

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Germany Works to Get Migrants Jobs

By LIZ ALDERMAN SEPT. 17, 2015

PASSAU, Germany — As Germany struggles with a surge of migrants and has at least temporarily clamped down on new arrivals, Nematullah Jasor may serve as a symbol of the way forward.

One afternoon last week, Mr. Jasor, 22, walked with a light step around the cavernous factory floor of ZF Friedrichshafen, a large German industrial company that recently hired him as an apprentice in this small town on the border with Austria that has become a major landing point for migrants.

Just a few years earlier, Mr. Jasor faced threats on his life back home in Afghanistan, where Taliban insurgents had threatened to kill him if he did not join the group and stop his computer science studies at the local university.

After learning German quickly and proving to be a skilled employee, Mr. Jasor is on track for a permanent job once he completes his apprenticeship in making machine and auto parts. More than any other European country now contending with an influx of migrants and refugees, Germany — with Europe's biggest economy, an aging population and more than a half-million unfilled jobs — sees the migration wave as not only a challenge but an opportunity.

“Germany will benefit from people like Nematullah,” said Roland Biebl, Mr. Jasor's supervisor. “It's in everyone's interest to integrate them.”

Although Germany has temporarily placed tight controls on the border across the country's south to stem the tide of people seeking asylum, the government is intent on assimilating those it lets in. With at least 800,000 migrants expected this year alone, Chancellor **Angela Merkel** and the nation's biggest businesses have been mounting a vocal campaign to get migrants into jobs as a way of quickly integrating them into German society. Rather than risk letting the migrants become wards of the state, the idea is to help as many as possible start contributing to the economy.

Advocates of fast-tracking employment say that Germany, Europe's largest economy, has enough jobs to accommodate the flood of new arrivals — and in fact is facing the threat of a labor shortage and a growing bill

Refugees like Mr. Jasor, as well as many asylum-seekers who have arrived from Syria, are educated and bring employable skills that could help ease the labor squeeze.

Last week, big employers including Deutsche Post and the automaker Daimler called for an overhaul of German labor laws to let asylum-seekers get to work quickly. Ms. Merkel, who met with industry leaders, announced that Germany would accelerate the asylum process and make it easier for those allowed to stay to enter the work force. An additional 2 billion euros, or nearly \$2.3 billion, will be spent to help people learn German, which is essential for any job.

On Monday, Germany's four main employers' associations said they supported the government's decision to temporarily slow the flow of migrants to avoid burdening the asylum system. But in a joint statement, the organizations, which represent hundreds of thousands of companies, renewed the call to give approved migrants faster access to the labor market and to language and skills training.

"That is the best way for permanent integration," the organizations said in the statement.

Some Germans fear that the influx could threaten their own jobs and drive wages down. Recently, Marine Le Pen, the head of the far-right National Front party in France, accused Ms. Merkel of encouraging immigration to "recruit slaves." But political proponents and many businesses see an opportunity to welcome a wave of motivated, mostly younger people into the German labor force.

"There is something to be said about thinking of refugees not just as victims but as potential contributors to societies and economies in the future," said Elizabeth Collett, a policy fellow at the Migration Policy Institute Europe, based in Brussels.

Despite a five-year economic crisis in Europe, unemployment in this country of 82 million is at a 30-year low of 4.6 percent. Nearly 597,000 jobs are open in health and hospice care, engineering, carpentry, fast food — the list goes on.

Analysts said Germans and other European nationals were not filling those jobs because they did not have the right experience or education or, in the case of low-skilled work, because they did not want the jobs.

The labor shortage has persisted even after tens of thousands of young people from Greece, Spain and other crisis-hit eurozone economies have flocked to Germany in recent years to find employment.

"We don't see evidence that refugees will be stealing jobs," said Alexander Wilhelm, a labor market expert at the Confederation of German Employers' Associations. "We have record-high underemployment and record-high job openings. So for the moment, the labor market is capable of giving new opportunities."

Ms. Merkel and many German companies say change is possible. They point to the reunification of East and West Germany and Germany's previous absorption of European migrants during difficult economic circumstances.

That has not always worked seamlessly.

In the 1960s, “guest worker” programs bringing Turks and others to fill factory labor shortages stoked friction and gave rise to ethnic enclaves.

And not everyone has the requisite skills.

Of the migrants who settled in Germany from 1985 to 2013, for example, 73 percent of men and 48 percent of women wound up working, compared with 83 percent of men and 73 percent of women in the total German labor force, according to the Cologne Institute of Economic Research.

Migrants coming in now from the Middle East may take longer to learn German or adapt to European culture, making the transition more difficult, the institute added. Others may be suffering trauma from war and their harrowing odyssey to Europe.

Whether the push to employ asylum-seekers proves more than a token gesture remains to be seen. So far, few German companies have hired more than a handful of migrants.

Daimler’s chief executive, Dieter Zetsche, told German news outlets last week that the migrants coming now were the kind of workers the country needed. But his company had taken just four migrants into vocational jobs, a spokesman said, in a work force of nearly 169,000.

Other companies are doing a bit more. Two hours northwest of Passau, the German industrial giant Siemens started a pilot project in the spring, taking 10 migrants from Syria and elsewhere as interns at its Erlangen operation, which has 33,000 employees. This autumn, it plans to expand the program to nine sites around the country.

At ZF, which has 49,000 workers in Germany and is the largest employer in Passau, Mr. Jasor is the only refugee to be hired. There are no immediate plans to seek others, since the company, a powerhouse in gears and transmissions, has plenty of skilled applicants, said Gernot Hein, a spokesman.

But that could change, he said, especially with Ms. Merkel leading the charge. “We see it as a freedom project,” Mr. Hein said. “We must include refugees in the labor force and not just leave them on the street.”

That view has made Mr. Jasor fall in love with Germany. After fleeing Afghanistan in 2011, he took a perilous route through Iran and then Turkey, where he worked odd jobs and studied German using a Turkish textbook. Later, a smuggler helped get him through Eastern Europe to the border of Germany.

“I’ve been through so many countries, and Germany has the best people,” said Mr. Jasor, a sunny, soft-spoken man who teared up as he thought of the parents he had left behind in Afghanistan. “No one has made me feel like an outsider.”

Mr. Jasor, who is Muslim, prays regularly, but his German colleagues do not seem to mind, he said. Out of curiosity, he went to Mass one Sunday at a local church, and he has returned several times since to learn more about Christianity and to make friends.

After his shift at ZF ended one recent afternoon, Mr. Jasor made his way to the migrant home where he lives on the outskirts of Passau. As an apprentice, he now earns 945 euros a month before taxes, and he pays 208 euros a month to rent a small room, instead of having the government continue to subsidize it for him.

On the floor, a thin blue mattress lay next to a black carpet adorned with a red rose. A rickety desk held German language books, which Mr. Jasor studies at night. The verdant, rolling hills flanking the Danube rise into view through his small window.

Outside, a cacophony of voices filled the air; 95 migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria and other countries crowded the other rooms, and rows of strollers and laundry racks lined the hallway. On this day, community volunteers took the migrants for a cruise on the Danube to see the sights, and now they had gathered on the ground floor to discuss the trip in German.

Mr. Jasor, one of the few who had a job, could not take the tour. But that was fine with him. “I want to work,” he said. “That is my dream. I will save money to get my own apartment and have a family.”

He gazed out the window toward the warm, setting sun.

“This is my future,” Mr. Jasor said. “My future is Germany.”

Rhea Wessel contributed reporting.

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