

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS A WAY

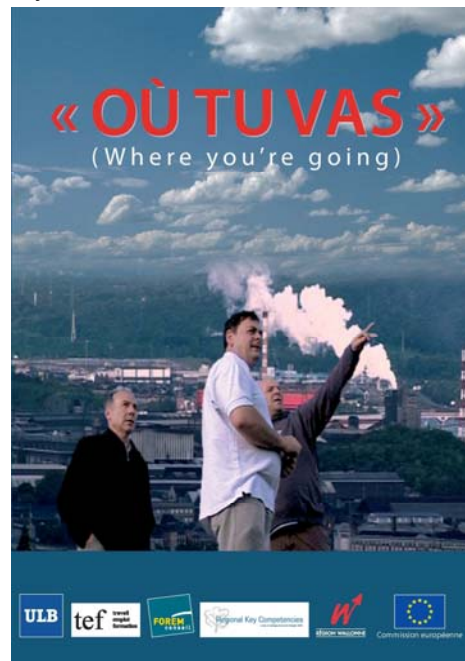
Where am I going? Everyone has asked themselves this question at least once in their life. Of course, the future is unpredictable, but we all need some points of reference to hang on to and one's job is one of these. But what if we suddenly lose our job?

For people in the Belgian province of Liège, this has certainly been a pressing and widespread question. In recent times, Liège has been blighted by company closures, bankruptcies and successive restructuring, all of which has threatened the livelihoods of many of its citizens, as well as the economic and social prosperity of the province as a whole. However, fortunately, the Article 6 project *Regional Key Competencies – A Way to Manage Structural Changes* has been working to analyse the features of this critical situation, and developed and tested an innovative tool called the “Regional Signal Panel” (RSP). Moreover, the project has disseminated the outcomes and achievements of its work by creating and presenting an interesting film, a film that shows the real lives of workers made redundant from the Liège-based aluminium company, Eurofoil. This film presents a picture of hope, thanks to the intervention of the *Regional Key Competencies* project. It shows that, despite the restructuring difficulties of Liège, its laid-off workers can look to the future with optimism.

A QUICK LOOK AT LIÈGE, THE PROJECT AND THE FILM

Liège has been strongly marked by the industrialisation of the XXI century, seeing not only the emergence of the coal and steel industry, but also the heavy metal and armaments manufacture sectors. Today, as Bernadette Mérenne, professor of economic geography at the University of Liège, says: *“the city and the surrounding area are facing an unprecedented mutation, like most regions with industrial traditions. It is a matter of a shift from an industrial society to a post-industrial society. And that means many job losses. For example, 100,000 jobs were lost in the manufacturing industry during the last forty years, representing two thirds of total jobs which existed in 1960. We of course gained new jobs in the services and commerce sectors, more or less 60,000, but there has been an overall decline in total”.*

Seeing the critical situation of the Liège labour market, *Regional Key Competencies – A Way to Manage Structural Changes* has decided to analyse the features of this area through an interesting consultation with its key economic and social actors. In fact, *Regional Key Competencies* has developed and tested a particular tool, called the “Regional Signal Panel” (RSP) which can be applied across all of the regions participating in the project (the Ribe County in Denmark, the South West region in England, the Vysocina region in Czech Republic and the Belgian Walloon Region). The idea behind RSP is to find alternative ways of gathering information about the region, instead of relying solely on statistical data. The first step is to pinpoint relevant regional actors who are capable of expressing trends, ideas, hopes and anxieties for the future development of the region. The individuals involved in the RSP include not only traditional experts and researchers, private and public decision makers, but also alternative experts, citizens and ‘wild cards’ (individuals who can add new and sometimes unexpected elements to the debate).



Against this backdrop, the partners responsible for the Belgian sub-project, Forem (the office for vocational training and employment) and TEF (the centre of sociology of work, employment and training of the Free University of Brussels), have given a voice to dozens of former workers in the steel sector that have lost their jobs following the closure of Eurofoil in 2005. Starting with some initial interviews, the partners have decided to go further by making a short film on the personal experiences of workers made redundant in the Liège industrial area, allowing them to present their fears, visions, dream and perceived prospects for the whole region. "Where are you going?" - the title of the film immediately expresses all the doubts and reservations of these workers regarding their future.

EUROFOIL: A DROP IN THE OCEAN

Serge and Franco, 45 and 46 years old respectively, take us back to Eurofoil, the factory where they worked until May 2005, when it closed its doors, leaving 104 workers jobless. The site is now empty, but Serge and Franco can still hear the sound of the machines and remember the moment when they unrolled the last aluminium film. *"Eurofoil has been sacrificed on the altar of profitability. Our factory was making profit but not enough in the eyes of the Canadian group Alcan, who acquired the company in 2003. The Canadian owners therefore decided to close it down. The death of Eurofoil, after 43 years in existence, was a deliberate decision"* says Franco.

The memory of those difficult days when the closure of Eurofoil was first announced to its workforce is still fresh in Franco and Serge's memory. *"First we felt guilty. Was it because of us that the company was closing? But in the end, we knew that we did everything to prevent it. We even added one day to our working week but it was just a waste of time: the shareholders wanted to have a level of turnover which exceeded our means"*.

The closure of Eurofoil, in May 2005, left 104 individuals jobless: 81 of them were factory workers (all men) and 23 were employees (18 men and 5 women). The majority of the factory workers, 54 out of 81, were aged over 40. They all entered the labour market at a very young age and have accumulated over 20 years of work experience (sometimes even within the same company). Generally, their educational background is quite weak and this constitutes a barrier to their reintegration into the labour market. Of the 104 workers made redundant, 34 have benefited from early retirement schemes. What about the others? They either had to find a new job within the same sector or to retrain for a different profession. And here, the age factor plays a significant role as it influences considerably the worker's retraining process.

As Anne Jamar, adviser in professional support of Le Forem, says: *"The mourning period varies from case to case, and between generations. Older people tend to struggle more with change and fall more easily into alcoholism and suffer psychological problems ...for them it is very hard to look for a job in another sector; they prefer to stay in the same field of activity while the younger generation is ready to move on to retrain for work in a new sector. Younger persons tend to change profession radically while for those aged between 40 and 50 it is more difficult. They are more reluctant to change profession even if they know perfectly that they won't find a job anymore within the same sector"*.

To assist the former workers of Eurofoil, a "Reconversion Unit" was set up in May 2005 and was active until the end of April 2006. But what exactly is a "Reconversion Unit" and what is its role?

First of all, a Reconversion Unit is set up at the request of trade union representatives within a company at the time of closure and following some preparatory meetings between Forem, worker representatives and employers in the company. It is usually located in a neutral place, close to the workers but also to the closing company. Its primary aim is to help redundant workers to find a new job and if necessary, update or create new competences in a specific field.

As Anne explained: *"through the Unit, the redundant workers can keep on seeing each other and ask the social counsellors questions and communicate with, former trade union delegates operating within the companies at the time collective redundancies were announced. The Unit is a place where people can look for new employment and recover faith in themselves and in the future"*.

The career advisers and social counsellors active within the Unit work with each former employee. After a first assessment of his/her competences, skills and needs, a training path is drawn up, which is considered to foster the worker's professional mobility and increase the likelihood of finding a new job. Above all, this path is aimed at improving the skills of the beneficiary or, sometimes, guiding his or her reconversion to another profession.

Some of the workers attending the Unit only wanted to have some support and help to write a CV or to apply for a job while others decided to undertake new training. Among Eurofoil's former workers, 30 individuals lodged a request for training to the Unit's team. In April 2006, at the end of the Unit's work, 24 training courses had been completed successfully. 10 workers were retrained as overhead crane operators, 12 as drivers, 1 became a nature guide and another a crane driver while three courses (2 in administration and 1 in Spanish) are still ongoing.

One year after the Unit opened, the results are encouraging: of 69 workers that followed the activities of the Reconversion Unit, 53 found new employment while only 16 are still looking for a job. Some have aimed their retaining at an area linked to a "passion" or private interest. One example is Christophe who today works as a first-aid trainer for industrial companies. Christophe had been doing similar work on a voluntary bases with the Red Cross for some time and had been able to turn this activity into a new profession, assisted by the Unit.

Nevertheless, converting a passion into a new employment reality is not feasible for everyone. Some of the former Eurofoil workers have only been able to find employment which implies sacrifice in terms of longer commuting times or lower salary. Joseph, for example, has accepted a job in a foil mill in Dudelange, Luxembourg. He has been downgraded from supervisor to simple worker, but he does not complain about this situation. *"I'm away from home during the whole week and sometimes I have to work during the weekends: I'm doing this to assure to my family's economic security"* said Joseph looking at the pictures of his little son.

Philippe is now employed in a prison in Brussels and drives more than 200 Km every day to get there. *"Of course I'm tired as the road is long but if everything goes well, I will stay there until the end of my working life. I know I was lucky, my wife helped me a lot, also psychologically and now I also have a new job!"*.

Everybody agrees that the Reconversion Unit has been very important for them to find a new job or just to meet their colleagues in hard times. *"What the Reconversion Unit has taught me is smartness and resourcefulness. After a year I now feel that I stand on my own two feet ..."* said Serge.

LIÈGE, A REGION WITH PLENTY OF DRIVE!

What is the purpose of the film? What do these stories show us?

As Aline Bingen from TEF, the centre of sociology of work, employment and training of the Free University of Brussels, says: *"the central aim of the film was to show the personal experiences of workers made redundant in Liège's industrial area and to try to understand how stakeholders see their region today and how they imagine it in the future. We wanted to give a voice to those directly affected by restructuring"*.

The common feeling among these workers is that heavy industry is condemned to disappear. Closures, bankruptcies and successive restructuring are the main factors behind this negative perception. Even if some job opportunities still remain in the sector, the growing practice of short-term employment contracts is perceived to be a source of instability. Many of the redundant workers still dream to see a big factory established on the territory, able to recruit thousand of workers who were previously victims of lay-offs. But that's just a dream...Lately, some flourishing business activities have emerged in Liège such as in the transport and logistics sector and in industries linked to new technologies (such as the space industry). Unfortunately, few jobs are created in these booming sectors.

Despite this negative scenario, many redundant workers underline the specific nature of Liège's inhabitants, their optimism, perseverance and courage. *"When you loose everything, things can*

only get better” explains Franco. Perseverance, conviviality and adaptability: these are the three main characteristics of Liège’s citizens, qualities which can be advantageous for the revival of the region’s economy.

Adapt to the new situation and always think about the future of the younger generations: this is the motto of Liège’s economic and social actors. As Bernadette Mérenne says: *“trying to find palliative solutions for the jobless today is important, but we should also think about the future, ensuring that training opportunities offered are future proof. It is essential to inform young people about existing job opportunities as today there are shortages for some professions and surpluses for others”*.

From their side, the youngsters seem to look at the future with rose tinted spectacles. As Franco’s daughter explains in the film: *“I do not care too much about unemployment, I want to work within the education sector, I think there will always be kids to take care of and, if not, I’ll find a new job. The heavy industry is finished, there is no employment within this sector anymore, no future. We try to study and find employment in sectors that offer jobs.”*

Liège needs to change its image, along with most regions with an industrial past. This can be achieved by developing the abilities and strengths of the area and also by fostering the adaptability and employability of its citizens. Other regions and cities such as Bilbao and Glasgow are mentioned as successful examples of regeneration.

Bilbao, for example, fell into a deep crisis at the end of the 20th century that forced the city to rethink the foundations of its economic development. The city and its surroundings were obliged to face the challenge of industrial restructuring and to deal with its negative consequences. After years of financial uncertainty, Bilbao has again become a dynamic city, with a booming service industry and focused on environmental and urban regeneration. With its lands freed from the old industrial settlements, the city is now undergoing a physical transformation, becoming more and more appealing to visitors. The Guggenheim Museum and the Euskalduna Palace, a conference and music centre, have become the icons of the new Bilbao.

However as professor Mérenne says: *“I find it interesting to see what has been done elsewhere, but I think that no model could be transferable as such. A project is, in my opinion, an issue for a community and its electorate has to find out what is the best for the region”*.

This means that, in the end, the regeneration of a region depends above all on the players acting in the territory, on their capacity to take charge of development projects as well as on their ability to overcome defeatism. As Henriette Hansen, Project Manager of the *Regional Key Competencies* project, says: *“It is important that regions stop being the victims of globalisation. Regions have to take the situation into their own hands and think about the future smartly and democratically”*.

The movie “where are you going?” is intended to stimulate a debate on how regional restructuring can be managed. It wants to show that regeneration is indeed possible if you maintain hope in a better future. As Alain de Halleux, director of the movie, says: *“This film has touched me deeply, it has been a great experience for me. I thought I was going to see gloominess and despair, instead I met creative and optimistic people”*.

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