Activation Policies in Sweden: “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed and Something Blue”

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1 Introduction

Sweden is part of the trend with a growing reliance on “activation policies” for unemployed individuals, but Sweden represents a different position in comparison with many other countries. The reason is a long tradition of “active labour market policies” (here ALMP) as a regular part of the Swedish welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990; Junestav 2004). Sweden has had active labour market policies since the late 1940s (Cochrane et al. 2001). These policies focus both on a general development of the labour market and an improvement of the work force (Olofsson 1996). The overall goal with Swedish labour market policy is to achieve high economic expansion and low inflation (Regnér 2000). In addition, to the above goals, “full employment” has also been an important political ambition with the labour market policy system in order to maintain a generous welfare system.

Sweden is, in general, characterised as a universal and generous welfare state with many rights-based programmes (Esping-Andersen 1990). But Swedish labour market policy programmes have never been all about rights, and there are a number of different requirements and individual responsibilities, especially in terms of activity for the unemployed. This demand is emphasized in the Scandinavian, so-called, “arbetslinjen” or the “work-line” in English (sometimes termed the “employment strategy”). The work-line, which is an important element of the Swedish welfare system, emphasises work and/or activity in terms of re-training and skills-enhancement instead of passive income benefits alone. The work-line also stresses a strong work ethic in which one should be self-sufficient through a regular employment according to traditional social democratic ideology. These chief characteristics are deeply manifested in the Swedish welfare model and it was not questioned by the new centre-right government that was elected at the end of 2006. The current government, a coalition between four different centre-right parties, clearly indicated in the election campaign that they will carry on, and even call more attention to, the importance of both the work-line and labour market policy issues in order to reduce high unemployment levels. This is now seen in a number of proposed and enacted labour market policy changes.¹ The new reforms have significantly influenced the current debate about labour market policies and activation, but are still too novel to discuss in detail in this chapter.