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Swedish unions, why do we suck?

A syndicalist attempt to provide solutions

Outside of Sweden, people are often impressed by the fact that a majority of Swedish employees are unionized and work under collective agreements. But Swedish unions' ability to defend workers' interests is declining, argues Rasmus Hästbacka, showing that high union density is no guarantee of strength or militancy.

Sweden is often portrayed as the promised land of strong unions and public welfare. But available data indicate a negative trend. While real wages for most workers are not declining (they follow a slow growth), other labor conditions look dimmer. Since the 1990s, employment protection has been hollowed out step by step, both according to law and even more so through collective agreements and [staffing companies](#). In a country of less than 5 million wage earners, over 770 Swedes die from [work-related stress](#) each year. Every week, a worker dies in a workplace accident.

What about public welfare? More and more Swedish schools are owned by large corporations which are turning tax payer money into profits and increasing segregation along class and ethnic lines. It may also be noted that social mobility (across classes) is decreasing. 200,000 women in Sweden are [poor pensioners](#). They have less than 12,000 Swedish kronor per month (about 1,210 US dollars), before taxes are paid. The EU estimates that another 300,000 Swedes risk ending up there.

If we turn to sectors dominated by immigrant workers we face a labor market slum (which I will get back to below). I believe readers outside Sweden can benefit from an insight into the current crisis of our unions and the debate about possible solutions.

The Swedish labor relations regime is characterized by what is called “samförstånd,” namely a strong consensus or a spirit of cooperation among three elite groups: union officials, business leaders and politicians. Political scientist Peter A Swenson has [highlighted](#) the employers' approach to unions, formed as it was in the early 1900s:

Organized capital in Sweden wanted strong unions, and when they got them, they did not regret the consequences (...) Making virtue out of necessity, employers saw in the national unions a potential ally in securing managerial absolutism. (...) In the course of time, organized capital in Sweden acquired a distinct liking for the Social Democratic labor movement, at least in comparison to the alternative, including no unions at all. Centralized collective bargaining with unions that had shed all ambitions to control management proved highly convenient.

The Swedish “samförstånd” is often said to be the magic formula behind a high standard of living and public welfare in Sweden. This picture is, at best, a half-truth. The picture hides the fact that it was a fighting working class that helped produce a consensus at the top, a consensus that accepted improvements for workers at the bottom (for a limited period of time).

A wave of labor unrest marked the 1920s in Sweden. New waves of militancy marked the 1970s and 1980s. Without recurring threats from the shop floor, union officials wouldn't have achieved much at the bargaining table. A basic logic in class struggle is that employers may give up a small part of their wealth and power, in order to avoid taking even greater damage from militant workers (in terms of losing both profits and power). In this respect, Sweden is hardly different from other countries.

Militancy is not only about staging strikes (and it seldom begins with strikes). Militancy encompasses a [rich variety](#) of ways to put pressure on the buyers of labor power.

Social democracy and the destruction of militancy

A problem with most Swedish unions today is that they don't promote workers' militancy but, on the contrary, stifle and destroy it. This is not an accident, but a systemic defect. The defect is built into the three dominant central bureaucracies [LO](#), [TCO](#) and [Saco](#). The defect can be summarized as follows.

Most Swedish unions are characterized by top-down governance, centralism, and loyalty to the employer side. Union members have no right to participate in decisions about industrial action. Decisions are made by the boards of national unions and must in some cases even be approved by the higher LO central board. Members have no right to reject or accept proposed collective agreements at national industry levels. Rank-and-file voting is also extremely rare when it comes to collective agreements at the local workplace and company levels.

The extreme centralism and top-down governance is the quid pro quo for the seat union officials have been awarded at the table. The strongest symbol of "samförstånd" is the so called 1938 Saltsjöbads-agreement between LO and the private employers' association SAF. Here, as historian Klas Åmark has pointed out, LO promised to promote industrial peace and combat syndicalists and communists while SAF promised to dismantle its strike-breaking organizations. In order for LO to fulfill its promise, the power within unions was centralized at the LO congress of 1941.

Furthermore, LO and to some extent TCO are hampered by loyalty to the Social Democratic Party. In the public sector, union officials have their party comrades at the other side of the bargaining table. Union officials are reluctant to oppose anti-union policies when pursued by a Social Democratic Government. Both the Party and LO/TCO are career ladders where the ambitious climb up the business world, public sector and political heights. If they were to side with militant workers, their careers would be destroyed. TCO and even more so Saco are characterized by craft chauvinism. They sharpen the divisions between blue-collar and white-collar workers, for instance by insisting that the best paid occupations must be paid even more.

All in all, this is a good recipe for stifling workers' militancy. Thus, union officials are killing their primary leverage against corporations and the state apparatus. As a result, Swedish unions are performing worse and worse in terms of defending workers and even worse when it comes to advancing the frontline.

As I stated initially, real wages for most workers are still growing. But that is not enough for a decent trade union movement. More equality is a goal as well. Since 1980, the profits' share of the value produced in companies has increased at the expense of the wages share. This is a global pattern and true for Sweden as well. Furthermore, Sweden is the OECD country where income inequality is growing the fastest. The measure of inequality known as the [Gini coefficient](#), a number between 0 (everyone has the same income) and 1 (all resources go to one person), rose from 0.2 in 1980 to 0.31 in 2019. Sweden now [ranks 11th](#) on the list of most egalitarian European countries.

Sweden belongs to the countries with the [highest concentrations of wealth](#). It has been estimated that [two billionaires](#) (measured in Swedish kronor) own more wealth than the poorer half of the Swedish population.

None of the facts above should be surprising. When you take away workers' power, the working class starts to lose on all fronts.

Large parts of the Swedish labor market are turning into a slum. The victims are primarily immigrant workers, documented and undocumented. Union density is low among immigrants but increasing. A new [book](#) about the slum by award winning journalist Elinor Torp, *Vi, skuggorna. Ett Sverige du inte känner till* (We, the shadows: A Sweden you don't know exists), has been received as shocking news.

A new buzzword, used by Swedish authorities in this context, is *working life criminality* (in Swedish [arbetslivskriminalitet](#)).

Swedish syndicalists emphasize that the slum has been growing for years and is [no longer a shadow society](#). Brutal exploitation is taking place in the midst of society. Companies in which bosses commit crimes are often bound by collective agreements that are not followed and they deliver goods and services to public sector agencies. Given the logic of underbidding competition, the slum may undermine the working conditions of ever larger parts of the population, including unionized and non-immigrant workers.

So far, my sketch of the labor market and Swedish unions may seem too harsh, but it's rather too mild. Let me add two concrete examples.

First, two LO unions (in the construction and restaurant industries) have public lists of certified “good employers.” SAC’s newspaper [Arbetaren](#) has revealed that many of these employers [systematically violate collective agreements](#), but the two LO unions don’t remove these employers from the lists. Even the [LO headquarters](#) have hired a construction company that violates collective agreements. The promise of Swedish collective agreements has to a large extent become a [rosy myth](#) that hides a harsh reality.

Secondly, in 2019, the right to strike was drastically limited by new legislation. This has been highlighted in two [articles](#) on the [Counterpunch](#) website. Roughly two prohibitions have been added. First, a prohibition against industrial action with the purpose of winning legal disputes. For instance, it not allowed to strike to fight firings that are contrary to law. Second, a prohibition against industrial action against employers already bound by collective agreements. That’s a new main rule. Non-bound unions may take action if they first propose a collective agreement in negotiations and then take action to reach an agreement with a peace obligation.

The leaders of the Social Democratic Party *and* its union (LO) actively supported this attack on the right to strike, as did TCO and Saco. The new legislation protects employers who use two methods of social dumping, namely so-called *collective agreement shopping* and *yellow unions*. Both prohibitions are aimed at SAC and the Dockworkers’ Union but are very destructive for LO, TCO and Saco as well. Former LO lawyer Kurt Junesjö has made the comment: [“LO unions are now stuck in the shit”](#).

Syndicalist unions, and their problems

In Sweden there are two unions that have a different set of principles: the [Dock Workers’ Union](#) and the syndicalist [SAC](#). Their principles can be summed up as follows: member democracy, rank-and-file solidarity, and independence from all interests outside the collective interests of workers.

I regard the Dock Workers’ Union as the flagship of Swedish unions today. This union is of course limited to one industry, while SAC welcomes employees in all industries.

The problem for SAC is that for decades we have had a hard time putting our principles into militant practice. Why? A major factor is that we have allowed client service to become dominant in the union, i.e. individual grievances, at the expense of workplace organizing. This means that the Locals of SAC, our industrial branches, and workplace sections are mainly engaged in negotiations. But *successful* negotiations are the final step of a successful organizing process. To rush directly to negotiations and conflicts usually gives meagre results. In the worst case, we only expose a weakness, after which the “troublemakers” in the front are punished by management.

Every time we stick to syndicalist principles of building workers’ power, however, the approach is validated; workers *do* push the frontline forward. This has been shown in recurring re-ignitions among our grass roots. One example is Polish workers at a cleaning company in Gothenburg. They recently informed the client companies about their low wages and bad conditions and urged them to contact their

employer. Those clients who didn't express sympathy with the cleaners became the object of strikes. As a result, everyone got a pay raise, among other improvements.

One way to promote re-ignitions within SAC has been conferences for the rank-and-file, which consist of industry-specific meetings in small groups and exchange of experience for all participants. In 2001, SAC restarted regular conferences which gave rise to new industrial branches and workplace sections. An example of a section that began to win collective battles is the section in Stockholm's subway. Another example is a section at the Willys grocery store in the city of Gävle. In the autumn of 2021, a conference was held in the healthcare sector for both syndicalists and members of other unions. It will be exciting to follow that development.

The re-ignitions of SAC have entailed a boost for collective action in workplaces, rather than just client service in individual cases. It means that the very concept of organizing is brought back from the dead. Believe it or not, in Sweden the expression "to organize a workplace" usually refers to nothing but membership recruitment and union administration. It has been forgotten that "to organize" means that co-workers develop and use their collective strength.

A workplace is said to be "organized" when a majority belongs to a union and the employer is said to be "good" if bound by a collective agreement. Hopefully, this means that a local job branch will react with negotiations and lawsuits when there is a breach of the agreement. But collective agreements are no barrier to, for instance, speedups and understaffing. In many cases, Swedish unions conclude agreements but have no presence in the workplaces concerned and employers remain unchecked.

The re-ignitions have had three additional merits worth underlining: syndicalists have taken the time to map their workplaces to find opportunities to organize, the focus has been on union core issues rather than just bragging about our union (or our radical opinions) and syndicalists have carried out cross-union actions with their co-workers. But the re-ignitions usually fade away and our membership doesn't grow. What then is to be done?

Re-organizing the working class

In [a previous](#) version of this article (in Swedish) I ran through ten shortcomings within SAC and proposed ten solutions. The proposals are based on a book I wrote, which will be published by the Umeå Local of SAC. The title of the book is [Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice](#). Below, I will only summarize four of the proposals.

The *first* proposal is to prioritize workplace organizing rather than client service. Perhaps this is a no-brainer, but it needs to be repeated. Even individual grievances often shed light on collective issues and opportunities to organize. However, there are many ways to escape the tricky and inconvenient task of organizing. One way can be called political [procrastination](#). This means that union meetings are used as a forum for various issues *except* workplace issues.

There is also a kind of *union* procrastination in workplaces. Then you are busy with various "union stuff" far from your co-workers. One example is to put all your commitment into meetings with bosses in negotiations and health-and-safety committees. Another example is to attend courses and conferences without turning this into organizing at work.

The way forward is collective action on the shop floor. Meetings in the Locals of SAC are (or should be) forums for the participants' workplaces. Between these meetings, members who have taken on the role of workplace organizers may have more frequent meetings, with the support of the Local board (or a special organizing committee).

The *second* investment is to document union experience and formulate an ideological compass on this basis. The book *Swedish Syndicalism* is an attempt to do just that. The idea is to gather recipes for successful organizing, rather than repeating old mistakes. The book is, however, only a starting point.

The *third* investment is to offer a union education ladder where members can continue to grow. SAC is already well on its way with courses on organizing, collective bargaining, health-and-safety work, etc. Of course, new organizers cannot be manufactured through pure classroom teaching. Union education also includes experiments on the job where we learn from each other.

Finally, members have a right to be active in the union, but are not compelled to be active. A syndicalist union should make it clear what is expected of all members. It's pretty simple. A member who wants the union to pursue his or her individual case must be active in that case, otherwise not much happens; the result is simply poor or zero. A member who chooses not to be active at all has also chosen that his or her case should not be pursued by the union; this is totally fine. So-called "passive" members are most welcome to support active syndicalists through their membership fees.

If syndicalism is to become a powerful popular movement once again – rather than a small activist network or a "revolutionary" cadre union – then we need to value all members, from the most to the least active. There is a difference between a *popular movement union*, on the one hand, and *activist networks* and *cadre unions*, on the other. I have described this at length in the labor magazine [ASR](#), available online, so I won't repeat it here.

Conclusion

Swedish unions maintain impressive façades. But those who enter them are likely to meet a dead bureaucracy or a rather empty shell. No one can predict the future of Swedish unions, but I will end this article with two indications.

First indication, the membership of LO unions has declined from about 2.2 million members in the mid-1980s to about 1.4 million today. Maybe this has something to do with the endless praising of "samförstånd" – even when unions are confronted by an increasingly aggressive business world and state apparatus.

Union officials insist that they must sell industrial peace to achieve results. We syndicalists agree. But in order to extract a good price for the peace delivered, a credible threat of industrial action is needed. The threat becomes empty if action is never executed. Unions with empty threats are doomed to make concessions.

At the time of writing, the leaders of a majority of LO unions are participating in a legislative attack on the Swedish Employment protection act. This law contains the forms of employment allowed and the basis for firing people accepted by the Labor court. The leaders of TCO and Saco support the attack, arguing that it is necessary in order to avoid even worse attacks. To weaken employment protection, to attack the right to strike (as in 2019) and to make fake certifications of "good employers" (as I mentioned above) is hardly the way to run unions.

Now, let's turn to a *second* indication. Suppose you were to ask top union officials the following: *has syndicalism gained renewed relevance on the Swedish labor market, is it a force to be reckoned with?* You would definitely get the answer: *No, syndicalism is dead and irrelevant.* Swedish business leaders and politicians would agree.

However, the rigorous barriers that these elite groups have installed against workers' militancy actually indicate a fear of syndicalism — i.e. a fear of member democracy, rank-and-file solidarity and independent action. I have already mentioned barriers in the form of bans on industrial action through union bylaws and legislation. We can add the extensive bans through collective agreements. We can

also add a system of state mediation; its purpose is to hold back wage demands and counteract industrial action.

The union bureaucracies promote industrial peace through harsh suppression of members who demand more democracy within the union and act collectively on the job.

Why have the elite groups taken such rigorous measures, if not because they see a breeding ground for syndicalism? In the journal *Lag & Avtal* (issue 10/2007) the two hawks among Swedish employers' organizations (Teknikarbetsgivarna and Almega) speak in plain language. The hawks are concerned that the union density of LO unions is declining. They warn that SAC and the Dock Workers' Union may gain new ground. The hawks' fear of democracy from below gives me a little bit of hope.

The former head of LO's think tank, Olle Sahlström, has simply declared: "The labor movement is dead" (in the journal *Tvärdrag*, August 2008). Sahlström was kicked out of LO. But he actually added the following: "...for me this means an insight filled with hope and a future of possibilities".

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