

# REVIEW & FORUM.

## *Let these workers be*

**S**OME 500 middle-aged workers in the petrochemical industry are making heavy weather of their wish to stay in gainful employment beyond mandatory retirement. They deserve to have their worries eased. Because of a statutory exception called an “exemption” in the Retirement Age Act, these workers’ exclusion from indefinite, continued employment would be an anomaly when state policy is promoting a longer working life and coaxing older casual workers to take up full-time, paid work. Many heartlanders have responded to the call, filling jobs in retail, restaurants, hotels, in office cleaning and security services.

The oil industry workers in question

are mainly service technicians and white-collar staff in six companies. They should be granted their wish when industry and house unions take their case up with the Manpower Ministry. They were employed before 1993 when the retirement age was first reset, from age 55 to 60. They could not then work past age 60, which is hard to justify either on grounds of “taxing” physical demands or the policy bias towards working for as long as one is competent and able to. The retirement age is due to be raised yet again from the present 62 years to 65, in due course. What could be the clinching argument for the oil companies’ staff is pending legislation

under which employers will be required to retain those employees who are fit and have reasonable service records. The oil firms have in any case been rehir- ing some of the youngish retirees.

In the circumstances, the exemption clause in the retirement law which covers 26 categories of workers is looking out of sync with the times. Longevity has lengthened in the nearly two decades since its enactment. Work process improvements have lightened some jobs. With few exceptions – airline pilots being one case – it is harder to justify “exempting” civil servants, uniformed personnel and doctors from the provisions. Oil industry workers (bar

those working on rigs) are another odd kettle of fish on the list. In making its review, the ministry could consider the bold step of deleting it entirely. The different industries should be free to determine for themselves how long staff in physically demanding work, or cerebral work for that matter, should be permitted to carry on, with no concessions made to safety or performance. They know best their requirements and their duty to the paying public.

Age-critical sectors, like airlines and public transport, can be relied upon to be mindful of self-preservation and not push pilots and drivers to work beyond an age which is unsafe for their clientele and reputations.