. The vulnerable position of these workers meant that whilst being perfectly aware that they were being bullied/mobbed, they were too afraid to complain and said they were simply thankful for their jobs.

**New health risks in the steel industry:** A further concern for the industry is to recognise the different ways in which the nature of work is changing and the need to be aware of emerging health and safety issues. Clearly, in most companies the rate of fatal or disabling accidents has fallen dramatically. Health and safety training and practice has improved markedly, with fatalities and physically disabling injuries much reduced in the majority of plants.

However, whilst the practice of making steel has become safer, other developments in the industry have created new concerns. Cuts to workforce numbers and increasing levels of productivity mean that more steel is being created by fewer workers. Changes in work organisation, particularly towards

multi-skilling and flexibility create new stresses and strains. On occasion, the industry fails to recognise the negative consequences of work related stress – in one example from the EDLESI research, a team manager claimed to have suffered a heart attack as a direct result of work related stress.

**Representation of disabled workers' interests:**

The representation of disabled workers' interests by trade union and works councils is uneven across Europe.

In Germany and France, for example, there are formal structures for the representation of disabled workers. At a German plant an elected disabled workers' representative who spoke on behalf of disabled worker interests had recently benefited from greater statutory powers. In France the role of representing disabled workers is the responsibility of trade unions (for example, through the works council).

In a number of other plants however, trade unions were largely absent in their support of the needs of disabled workers, beyond securing for workers disabled in service new employment within the company or facilitating compensation and severance packages. Employers co-operated in finding new work for employees disabled in service, but the positive moves to recruit disabled workers were mixed.

Most problematic for disabled workers employed within the industry, is the absence and implementation of equal opportunities policy to secure protection for disabled workers from discrimination and bullying/mobbing and ensure fair and equal treatment.

For further information contact:

Dr Dean Stroud (Project Manager)  
StroudDA1@cardiff.ac.uk

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