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What are the critical issues for Nordic trade unions?

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Theme: Fatal workplace accidents



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The Nordics, the EU and the climate

New labour ministers have recently been appointed in three of the Nordic countries. In Finland and Denmark as a result of elections, in Sweden because the government nominated Ylva Johansson to a role as a new EU commissioner.

EDITORIAL

12.09.2019

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

In our portraits of Denmark's Peter Hummelgaard and Finland's Timo Harakka, the Nordic Labour Journal highlights the challenges facing the two men. We portrayed Eva Nordmark in 2011 when she became chair of the TCO, the second biggest of Sweden's three major trade union confederations. She also participated at the Council of Nordic Trade Unions' congress in Malmö on 3-4 September, only days before she took up her new post as Sweden's Minister for Employment.

Her message to the congress was the same as the one she delivered when she became the TCO chair:

The trade union movement must remain relevant in a new era, and must grow and become stronger. That is the only way it can gain influence.

While the congress was in session, Foodora riders in Oslo were striking. This is the first major strike in what is known as the platform economy – where customer demand is matched via an app with those delivering services. The strike has led to a rush of bikers who want to become trade union members. The striking riders want their own collective agreement. If they succeed, it will prove that at least parts of the new economy can exist within the Nordic labour market model.

A major Nordic project is looking at how the new economy impacts on work. Tomas Berglund from the University of Gothenburg, one of the project's researchers, sees a polarisation in the labour market, with the growth of high-skilled jobs and a fall in the number of low-skilled jobs. Jobs in the middle are disappearing to artificial intelligence and automation.

But there are no jobs on a dead planet, as many pointed out at the NFS congress in Malmö. Climate change has become one of the biggest issues for the trade union movement too. Moving to a fossil-free society means major change. Trade unions

must therefore make sure the change happens in a just manner.

“As governments and trade unions, we must make sure that what we do about climate change does not lead to more hardship in the lives of normal people,” Iceland's Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir told the congress.

Thanks to high membership levels, Nordic trade unions retain a lot of influence in the European Trade Union Congress too. Their General Secretary Luca Visentini was present at the congress, and promised not to accept any minimum wage legislation within the EU that would impact negatively on the Nordic collective agreement model.

The Nordic trade unions are probably disappointed that Ylva Johansson, known as Europe's most experienced minister for employment, did not get that post on the EU Commission. Instead, she got the migration and refugee portfolio, one of the toughest jobs for any commissioner. Denmark's Margrethe Vestager continues in her role as Commissioner for Competition, but also gets responsibility for digitalisation. Finland's Jutta Urpilainen is the new Commissioner for International Partnerships.

Fatal workplace accidents were one of the issues Ylva Johansson highlighted during her last months as Minister for Employment. One example of how the Nordic countries learn from each other is Sweden's new safety training park which is being constructed near Arlanda. We have visited the Finnish safety training park in Espoo, which was the first of its kind in Europe.

Finally, for those who want to sink their teeth into a complicated problem – read Kerstin Ahlberg's comment on how national insurance contributions influence competition between local and posted labour!



Timo Harakka's challenge: to increase employment in Finland

Much is expected from the new Finnish Minister of Employment Timo Harakka. His background is unusual for a politician. The ministerial post came as a surprise to him too. As an MP he focused on the economy and the environment.

PORTRAIT

12.09.2019

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: LAURA KOTILA, FINNISH GOVERNMENT OFFICES

The government programme, agreed in June, is called 'Inclusive and competent Finland'. Minister of Employment Timo Harakka says this sums up what work means to people and society.

Finland aims for an employment rate of 75%. That might be challenging in a country where access to labour and businesses' recruitment challenges are growing problems. The current employment rate stands at 72.4%.

Harakka has underlined that the government programme aims to increase participation in the labour market for those who are partially capable of working, those who are difficult to employ, young people, older people and people with immigrant backgrounds.

Time spent in the labour market must increase – at the beginning, in the middle and towards the end, the programme

says. Finland, like the other Nordic countries, wants to move from a passive to an active labour market policy.

Broad Social Democrat-led government coalition

The appointment of Harakka as Minister of Employment came as a surprise in the wake of the April general election. The post was initially offered to the chairman of the Social Democratic Parliamentary Group, Antti Lindtman, who declined the offer for family reasons.

The Social Democrats came in, while the National Coalition Party went out of government and the Finns Party carries on in opposition. Despite suffering great losses, the Centre Party remained, but had to give up the role as coalition leader and Prime Minister Juha Sipilä had to vacate his offices.

The Centre Party elected Katri Kulmuni as new party leader in early September. She is the new government's Minister for Economic Affairs. Her party colleague Antti Kaikkonen is the new Minister of Defence.

There are three more coalition members; the Left Alliance, the Green League and the Swedish People's Party.

A colourful minister

Harakka could have been prime minister by now. He ran for the party leadership during the 2017 Social Democrat Party (SDP) congress, but lost by a big margin to Antti Rinne. His campaign was seen as crucial to secure a more senior position within the party, which he has now succeeded in getting.

The SDP congress was not convinced by the new MP Harakka's demands for reforms. Some also felt it was mostly empty, albeit competent, rhetoric.

Harakka will probably benefit from his training in theatre and drama as well as his comprehensive TV experience. He is well known for colourful initiatives and statements.

Not long ago he described Boris Johnson's decision to prorogue parliament as "incredible", and compared the situation to Finland. The Brits take great pride in their parliamentarism. Closing down the British Parliament is like banning saunas in Finland, wrote Harakka in a tweet.



Peter Hummelgaard: aims to secure early retirement for tired workers

The Danish labour market is facing major changes if Minister for Employment Peter Hummelgaard manages to get support for his plans. He wants to fight for fairer conditions for people with lower levels of education and for those in low-paid jobs.

PORTRAIT

12.09.2019

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: STEEN BROGAARD

He became Denmark's new Minister for Employment in June 2019, and describes himself as the son of a porter and a cleaning lady, who learned at an early age that it is important to secure proper conditions for people with low levels of education and those on the lowest level of pay. A fair labour market is not a given.

That is why he ran for the Social Democrats and accepted the post as Minister for Employment in Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's government. His task will now be to create a political majority for a crucial Social Democrat election promise: to secure early retirement for worn-out workers.

One of the key issues during the election campaign was how to give tired concrete workers and bus drivers the oppor-

tunity to retire before their bodies start to give in. This is also a central issue for the trade union movement. It will not be easy to keep this promise, however. Before the general election, the government coalition partner The Danish Social Liberal Party had entered into a retirement agreement with the centre-right opposition which has little in common with the Social Democrats' model.

Peter Hummelgaard agrees he faces a challenging task, but says he is doing all he can to find a solution, and that helping worn-out workers is a question of justice. He uses the word "justice" a lot, also in his 2018 book "Den Syge Kapitalisme" (Sick Capitalism). In it, he describes what he calls a new

social contract between different groups in society, which would fight injustice and work for a more just society.

His first act as a government minister was to start talks to secure help for the most needy families with small children, who receive integration support and unemployment benefits. He has also flagged labour market reform aimed at moving more people off benefits and into jobs. The reforms will follow three main strands. First, to make sure people without jobs – including refugees and immigrants – get the right skills. Then, better work environments to reduce the number of people who get sick from going to work. And finally, it should become more pleasant and easier for senior citizens to choose to stay in work after reaching retirement age.

The Minister for Employment has been very clear in his opposition to a central element of the former government's employment policy: to get more people into work by cutting welfare benefits for people like the unemployed and refugees, in the belief that this would make working a more desirable goal.



What are the critical issues for Nordic trade unions?

What goes on inside the head of a trade union leader? At the NFS congress in Malmö they were challenged to spend one minute to describe what they see as the greatest challenge going forward. Here are some of the answers:

NEWS

12.09.2019

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Eva Nordmark, TCO, Sweden:

“I would like to highlight a basic requirement for managing the challenges we are facing. And this is about ourselves: the trade union movement’s ability to grow, to make sure we stay relevant in a new era, when we have major challenges to solve. We have a great responsibility for making sure we grow and become strong.”

Erik Kollerud, YS, Norway:

“I have also been thinking about what Eva says. Even more to the point: trade union membership numbers. It is one thing to say we must do something about the big questions, but in order to manage that we need power, and we get that through membership numbers. It is a challenge that union membership has fallen by 35% in the past 20 to 25 years in the OECD.”

Drífa Snædal, ASÍ (LO), Iceland:

“Iceland’s Prime Minister pointed out that the climate should not be debated on an individual level, but on a society level. This is a way of thinking we should apply to other areas too. To solve the challenges we are facing, we need to go back to our ideology and stick to it. We are stronger together, and not through the market... how do you say it? ...capitalism – to put it simply!”

Lars Quistgaard, the Danish Confederation of Professional Associations (Akademikerne), Denmark:

“The generation coming after us will be the first ever to not feel the benefits of welfare increases, which the older generation has enjoyed. It is alarming that the EU might not be able to handle that challenge for young people. The way they handled the crisis last time around did definitively not benefit the young. In Southern Europe, we have generations who in the years that followed lost out in the labour market. We must address the younger generation too, and we must represent them.”



Göran Arrius, Sonja Ýr Þorbergsdóttir, Bente Sorgenfrey, Josef Therkildsen, SIK, Grönland and Peggy Hessen Følsvik.

Peggy Hessen Følsvik, LO Norway:

“I think the greatest issue is growing inequalities and insufficient gender equality. This is what creates more populism and the trends we see in Europe today. So the challenge is how the trade union movement handles this. How should trade unions influence this, both on a union level but also through political influence? With the ever-accelerating change, with digitalisation, automation, new forms of employment, trade wars and Brexit. If we go down a route ending in greater inequality, I think we are heading towards difficult times.”

Bente Sorgenfrey, FH, Denmark:

“If we put on our trade union glasses, this is about agreeing on some basic wage conditions for European workers. But also to allow them to benefit from the progressive policies that have resulted in growth and welfare in the Nordics. That is

why we must show that we are pioneering countries. Our colleagues in the south and east and even in the west and the north must be given pay rises again. Because there have been major setbacks. We must also make sure the models we enjoy in the Nordic region remain in place.”

Sonja Ýr Þorbergsdóttir, The Federation of State and Municipal Employees BSRB, Iceland:

“It is a challenge in itself just to talk about one challenge. I have one that encompasses everything, which I think we must talk about. And that is democracy and populism. I believe we must fight populism in a positive way, and talk about hope and a belief in the future.”

Göran Arrius, the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations Saco, Sweden:

“I want to highlight academic freedom and press freedom, which I feel is under a lot of threat in countries that are really not that far away from us. We hear about this as fake news, that people do not trust research results, that what you read on Twitter is as true as what comes out of a university. This represents a great danger, and it is being used by the populists in order to create alternative facts. I think this is really dangerous to us.”



Sonja Jógvannsdóttir, Karl- Petter Thorwaldsson, Antti Palola, Ragnhild Lied and Þorunn Sveinbjarnardóttir, the Icelandic Confederation of University Graduates BHM, Iceland.

Ragnhild Lied, the Confederation of Unions for Professionals Unio, Norway:

“I think the most important thing for Europe is to regain trust in democracy. We can do this through good education and skills development for the duration of people’s working lives, high trade union membership numbers which will strengthen the unions’ power, influence and autonomy in the workplace and not least through real gender equality.”

Antti Palola, the Finnish Confederation of Professionals STTK, Finland:

“I think the greatest issue is climate change, which is happening in parallel with changing labour markets because of the

incredibly rapid technological development. Climate change also means we need to secure better knowledge and competencies. For trade unions, it is especially important to help people who are already in the labour market and who need new knowledge which will allow them to expand their knowledge and face these major changes.”

Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson, LO Sweden:

“When we talk about our Nordic societies, you might get the impression we are on the precipice of a catastrophe. We are not! We have high employment levels. We are the first region in the world that will manage the climate challenge. We have the best integration of people coming here, we have fairly open economies. There are two issues we have to succeed at: firstly, gender equality, because this is a good way of fighting populism and xenophobia. Secondly, we are prone to look at things with pessimistic eyes. We should meet people on their own level, but when everyone is a pessimist we all turn into pessimists. We enter into a downward spiral. So, I encourage everyone: we are the best in the world – be a bit more bloody optimistic!”

Sonja Jógvanndóttir, SAMTAK, Faroe Islands:

“We have seen great growth in the Faroes in the past decade. I think our GDP has grown by 30%. Unemployment stands at around 1%. But at the same time, we are seeing a large increase in poverty. The majority of the growth has benefited the richest 5% and we are seeing a tendency of ‘the working poor’. How do you crack that nut? How do you solve the problem of people going to work every day who still can’t make ends meet? We cannot only talk about a sustainable economy, we must also talk about social sustainability!”



Nordic trade unions: climate action must be fair

”There are no jobs on a dead planet” was the most cited slogan at the Nordic trade unions’ congress in Malmö from 3 - 5 September. The climate issue is at the forefront of the trade union movement’s mind too.

NEWS

12.09.2019

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Once every four years, the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS) gathers the Nordic trade union confederations at a joint congress. The NFS’ 15 member organisations represent 8.5 million workers.

The relationship between the Nordic trade unions and Europe has always been a key issue for the organisation. The congress’ more traditional title ‘Building Bridges’ reflected this. The aim is to build bridges between the different Nordic central organisations, and to colleagues in Europe who sometimes have different views on trade union issues.

The Öresund Bridge could be seen from the hotel windows in the Hyllie neighbourhood where the congress was held – a reminder that infrastructure can actually erase borders. It only takes 15 minutes to get to Kastrup in Denmark.

The border is also about political decisions – when the Öresund train arrives from Denmark, the platform in Hyllie is closed to allow for passport controls, which were introduced in the wake of the migrant crisis 2015.

Two of the Nordic countries – Norway and Iceland – are not EU members, even though they are members of the EEA. This is also the case for the autonomous areas of Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

Norway can afford to send lobbyist to Brussels, but in Iceland it is trade unions that play an important role in promoting Icelandic points of view – through organisations like NFS and the European Trade Union Confederation, says Sonja Ýr Þorbergsdóttir, who is the NFS President this year.

That means Nordic trade union cooperation is particularly important. The first keynote speaker, Iceland's Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, even turned down a visit from US Vice President Mike Pence in order to participate at the congress (Pence did reschedule his visit to Iceland, however).



Katrín Jakobsdóttir fired up the delegates with a speech focusing on climate change:

"There are strong forces in the USA and in Europe that refuse to accept that we are in a crisis. They have no scientific support and it is all glued together with populism. But I think we have been focusing too much on what individuals do to limit climate gas emissions.

"Everyone must recycle, stop flying, change their car, eat organic food, buy the right clothes and so on. I can see this in my three sons, who are 8, 11 and 13. They all have a lot of 'flight shame' and are thinking about what they can do as individuals. But it is governments, the authorities, trade unions and not least the big companies that must take responsibility for this.

"As governments and trade unions, we must make sure that what we do about climate change does not lead to lower living standards for normal people. We cannot increase petrol prices until only the richest people continue to pollute while poorer people cannot afford to get to work," said Katrín Jakobsdóttir to applause from the audience.

The trade unions' take is that the climate issue must be linked to "climate justice" in order to achieve a just transition to a fossil-free society. People who work in fossil fuel-dependent sectors that are disappearing must be given a chance to develop their skills in order to get by in the new economy.



"It was clear from the group discussions that we need even more gender equality focus when working with climate change," says Magnus Gissler, the NFS General Secretary.

"It is still too early to present new demands. We now have the material from 50 different discussion groups which we will address during the NFS' next board meeting in November. Only then can we agree on the strategy for the next four years," he says.

The Danish delegation did, however, present the congress with a concrete proposal: Nordic trade unions should push for the creation of a separate EU directive about the psychosocial work environment.

Other discussions focused a lot on the rise of populism in Europe. Sweden's Minister for EU Affairs Hans Dahlgren was also one of the keynote speakers. The best thing about the EU, he felt, was the values which were already there in the very first Treaty of Rome:

"Freedom, democracy, equality, respect for the rule of law, tolerance, solidarity – it sounds like poetry but it is politics! When someone asks me where the EU is heading, I answer that there is no better compass than these values," said Hans Dahlgren.



"But in our midsts we now see states that do not accept these values. Sure, nationalists and populists and the extreme right

is nothing new in Europe. But what is new, is that these powers have gained real political influence. They even sit in government coalitions in several countries.

“The rule of law is important to the economy too. If that does not work, we risk the erosion of the inner market. That is why the Swedish government has pushed for what is known as the Article 7 procedure, which can highlight and finally suspend a country’s rights within the EU if the country is in breach with the rule of law. So far such procedures have been initiated against Poland and Hungary.

“We also have demands when it comes to the European budget. It cannot be right that countries that fail to live up to the rule of law are allowed to keep receiving the same amount of money from EU development funds. It must be made expensive not to do the right thing.”

Fears about populism within the EU is just one part of the relationship to the Continent. Nordic trade unions also fear the Commission, and not least the EU Court, will interfere in the Nordic agreement model, where the social partners do their own negotiation about wage and working conditions.



Luca Visentini from the European Trade Union Congress ETUC, tried to reassure his Nordic colleagues.

“We will never accept legislation on minimum wages without a guarantee that countries who want collective agreements can keep these,” said Luca Visentini.

Stefan Olsson, director at the EU Commission’s Directorate for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, warned that the compromise reach on the right to collective agreements in relation to legislation was fragile, however.

“There is knowledge about collective negotiations and the Nordics within the Commission, but negotiations between the Council and the Parliament can get brutal – especially as the negotiations go on until 5am. You then often have some politician from Southern Europe saying ‘but it is only you Nordic people who want to keep your competitive advantages and who don’t allow us anything’.

“In the wake of the crisis, there are many misunderstandings and a lot of bad faith. You have to remember that in these countries there have been enormous developments when it comes to social rights. This has created deep wounds. So when the Commission finally come up with relatively humble rights and Sweden and Denmark in particular say we don’t like this at all, things get very brutal. You get reactions like: ‘how can you say that, you who are so well off? Won’t you even allow us this much?’

“The formulations around collective negotiations in the employment directive were among the last things we agreed on. I think we spent three hours arguing over one single word between 3 and 6am,” said Stefan Olsson.

“In a hypothetical situation, the EU Court can test this. If we say we flatly refuse the Commission’s proposals, we put ourselves outside of the system,” he warned.



Iceland's Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir

Why did #metoo hit the Nordics differently?

Two years after the #metoo movement exploded in social media and became a global phenomenon, Iceland's Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir will be hosting an international conference on the issue in Reykjavik from 17 to 19 September.

NEWS

16.09.2019

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“The #metoo conference is part of Iceland's Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, where we focus on gender equality and violence towards women. Parallel to the conference, the Nordic ministers for equality will also meet in Iceland,” says Katrín Jakobsdóttir.

Many well-known feminists will be attending the conference, including Angela Davis, known for her membership in the Black Panthers in the 1970s. Researchers and activists will be discussing what has happened after millions of women came forward under the hashtag #metoo to speak up about the sexual harassment and violence they had experienced.

“We will also be talking about why the #metoo movement had different impact in the different Nordic countries. When you compare the countries you can see in which sectors the movement has had the greatest impact. We will look at both similarities and differences, as well as what can be learned from all this.”

Shocked by the volume

Katrín Jakobsdóttir says Icelanders were shocked by the volume of assaults reported by women, be it anonymously or not.

“Iceland has been top for gender equality globally for five years. We are considered to be a gender equality paradise, and then we had all these stories!

“Many women from theatre and politics came forward, but the most striking thing was all the women with foreign backgrounds living in Iceland who experienced double discrimination.”

The conference will be held in the Harpa Opera House in Reykjavik, and is open for anyone who wants to register.

“So what can we learn from #metoo?” asks Katrín Jakobsdóttir rhetorically.

“In Iceland there was a very strong reaction from the trade unions, but also from employers. Soon after the #metoo movement began, Iceland hosted a large conference where the government and local authorities met employers and trade unions to discuss what could be done.”

Changing the culture

“Nearly two years on, we see that companies and institutions have prepared rules for how people should behave. This did not exist before.

“To use my own party as an example, we have formulated new rules for how to behave, but the most important thing has been the discussion around the rules, not the rules per se. There are so many negative things buried in our culture which we never talked about before.”

Are you the only prime minister in the world who is also responsible for gender equality issues?

“There aren’t many others in any case! This was a change I brought in because I realised that gender equality issues must permeate the entire system, a bit like climate change. These are two major causes that I engage with, but I of course cooperate with other ministers on both.”

How much of your time is spent dealing with gender equality?

“I bring gender equality to the table no matter what I am talking about. You have to do this. You have to talk about gender equality when talking with the trade unions, or with employers, or when talking about the climate. Gender equality is not something to hide away!

“So I actually think I spend 100% of my time talking about gender equality!”

What do you hope will come out of the conference?

“I hope that we can strengthen the Nordic cooperation in this area. Together we will have more power to change the culture.”



Oslo Foodora riders on strike

It has become an increasingly common sight in many cities: Foodora's bike riders home-delivering restaurant food. But right now in Oslo, hundreds of striking riders are cycling around to gather support for their demand for a collective agreement. Other countries are taking note.

NEWS

19.09.2019

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The strike is being followed with great interest from abroad, because this is the first major strike among so-called platform workers.

“There has already been contact between riders on a European level. The strike has been a boost to trade unions, since it has proven that it is possible to organise even those who work in the new economy,” says Kristin Jesnes, who is a platform economy researcher at the Norwegian Fafo research foundation.

Foodora is a German company operating in 15 countries, using bicycles to deliver food from 36,000 restaurants. The company started operating in Norway in 2015, making their riders employees from the very beginning – although most are on part-time contracts. The company now has 600 em-

ployees. Their average age is 25, and they work on average 16 hours a week. After one year they disappear into other occupations. There are many immigrants among them. In other words, not an easy group to organise.

“But Foodora's riders meet each other more often than other platform workers. They wait outside restaurants and work within a restricted geographical area. This allows them to build up a shared identity,” says Kristin Jesnes.

Workers in other platform companies, where jobs are shared out via apps, sit isolated in front of a computer, or – as is the case in Uber – drive around in a car. Platform workers are also often considered to be self-employed.

But the striking workers have also shown great imagination. Every day, they meet at Oslo's Youngstorget square. They have put up a bike repair shop in front of the headquarters of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions LO, helping Oslo citizen fix and trim their bikes.

"There is a lot of knowledge about bikes among the striking riders, so it would be a shame not to use this for something," says Espen Utne Landgraff, one of those who initiated the strike. It began on 20 August as talks stalled.



Espen Utne Landgraff says they have had a lot of support from LO. "But maybe they can learn something from us too," he says.

"There are 142 of us on strike now, but the number of new members increases every day, which means we can step up the strike with a further 53 people in two weeks from now. The strike will probably be expanded to include Trondheim and Bergen too," says Espen Utne Landgraff.

The striking riders are organised in what used to be the Norwegian Transport Workers' Union, which is now part of Fellesforbundet. According to Foodora, they earn 174 Norwegian kroner (€17.60) an hour. With tips, that could rise to 185 kroner (€18.70) an hour.

The strike has already had consequences for Foodora. The company's CEO for the Nordics, Carl Tengberg, has said the union demands would dramatically increase the company's expenditure, and make it very difficult to keep operating in Norway using employed labour.

The employees demand higher salaries and compensation for expenses incurred using their own private bikes at work.

The striking riders cycle around Oslo every day in what they call Critical Mass, something that demonstrates the strike is ongoing and that it is growing day by day.

"It is incredibly exciting to follow this group, since they work in a different way from what we in the trade union movement are used to. They are incredibly active in social media, and they cycle through the city with their yellow and green jerseys

and cycle bells and draw applause from people in the street," says Peggy Hessen Følsvik, deputy leader in LO Norway.

"It is an incredibly enthusiastic group of people who are now taking up the fight for a completely new group of workers."

At Youngstorget the bikers gather in front of a big statue of a worker, dedicated to the trade union movement's pioneers, before they slowly cycle up towards the Karl Johan main street and disappear around the corner just before an even larger group of demonstrators against India's occupation of Kashmir walk up the street.

Can the Norwegian Foodora strike lead to a new movement – "cyclists of the world, unite"?

That partly depends on whether or not the striking riders manage to secure an agreement. According to Espen Utne Landgraff, the support from LO is "very big".

"Even if the strike means Foodora goes bust, the trade union can claim that this proves the business concept is not viable, and that it is better if people seek out more profitable occupations," says Kristin Jesnes.



Read more about the platform economy: Cycling into the future



Alarm bells ring after many fatal workplace accidents in Sweden

Men working high up in construction and men loading and unloading trucks. Two risk-filled jobs that have claimed lives 2019 in Sweden. But the initial increase in fatal accidents earlier in 2019 has subsided. 44 persons died, which is 11 less than the year before.

THEME

12.09.2019

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

2019 had only just begun when a 53-year-old driver died while loading his lorry with a forklift truck at ICA's Helsingborg warehouse on 1 January. An automatic gate designed to close automatically as the lorry leaves the warehouse closed early by accident. The man crashed into the gate and fell off the forklift truck. The fall killed him.

One day later, a man in his 30s died when a piece of concrete fell on top of him at Södra Cell in Mönsterås. Five days after that, on 7 January, a 61-year-old carpenter died after falling three metres from a balcony on an industrial site – this too in Helsingborg.

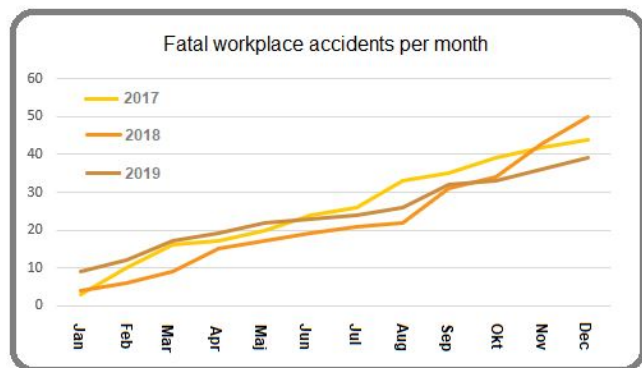
At the end of January, nine people had died in workplace accidents. In February a further three died. This set alarm bells ringing. Minister for Employment Ylva Johansson got together with five other government ministers and launched an initiative to prioritise work to prevent workplace accidents.

“We can never accept that people die as a result of their work. Everyone should have the right to come home from work. Each death is a failure for the employer and for society,” said Ylva Johansson.

The Swedish Work Environment Authority was tasked with analysing workplace deaths from 2018 and 2019 to see if

there were any common factors or measures that needed to be implemented. The analysis is not yet ready.

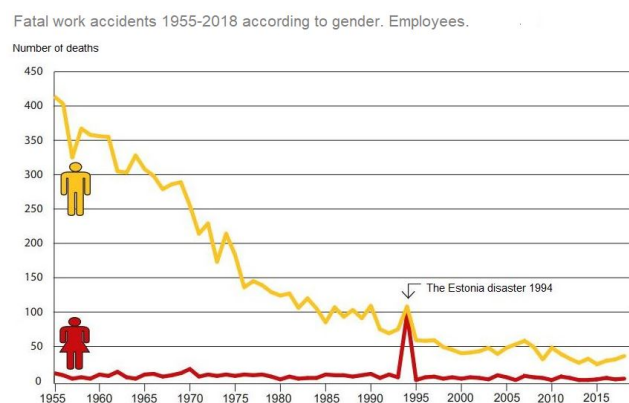
The Nordic Labour Journal has looked at the statistics, and it is worth noting that the numbers began to stabilise in the summer. After October the figures were better than for the last two years.



The fatal workplace accidents, accumulated, for the last three years. The brown line is 2019. The year started with nine fatal accidents, but after the summer, 2019 has had lower numbers and after October fewer has been killed than 2017 and 2018. Source: AV

2019 turned out to be a better year for fatal workplace accidents than what was feared in the beginning of the year.

The number of fatal workplace accidents has fallen considerably if you look further back in time. It is only just one tenth of what was common in the 1950s.



The graph above shows a great difference between men and women. Historically, very few women have died compared to men. The only exception is the Estonia accident in 1994, as there were many women on business trips onboard the ferry.

For each fatal accident, there are many more non-fatal ones. Nearly 50,000 workplace accidents are reported in Sweden every year. By analysing these figures, the Swedish Work Environment Authority has identified four main risk factors.

Occupation – mostly within agriculture and craftsmanship as well as among process operators.

The sizes of the workplace – risks rise when many things must be done in a small area, e.g. on a construction site.

Sector – the highest risk is within the transport and storage sector, along with six other sectors.

Education levels – the shorter the education, the higher the risk.

If all these four factors are present, the risk of an accident is 15 times higher than normal. Other risk factors include workplace ownership, if the individual worker has a foreign background as well as age. When the eight greatest risks are present, the risk is 25 times higher.

Looking at fatal accidents in 2019, some fit well with what we know about occupations and sectors carrying great risks. Falling from heights and accidents during loading and unloading represent 10 of the fatal accidents. Seven of these were linked to various types of falls, while three Swedish workers died during loading and unloading (as well as two foreign workers who are not part of the official statistics because they were not part of the Swedish workforce).

There are also many traffic-related accidents during working hours. Eight people died in car crashes, while another two died in a plane crash in Ethiopia (in which a total of four Swedes died). One person was murdered when she arrived to clean at a private house.

This text was updated Jan 6, 2020.



Finnish safety training park makes workplace risks more visible

Everyone should return home in the evening. That is the motto for construction workers. But you need more than theoretical knowledge in order to eliminate the risks of accidents. Like bringing routines closer to people's hearts. A visit to a safety training park speeds things up.

THEME

12.09.2019

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: MARIA ROSENLÖF

"Nobody owns the knowledge here. We share it just like we share our experiences. Positive and negative alike. Anything that can play a role in improving safety in fact," says Lasse Heikkinen. He is addressing a group of service engineers and supervisors from Finnish TetraPak, and this is their introduction to their visit to the Rudus safety training park.

Lasse Heikkinen's job at Rudus is to spread knowledge about safety in the construction industry, and he is also in charge

of the upkeep of the safety training park. He combines the job with his studies in Safety, Security and Risk Management at the Laurea University of Applied Sciences.

TetraPak's visit to the safety training park was initiated by one of their service engineers, Veikko Pullinen, who did the same course as Lasse Heikkinen a bit earlier. The two have kept in touch.



Veikko Pullinen inspects the main switch. Knowing where this is situated can save lives. This one has a warning sign saying it is out of action.

“TetraPak launched a global campaign for workplace safety last year. Everything we learned from that was relevant, but I knew via Lasse that this safety training park makes everything a bit more concrete when it comes to accidents that might happen when you are doing fieldwork like we do,” says Veikko Pullinen.

Working in a challenging environment

TetraPak’s service engineers install and repair machinery in different types of industries across Finland. This means they take their equipment both to completed plants and to some that are still under construction.

“We face special conditions and challenges, and experience new environments all the time. Sometimes you have to adapt to the client’s wishes. That’s when you must make sure you also adapt to the safety situation and understand which safety regulations and routines must be followed,” says Veikko Pullinen.

At Lasse Heikkinen’s introduction ends, he shows Veikko Pullinen and the rest of the group out to the safety training park. They are ready for the next step.



Harry Kaponen next to a construction site with a safety net.

The need to study how workplace accidents in the construction industry occur and how to prevent them from happening is a global one. So far this year Rudus safety training park has welcomed visitors from Estonia, Lithuania, Ireland, Brazil and Russia.

Fatal workplace accidents do still happen, despite measures taken to reduce the risk. The past decade saw between 5 and 14 deaths annually in the Swedish construction industry, according to the Swedish Work Environment Authority. The numbers for Finland during the same period was between two and nine annual deaths.

Risks, but also solutions

Lasse Heikkinen begins the tour of the safety training park by asking the group from TetraPak: Which risks do you face in your work? How can you avoid them? Have you had any training? The conversation gets going and is linked to different stations in the park, which detail real past events to demonstrate both accident risks and how to avoid them.

“A lot of what we see in the park makes us think about things which we should talk about, even if the situations are not directly representative of our workplace. The car wreck for instance, that brings out emotions. There is often a lot of traffic near the factories that we visit, so all the stations we study in this park are relevant in some way or other,” says Veikko Pullinen.

The tour of the park also provides him and his colleagues with ideas for situations that can be discussed during the next service technician meeting, which TetraPak holds two times a year.

“One of the things we discuss is workplace security, and TetraPak tells us about accidents that have happened, which must not be allowed to happen again. We now have these realistic examples which we can present at the next meeting,” says Veikko Pullinen, before he and the group join Lasse Heikkinen to walk back to the meeting room.

A similar park is being constructed near Arlanda

Berndt Jonsson has also visited the Rudus safety training park. He is the regional head for the Swedish Construction Federation and the national working environment coordinator for the federation’s project “A safe workplace”. He is also the contact person for Sweden’s first safety training park near Arlanda outside of Stockholm.

“We spent a long time figuring out what concept to go for, and looked at Rudus safety training park when we carried out our first feasibility study in 2016. Our first Swedish park is based on the Finnish model, but with a Swedish point of view,” says Berndt Jonsson.

The organisers of that project have worked with different companies in order to identify various problem areas and to

create different scenarios for how work tasks can be carried correctly or in the wrong way.



Falling ladders and a loader backing into a car are just a few of the hundreds of the Finnish park's risk scenarios.

Berndt Jonsson hopes the safety training park can also become a place where different occupational groups and players can meet up.

“The construction sector has been missing a common arena for a long time, so I hope the park can become a place where everyone involved in the construction process can meet – from workers to customers and clients. And also those involved in project work, who often have limited opportunities to get practical experience.”

Berndt Jonsson would really like to see the project organisational teams, and all other players who are involved, meet at an early stage of the process.

The new Swedish safety training park will be manned, just like the Finnish one.

“We will have an executive manager at the park, and facilitators who will lead the training. Some members can bring their own instructors, but they too must follow the basic concept and keep themselves abreast of any changes,” says Berndt Jonsson.

Just like in Finland, the park's aim is to provide insight which can improve the way people act and change attitudes both on an individual and group level in order to eliminate accidents.

“That's why I compare this to aviation safety,” says Berndt Jonsson.

“Staff do what they are supposed to do as part of their routine. We need to get better at doing that in the construction industry. We do have routines, but they must be brought closer to people's hearts. This is what we want to achieve with the safety training park.”

The group from TetraPak are back in the meeting room to discuss the scenarios and situations they have been looking at in the park. Lasse Heikkinen starts by saying:

“What did you see? Have you learned anything new? Did you start thinking in new ways about any parts of work? What will you take away from this?”

Veikko Pullinen was eager to ask about issues surrounding the cooperation with emergency services – in addition to his job as a service engineer, he is also a part-time firefighter.

“It would also be good to carry out planned exercises together with them, and also to check out how your own crisis communication works internally. If an accident occurs, who opens the gate for emergency services and explains where the accident has happened?”



Melted electrical connections as a result of an excessive current draw. This is a real one from a hotel in central Helsinki.

Veikko Pullinen also highlights the importance of using the correct safety equipment – as in the right equipment and clothing for the workplace – and says this is something everyone can do.

“It is important to set a good example, and you do not have to be the boss to do that.”

When everyone has finished talking about their impressions, analysis, thoughts and even some conclusions after the tour of the safety training park, Lasse Heikkinen shows them a video about sleep, food, ergonomics and motion. He says:

“As a company, we cannot force a certain lifestyle on anyone – that is an individual choice. But we can promote a healthy life. We know this is important for safety.”

Everyone seems happy about having had the opportunity to reflect on how they can contribute to improved safety in the workplace. This is something that is often debated by Veikko Pullinen and his colleagues – if something has happened or near-misses.

“We talk about risks during our breaks and report what we feel is worth reporting to the Finnish boss, who takes it further up in the organisation. We try to maintain a high level

of workplace safety, so that we can all return home in the evenings.”



New technology leads to growing polarisation in the labour market

Skilled jobs are on the rise both in the Nordic countries and elsewhere in the OECD, while routine jobs disappear. The challenge now is to help more people to develop their skills and to expand social security support to include those without permanent employment.

NEWS

12.09.2019

TEXT AND PHOTO: GUNHILD WALLIN

“We’re unlikely to see massive unemployment caused by technological development. However, many jobs will change and adapting to this can be hard,” Stijn Broecke from the OECD recently told a seminar on the future of work, organised by the Swedish Ministry of Employment.

Stijn Broecke is an economist and one of the lead authors of this year’s OECD Employment Outlook. Some of the questions the report deals with include: how many jobs will be created and how many will be lost due to new technology? How common are the so-called atypical jobs, which are often found in the platform economy, and do workers in these jobs benefit from social security systems?

Similar issues are highly relevant for the Nordic countries too. A three-year-long research project financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers began in 2018, looking at future labour markets and the impact of technological developments. Some 30 researchers from all of the Nordic countries are working on seven different strands, and number two focuses on digitalisation and automation and the opportunities and challenges this brings to the Nordic model.



More high-skilled jobs

Professor Tomas Berglund from the Department of Sociology and Work Science at the University of Gothenburg is one of the researchers on the Nordic research programme. He is also part of a five-year-long research project on challenges and polarisation in the Swedish labour market, financed by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare – Forte. He spoke at the seminar on 26 August during the debate on "Digitalisation at work: towards polarisation or upgrading".

"We see an upgrading of the workforce, with more high-skilled jobs. New technology replaces routine tasks, as well as person-centred jobs," said Tomas Berglund.

The researchers have been studying changes to the labour market between 2000 and 2015, looking at the average wage for full-time work and dividing it into five parts – quintiles. By following developments year on year, they have been able to study workforce movements in the labour market.

Household work, restaurant jobs, cleaning and care jobs are examples of the first quintile, i.e. the lowest paid. The second quintile includes office work, the third bookkeeping and accountancy assistants, the fourth include administrators with a university degree as well as social workers, teachers and psychologists, and the fifth includes architects, engineers, managers and more.

"We see clear examples of upgrading in Norway, while there is a clear tendency for polarisation in Denmark. Finland has seen a degree of labour market growth and upgrading is the general tendency in Sweden," said Tomas Berglund.

Stronger polarisation in the private sector

Sweden has created some 500,000 new jobs in the two highest quintiles during the 15 years that have been studied. At the same time, 91,000 jobs in the second quintile have disappeared, according to Tomas Berglund.

"We see stronger polarisation in the private sector than in the public sector, and also more polarisation between men than women," says Tomas Berglund.

One explanation to the increase in low-paid jobs mainly in the private sector in Sweden, is that parts of the care sector were privatised and that the number of people employed in the private care sector increased by 174.6% during the 15 year period. Meanwhile, 67,000 people in that group disappeared from the public sector.

In the private sector, architects, engineers and similar occupations have seen the second largest growth, while in the public sector the growth has been among managers and higher-level civil servants. There are more women in the best-paid jobs, and fewer in the lowest-paid jobs.

Low-paid workers face uncertain conditions

There are also fewer native Swedes in the lowest-paid jobs, while the number of foreign-born people has risen in the two lowest wage classes. The three lowest quintiles have also seen an increase in the number of temporary jobs.

"The lowest-paid jobs have become more uncertain and are increasingly held by people with foreign backgrounds," said Tomas Berglund,

The OECD report also points to a trend towards a growing polarisation as a result of an increasingly tech-intensive labour market. It is true that there are no signs of technology causing mass unemployment, quite the opposite. Over the past 18 years, most OECD countries have experienced an increase in employment, but the jobs have changed. The number of production jobs has fallen by 20%, while service industry jobs are up 27%.

14% of jobs are forecast to become automated and 32% will be strongly influenced by automation. High-skilled jobs are on the rise – in the past 20 years, they have increased in number by 20%. Many people now lack the necessary skills for the jobs that are becoming more plentiful. Six in ten workers in OECD countries lack basic computer skills, for instance.

"Many must probably change occupations, and the big question will be how we handle this change. Skills development will become crucial," said Stijn Broecke.

Those who already have more

But the OECD's report shows that skills development is not offered to those who need it the most. Quite the opposite. Those with the best education run little risk of losing their jobs to automation, and enjoy full-time permanent jobs. They are given considerably more opportunity to take further education than low-paid workers, the self-employed or workers on temporary contracts.

"The problem is that the most vulnerable workers are those who have the lowest chance of taking part in further education," said Stijn Broecke.

He would like to see a fresh approach to adult education both from employers and individuals, and efforts to reduce existing barriers to skills development. He also wants to see earmarked investments in skills development for those who need it the most, and called for a system where more people share the economic burden of a more comprehensive adult education programme.

Many fall outside of the safety-net

The OECD report also highlights that no employers should be left to fix this on their own, and that social security systems must also be adapted to include the growing group of people who have no permanent full-time work. On average, two-thirds of jobseekers in the OECD did not have access to unemployment benefits in 2016, for instance. In some countries, it is estimated that 40-50% of those who do not have a full-time permanent job will not be able to access benefits if they become unemployed.

The OECD has presented a list of suggestions for how workers can benefit from social security systems. The future of work is not written in stone. But with the right policies and institutions, it can become more inclusive, partly by targeting measures at those who need them the most.

Wages are not everything – national insurance costs important to posting of workers

A Lithuanian construction worker posted to Sweden does have the right to be paid according to the Swedish Byggravtalet – the collective agreement between the Swedish Construction Federation and the Swedish Building Workers' Union – but he or she most often will not be able to keep as much of the money as a locally employed colleague on the same pay. Because the Lithuanian worker must normally pay part of the statutory national insurance contribution in his or her native country.

COMMENTS

12.09.2019

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG

That is one of the conclusions drawn by four Swedish researchers – including myself – in a new book called "Likabehandlingsprincipens olika ansikten" (The different faces of the principle of equal treatment).

In addition to the fact that the posted worker is usually paid less per hour than the locally employed worker, the company posting the worker gains a further competitive advantage over Swedish companies as a result, because the latter must pay national insurance costs for their employees.

This is but one example of how the competition in the borderless labour and service market is not influenced solely by lower wages. National insurance rules and taxation rules also play a part.

What does the employee end up with?

The purpose of the book is to look at how labour law, tax law and social insurance law work together when people from other countries come to Sweden to work. How do labour, tax and social insurance legislation taken together influence the cost of having a job done, and how much are those performing the job left with after tax and national social insurance contributions?

In order to find out, we created three typical situations where workers came from Poland, Lithuania or Germany to work on a Stockholm construction site – either directly employed by the Swedish construction company, as workers posted by a foreign company or as self-employed workers.

The two first groups' salaries and other conditions were in line with Swedish collective agreements, while we presumed the self-employed wanted to have the same amount per hour,

before tax, as a posted worker. It has been necessary to simplify the calculations, but they still serve to illustrate the effects resulting from the rules.

Posted workers most beneficial

The by far most economically beneficial option for those who commission the work is to hire posted workers, especially if the posting lasts less than 24 months. That is the limit for how long workers can remain in the home country's social security system, and hence have to pay some of the statutory national insurance contributions themselves (this applied to all of the three countries).

For the three examples, this resulted in savings of around 100 kronor per hour when hiring posted workers compared to if the Swedish construction company employed the foreign workers directly.

Hiring a Polish, Lithuanian or German self-employed worker who wants to be paid the same as a posted fellow citizen would turn out to be more expensive than using a posted worker. One reason is that self-employed workers must pay all of the statutory national insurance contributions themselves. Still, it would be cheaper still to hire a Lithuanian or German self-employed worker than to employ these people directly.

However, it is important to remember that some of them would probably be employees according to Swedish law – and be entitled to enjoy the same conditions as if they were employed by the Swedish construction company.

Best to be directly employed

For the construction worker him or herself it is, perhaps not surprisingly, most profitable to be directly hired by the Swedish company. According to calculations made for the book, in 2018 he or she could earn up to 58 kronor per hour more after tax than a posted worker.

This was partly because the locally hired construction workers are paid considerably more than the minimum wage which posted workers must accept according to the rules that still apply, and partly because they do not need to spend any of this pay on national insurance contributions.

As we know, from 30 July next year changes to the EU's posting of workers directive should be implemented, which mean that posted workers no longer have to be content with "the minimum rate of pay", but must be given "all the mandatory elements of remuneration" in the country where they work.

Exactly what this entails is still unclear, but even if the difference in pay between local and posted workers is reduced or disappears, the rules surrounding social security remain. Posted workers from countries where the responsibility for paying national insurance is shared between employers and employees will therefore still have to pay national insurance contributions in their home country. This represents an obstacle to the posting of workers directive's aim to guarantee posted workers the same rate of pay that is normal in their host country, and the devaluation of collective agreement wages for these workers.