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The Nordics look to the Baltics

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All senses need to be tuned to safety

May 30, 2023

# Theme: The Nordics and the Baltics



Newsletter from the Nordic Labour Journal 5/2023



Financed by  
Nordic Council of  
Ministers

## **NORDIC LABOUR JOURNAL**

Work Research Institute  
OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University,  
Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, NO-0130  
Oslo

## **PUBLISHER**

Work Research Institute, OsloMet  
commissioned by the Nordic Council of  
Ministers.  
The Nordic Council of Ministers is not  
responsible for the content

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An email edition of the newsletter can  
be ordered free of charge from  
[www.nordiclabourjournal.org](http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org)

ISSN 1504-9019 tildelt: Nordic labour  
journal (online)



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# The Nordics look to the Baltics

The war in Ukraine has brought the Nordics and the Baltics closer together. This will become very clear during the Nato summit in Vilnius on 11 and 12 July, when Finland and perhaps even Sweden will participate as members of the defence alliance for the first time. We take a closer look at the cooperation with the Baltic countries which has grown to become more equal.

EDITORIAL

30.05.2023

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It is said that Estonia's first President Lennart Meri used to pop into the Nordic Council of Ministers' Tallinn office, which was opened in 1991, to borrow the telephone. It was presumed the telephone line in the President's office was not safe. Today, Estonia is a world leader in cyber security and helped Ukraine secure its digital communication channels.

In Vilnius in Lithuania, Ukrainian refugee Kira Lebedenko carries on running her cyber security company in Ukraine with eight employees. In order to learn the language and integrate, she also works in a Lithuanian call centre.

While borders grow more visible and trenches are dug on both sides, we also live in a world where the amount of available information keeps growing without being confined by hardly any borders. But what do we believe out of all this information?

"I would like to offer my apology for the fact that the Nordic countries did not listen more to the Baltic countries earlier, when you warned about the threat that Putin's Russia represented," said Bryndís Haraldsdóttir, the leader of the Icelandic delegation, when she and other members from the Nordic Council participated at the Eastern Partnership Conference of the Baltic Assembly in Tallinn on 18 and 19 May.

Thanks to that foresight, Lithuania was the first country in Europe to become independent from Russian natural gas.

It is not clear how many people have died after Russia invaded Ukraine, but some say around 200 000 in total from both countries.

I have to compare that to the number of people who die from work-related illnesses every year in the EU. According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, EU-OSHA, this is also 200 000 people.

However, most work-related deaths happen in slow motion, as one of the participants at the EU work environment summit in Stockholm 15 and 16 May put it. Asbestos still kills the most people, several decades after they were exposed to it. Asbestos is still responsible for 88 000 deaths every year despite being banned in the EU since 1991.

Similarly, psycho-social consequences – from the war in Ukraine and from bad work environments – will lead to illness and continue to ruin lives in the future.

"When you have a workplace accident because of a bad work environment, you can trace it back in order to see what caused it. The same does not go for the effects people suffer from a bad psycho-social work environment. If that fails, it grinds a person down over time and it can take years before the effects on the individual become apparent. That is why these things need to be taken more seriously," Paulina Brandberg tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

The work environment is a common thread through several of the other stories in this newsletter: Swedish schools working against threats and violence, the row over working hours between the EU and Sweden, Finland and Denmark, the Metoo allegations that brought down the President of the Danish FH, and the long-running conflicts within Iceland's trade unions.

It also concerns the issue of hired labour – which often means construction workers from the Baltics – where Norway has gone further than any other Nordic country in tightening the rules and in some instances banning it altogether. Has the country gone too far?

Even before the new rules came into force, Norway voted to fight the rules in the EEA agreement.



# Estonia and the Nordics – from aid to equal cooperation

At the Nordic Council of Ministers' office in Tallinn, they will happily tell the story of how the Estonian President Lennart Meri regularly used to visit the information office in 1991.

THEME

30.05.2023

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: ALEXANDER GU



The President was happy to borrow the telephone in the Nordic office, as it was assumed the line in his own office was not secure. The Nordic office went online and connected to the rest of the world early on. This was new in the former Soviet Republic, which gained independence in August 1991.

Christer Haglund is looking back on the Nordic Tallinn office's 30-year history and the just over eight years he has been the Director there.

In the beginning, the Nordic cooperation with the Baltics centred on helping to build completely new institutions by providing Nordic examples via the three information offices in the three Baltic capitals and in St Petersburg.



**“A brave decision”**

“The Nordic governments made a brave decision when they established offices in the Baltics even before the countries had officially regained their independence,” says Haglund. Since then, their operation has expanded and the cooperation has become more equal.

To start with the Nordics provided help to Estonia, but for a long time now, the stated aim has been equal cooperation. This has increasingly been the case, says Christer Haglund.



*Christer Haglund has led the Nordic Council of Ministers' information office in Tallinn for over eight years. Photo: Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia.*

His job description has been to bring politicians, experts, business representatives and civil servants from the Nordics, Estonia and the other Baltic states together. The aim – promoting common interests within the framework of green growth, sustainable development, innovation as well as welfare, creative industries and culture. The idea is to use cooperation and networks to improve the Nordic-Baltic region's global competitiveness.

Haglund underlines that these days, the Nordics also have a lot to learn from Estonia, especially when it comes to the IT sector. This is about both business and security policy.

**A new threat from Russia**

Still – and yet again – a lot is about Russia. When Haglund started his job at the Tallinn office, the Russian occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas had already happened.

Russian influence in Estonia is a recurring issue, especially after the Russian attack on Ukraine.

A small, temporary office was opened in Narva, Eastern Estonia, near the border with Russia. There was a desire to integrate the population in Narva better into the rest of the Estonian society – 95 per cent of people there are Russian speakers.

Only a small minority of them are considered to be supporting Kremlin. Still, there seems to be a palpable fear of them and of Russia. Estonia wants to strengthen the Estonian language, including in schools, and to weaken the position of the Russian language.

**Much focus on the labour market early on**

When the Tallinn office was new, a lot of its work centred on the labour market and private businesses. This has continued during Haglund's time there.

Startup businesses have been a hot topic. Nordic experts have been called in to talk about how to set up and run startups, what to go for and where to be careful. Christer Haglund says there has been much progress.



*Markus Villig is the founder and CEO of the Estonian company Bolt, whose electric scooters can be found in several Nordic countries. It is one of Estonia's seven unicorns – companies that are valued at more than one billion euro. Photo: Diarmuid Greene/Web Summit*

“Estonia now has the world's biggest number of unicorns per capita – successful businesses that are extremely highly valued,” says Haglund. He mentions Bolt, Playtech and Transferwise. And Skype, which was both Swedish and Estonian before Microsoft bought it.

**The welfare sector and migration**

Some projects have been there from the start, mostly within the social sector.

“The welfare sector has always been a relevant issue and still is. For many years, we have been fighting human trafficking. New networks have made it easier for authorities to talk to each other. The problem is common in many countries and sadly still exists,” says Christer Haglund.

The Estonian authorities still want Nordic help with migration. The challenge has been that well-educated Estonians have been emigrating, and the population has fallen as a result. The issue and possible solutions to it have been studied at conferences and study visits.

Now, things have turned and the problem has changed. Estonia now has more refugees from Ukraine than the Nordic countries.

Domestic violence grew as a problem during the pandemic. It is a problem everywhere but perhaps more so in the Baltics than in the Nordics, says Christer Haglund.

During the pandemic, family relations frayed because people had to spend more time together while their economy also often suffered.

“You have to remember that social protection is not on the same level in Estonia as in our Nordic countries,” points out Christer Haglund.

### **Gender equality is a key issue for the Nordics**

One theme that the Nordics have pushed in the Baltics is gender equality. The Nordic drive to increase paternal leave has not had that much success in Estonia.

The issue has not disappeared in the Baltics, it is particularly relevant because the wage gap between men and women in Estonia is one of the largest in the EU. But the gender distribution in companies and organisations seems reasonable, says Christer Haglund.

“There are still challenges. But after a few years, I noticed the same people at all the gender equality conferences and seminars, and things never ended in concrete decisions and measures,” says Haglund.

He wanted to focus directly on Estonian companies since they have the opportunity and freedom to make changes quickly if they see the benefit of it. And it is not difficult to demonstrate the benefits of gender equality so that it spreads throughout society.

### **Sustainability and recycling – tempting young people**

Right now, there is a lot of emphasis on sustainability and recycling from the Nordics in Estonia. A lot has been done to break through to the most difficult target group – young men. Well-known Estonian actors and musicians have been used to make social media posts and TV reports, explains Christer Haglund.

The Nordic Swan Ecolabel is also being introduced in Estonia. The Swan is not only a Nordic brand, points out Haglund. He often describes the world of business as the engine for Nordic reforms, making sure things like the Swan Ecolabel become a reality faster than in many state organisations.

That is why it is important that both Estonian consumers and Nordic and Baltic businesses want to use the Swan Ecolabel. Investors also want things to be done well. Haglund is advocating the use of new channels and methods to spread the Nordic message.

“You have to get your message out in new ways so that people understand the benefits of this in these countries.”

### **Cyber safety put Estonia in the lead**

One of the new areas of cooperation is cyber security, where Estonia is considered to have bypassed the Nordics – both in terms of electronic voting, digitalised bank services and uncovering illegal online meddling.

There is even a council of ministers for IT and digitalisation for both Nordic and Baltic ministers and civil servants. This is the only one of its kind and a very interesting phenomenon, thinks Christer Haglund.

He talks about a new successful project – a Nordic-Baltic cyber battle which is all about positive hacking. School students in the Baltics and Nordics compete against each other in order to get to the finals in Tartu. There, they get real-life challenges which they must solve.



*Cyber Battle of Nordic-Baltics is held together with Cyber Battle of Estonia. The two competitions aim to raise awareness among young people about cyber security. A video about the event can be seen [here](#):*

The cyber battle, which is exclusively for school students and young people, is being developed further. Then there is “Cybercation” which is a cooperation between Nordic and Baltic teachers aimed at supporting education in this field in schools.

### **English replaces Scandinavian – and Russian**

These programmes for young people also raise another question – which language to use? When the three Baltic countries regained independence and the Nordics set up their offices, there was a lot of enthusiasm for learning the Nordic languages and anything that was not Russian.

The office turned to the universities and organised language courses. But this has changed.

“We have completely changed to English and it is not even our role to provide Nordic language training. This is perhaps not something people of all ages understand. It is the same in the Nordics and the Baltics and in the Nordic-Baltic coopera-

tion. Our understanding of each others' languages has weakened in the Nordics too."

"Before, people did not speak English that well, but now all young and middle-aged people do. So English has become their second language. There are also many migrants who have arrived and who do not know any Nordic languages. Should we leave them outside? No, of course we need to use English," says Christer Haglund.

Yet at the Nordic Council of Ministers, which maintains its Baltic offices, and across the Nordic cooperation on a government level, the working languages are still Nordic and Scandinavian.

"We as an organisation say that everyone should be equal. But that quickly falls by the wayside since Finnish-speaking Finns and Icelanders do not have the same opportunities," says Christer Haglund. There is a problem applying for Nordic services and to be approved." **Problemet gäller både att söka de nordiska tjänsterna och att bli antagna.**

#### **"Scandinavian is a tragi-comic tradition"**

The human world is built on communication. So Haglund thinks it is a bit tragi-comic that the Nordic organisation still maintains this old tradition, which leads to people misunderstanding each other.

Haglund would like to see one, equal language system where everyone can understand each other. English in Nordic settings would provide the same opportunities for Finns, Icelanders, people from the Baltics and for all those who have moved to our countries from elsewhere in the world.

"I am certain that this will change at some stage or other," says Christer Haglund, who has learned Estonian himself – the language spoken in the Tallinn office. But English is the language of cooperation that he prefers to use and the same goes for younger Estonians.

"To me, language is not an end in itself but a tool we have to communicate with each other. You don't need to speak anything perfectly. But you need to understand each other and avoid misunderstandings," says Christer Haglund, who himself is about to leave the Nordic cooperation. He wants to see even more creativity, efficiency and new ways of doing things in the cooperation between the Nordics.

Haglund leaves the Tallinn office in August and will be followed by Maria Gratschew, who has a background from both Finland and Denmark as well as international experience from the OSCE in Vienna.

Her job description contains both old and new focus areas, including education, research and innovation, business and creative industries as well as international challenges for the

welfare society – plus the good old issues; gender equality, freedom of speech, environment and climate.



## Ukrainian women in Lithuania: We want to work for our country

Many well-educated Ukrainian women who have fled with their children to Lithuania struggle to find skilled work. Now, with the support from the Nordic Council of Ministers and others, women are getting the knowledge and tools they need to rebuild their country once the war ends.

THEME

30.05.2023

TEXT AND PHOTO: MARIE PREISLER

Kira Lebedenko runs a cyber security business with eight employees in Ukraine. Right now she operates it out of the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. She had to flee here with her children at very short notice when the war in Ukraine broke out.





“I am now running the company in Ukraine via my computer in my apartment here in Vilnius, which I have rented for myself and my children. Most of my colleagues stayed in Ukraine and operate from home there. This works great. But I was about to go mad from sitting in the flat all the time, so I applied for a side job as a salesperson in order to get some colleagues,” she says.

Kira Lebedenko is over-qualified for the sales job, she explains. But Lithuania is a small country that does not even come close to being able to offer relevant work to the many relatively well-educated Ukrainian women who have arrived here since the war started. Right now, Lithuania is hosting around 80,000 Ukrainian women and children – a large number in a country with only 2.8 million citizens and no tradition for receiving refugees.

“I and many other Ukrainian women here in Lithuania are struggling to find work that matches our qualifications. I have chosen to work with telephone sales, calling private customers, only to get into a workplace and to get some colleagues, even though as a business owner I am used to working with sales on a far more strategic and business-to-business level,” she says.

### Important Nordic knowledge

It is a big task for Lithuania to construct a system for receiving and integrating refugees from Ukraine. The country has received far more Ukrainian refugees than its Baltic neighbours Estonia and Lithuania, explains Helén Nilsson, Director of the Nordic Council of Ministers Office in Lithuania. It

supports a project that introduces Lithuanian authorities and Ukrainian refugees to how the Nordic countries have been working with integration.

“There is enormous solidarity with Ukraine in Lithuania. Many Lithuanians have opened their homes and schools. But this is also a fairly young nation with hardly any experience of welcoming refugees. That means the Nordics have a lot of relevant knowledge to share,” says Helén Nilsson.

The Nordic Council of Ministers’ office is in Vilnius. Ukrainian flags are easy to spot everywhere you go in the city, including outside the office of Helén Nilsson and her colleagues in the centre.



*Ukrainian colours in the flowerbed in this Vilnius park.*

Blue and yellow Ukrainian flags are flying side-by-side with flags adorned with five white swans, symbolising the five Nordic countries and the Nordic cooperation.

Helén Nilsson welcomes us in her office on the first floor, where a map of the Nordics hangs prominently on one wall. The office has been here since 1991, shortly after Lithuania gained independence. Its aim is to represent the Nordic region in Lithuania and to further Nordic-Lithuanian cooperation and the sharing of knowledge.

Hélén Nilsson has been the Director here for the past five and a half years. She was about to start a project for exchanging experiences between the Nordics and Lithuania about immigration just as the war broke out in Ukraine in February 2022. She had to throw her plans out and start again to make sure the project would also benefit the many refugees from Ukraine who started pouring in.



*The Ukrainian flag flies next to the Nordic one outside the Nordic Council of Ministers' Lithuania office.*

“So now, the project focuses a lot on the integration of women and children from Ukraine through conferences and study visits to the Nordic countries that have a lot of experience in creating efficient integration. I am, in fact, very proud of this project. It is a really good example of Nordic-Baltic co-operation where we learn from each other about good ways of achieving integration,” says Helén Nilsson.

### **Lessons for a post-war Ukraine**

Ukrainian Kira Lebedenko is one of the project participants. She just swapped her job in sales with a position at the Lithuanian refugee agency and with her new workplace she went on a study trip to Finland, organised by the Nordic Council of Ministers' Lithuania office.

“I had no idea there were refugees in a Nordic country like Finland, and during the study trip there, I gained some really useful information about integration that I can use in Ukraine after the war. We will have to build bridges between the Ukrainians who had to flee and those who stayed. Then there is the Russian-speaking part of the population who will also need to be integrated. It will be difficult and it helps a lot to learn from Nordic experiences,” says Kira Lebedenko.



*Valentyna Ryulina og Helén Nilsson.*

The war has also impacted several other Nordic programmes in Lithuania, explains Helén Nilsson. Her office will run several smaller art projects allowing Ukrainian women to apply for grants for art projects that promote Ukrainian art in Lithuania.

The art projects are run by the office's Ukrainian intern, Valentyna Ryulina, in cooperation with several colleagues. Ryulina is a refugee from Ukraine who applied for and got the job when the Nordic Council of Ministers' Vilnius office established an internship post aimed at giving a Ukrainian refugee access to the Lithuanian jobs market.

“I had an exciting job as a lecturer at the university in my home city and had just defended a thesis on communication and modern art when Russian troops entered Ukraine. My husband and I decided that I and our three children should flee for the children's sake. They are teenagers and could not get to school because of the war. Here in Lithuania, they go to school.”

Her husband had to stay in Ukraine and she was on her own with three children in a country where she does not speak the language. She started learning Lithuanian and began giving lectures about Ukrainian and Lithuanian art.

“I am passionate about promoting Ukrainian culture in the Baltic and Nordic regions – as my contribution to winning the war. At the same time, I want to help better integrate Ukrainian women into Lithuanian society. It is hard for us to get integrated even though we are highly motivated and many of us are well-educated.”

The Lithuanian language is quite hard to learn. Valentyna Ryulina speaks many languages and has also taken Lithuanian classes. But she has so far not found a class that suits her level.

“If you don't speak Lithuanian, you only get vocational and often badly paid jobs like cleaning, and many Ukrainian women have to accept these jobs even if they have an education.”

Many Lithuanians and Ukrainians also speak Russian. But for Ukrainian refugees, speaking Russian is a sensitive matter because of the war, and being in exile makes it ever more important to protect your own language, explains Valentyna Ryulina.

She and many other Ukrainian refugee women in Lithuania also face the added job challenge of being on their own with no family network.

“It is difficult to find a job which also allows me to drop off and pick up my children from school,” says Valentyna Ryulina.





*Valentyna Ryvina works with promoting Ukrainian culture.*

Svitlana Zaluzhna also fled Ukraine with her three children. She was an activist in Ukraine and worked with social and cultural projects benefiting especially Ukrainian families. She has brought these experiences to Lithuania, where she is now the CEO of Ukrete Hub, a network of Ukrainian civil society activists in Vilnius. One of the things they offer is a space for refugee women from Ukraine who want to use their time in exile to build their own businesses.



“We have created a space where the women can work with entrepreneurship and build networks with others, which will improve their and their children’s lives while they are here. They can then take their entrepreneurial experiences back to Ukraine when the war is over. By then, there will be a great need for entrepreneurs who can help rebuild society,” says Svitlana Zaluzhna.

The Nordic Council of Ministers’ office in Lithuania co-hosts various events like panel debates together with Ukrete Hub. There is also a social entrepreneurship project in the pipeline.

### **The exile university**

The Nordic Council of Ministers in Lithuania has also supported the setting up of the European Humanities University (EHU) which is aimed at students from Belarus and Ukraine. The Council also supports EHU through grants for students from those countries. Because of the war, this support has been increased. EHU gets most of its funding from the EU, Lithuania and Sweden.

17-year-old Yelyzaveta Pukas from Ukraine is one of EHU's students. She is studying global politics and economy and moved to Lithuania with her mother and her cat, while her father remained in Ukraine.



*Student Yelyzaveta Pukas dreams of returning home to Ukraine.*

“As a student in Ukraine, I only would have had access to on-line lectures and there were air raid sirens every day, so it was difficult. Here I have a more predictable student life. I dream about returning home when the war ends, and hope with all my heart that I and my studies can help create a good society when the war one day is over.”



# New energy in cooperation between the Baltic Sea countries

A new wind is blowing for the cooperation on greener energy and security in the Baltic Sea region, believes Denmark's ambassador to Lithuania.

THEME

30.05.2023

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: HÖEGH LNG

In the harbour of Lithuania's only port city Klaipėda lies the ship "Independence". It functions like a depot for imported liquefied natural gas. This solution means Lithuania is now independent of Russian gas and the enormous ship was ordered by the Lithuanian government on the same day Russia invaded Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Lithuania's energy supply is changing tack once more – this time in a greener direction. As the first of the Baltic countries, Lithuania has decided to build offshore wind turbines in the Baltic Sea. This is an important signal for new opportunities in a greener Baltic Sea region, thinks Denmark's ambassador to Lithuania, Hans Brask.

"Lithuania was one of the first countries to decide to become independent from Russian energy, and has secured that independence in practical terms with the ship "Independence". Lithuania is now taking another big step, this time towards independence from fossil fuels by establishing offshore wind turbine parks in the Baltic Sea.

## **Lithuania as an energy hub**

This political decision has fantastic potential for the green transition, believes the Danish ambassador.

"Lithuania is the first Baltic country to invest in offshore wind energy, and the country is also looking at solar power, energy islands and green hydrogen. These are technologies and projects that Denmark and the other Nordic countries



prioritise, and this is also one of the areas where Denmark is already cooperating closely with Lithuania and that cooperation can be further intensified in coming years.”



*Ambassador Hans Brask, third from the left, during a breakfast meeting with the Lithuanian Minister of Energy Dainius Kreivys (in the middle).*

Hans Brask had a lunch meeting with Lithuania’s Minister of Energy this spring, and the Danish ambassador also invited his Nordic-Baltic ambassador colleagues to come along.

“During that meeting, Lithuania’s Minister of Energy presented a clear vision for Lithuania to become a future energy hub in the Baltic region with the export of green electricity from wind turbines and green fuels based on hydrogen,” explains Hans Brask.

### **Wind, solar and new nuclear energy**

Lithuania expects investors to look to the Baltic region to explore the potential offered by green energy from the Baltic Sea. This spring, Lithuania opened its first tender for the construction of an offshore wind farm with a capacity of 700 MW. The next tender is expected in the autumn of this year.

To supplement this, Lithuania’s Minister of Energy wants to develop small and innovative nuclear reactors, and the country is already well underway in developing solar power parks.

“There are many good reasons to cooperate closely in the Baltic Sea region to make Lithuania’s green vision a reality. This is first and foremost about finally becoming independent from Russian energy, but also about reducing the region’s total carbon footprint. It will also help develop the region’s common electricity market, which will improve energy security,” says Hans Brask.



*Hans Brask during a conference organised by the Baltic Institute of Corporate Governance. Photo: BICG.*

He believes Denmark and the Nordic cooperation can play an important role here.

“Latvia, Estonia and Poland all want to go in the same direction, so this could really get a green transition going which Denmark and the Nordics can support since we are slightly further ahead with realising our visions for sustainability,” says Hans Brask.

Before Lithuania joined the EU in 2004, nuclear power was an important energy source for the small Baltic country that was occupied by the Soviet Union between 1940 and 1991.

But in order to gain EU membership, Lithuania had to close the Ignalina nuclear power plant that shared its reactor design with the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. This meant the country would no longer be energy self-sufficient.

“Since then, Lithuania has been dependent on imported electricity, but this could now change with the new wind and green technology investments,” points out Hans Brask.

### **Seven times more offshore wind energy**

The Danish ambassador sees new opportunities for closer cooperation on common challenges inside the framework of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) since Russia is no longer part of that cooperation. The country was excluded in 2022 when it attacked Ukraine.

“The war in Ukraine has led to more instability in the Baltic Sea region, but there are some benefits to this situation. As Russia is no longer a CBSS member, we can revitalise the cooperation between the remaining countries and make decisions on things that it used to be impossible to agree on – including the aim to make the Baltic Sea region greener and independent from fossil fuels.”



*LNG is created by cooling natural gas to 162°C below zero, and is then transported on special ships like the one to the right. Independence is next to it, working as a gas terminal, where the LNG is heated up into natural gas again which is inserted into the national gas pipeline system. Photo: Höegh LNG.*

Denmark has been active in creating a new dynamic in the regional cooperation. The country's Prime Minister hosted a CBSS summit in 2022 where the member countries agreed to increase energy from offshore wind turbines in the Baltic Sea sevenfold by 2050.

A development like that would also create a basis for maritime transport across the Baltic Sea based on green hydrogen, which would further benefit the climate.

### **Nato and the sea of peace**

Despite the war in Ukraine – and also because of it – the Danish ambassador sees clear signs that the Baltic Sea countries are seriously starting to fulfil the potential within the Baltic Sea cooperation, especially when it comes to energy and the environment.

He also expects that Finland and Sweden's Nato membership will provide greater security for the region.

“Right now, the stability has taken a hit because of the war in Ukraine, but the dynamics will change with Sweden and Finland as new Nato members. All of the Baltic Sea countries except Russia will then be members of both the EU and Nato. The countries as a group will be stronger, and that will be a deterrence to Russian aggression.”

There will be a lot of focus on security in the region when Nato holds its summit in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius in July this year.

“A stronger Nato presence in this part of Europe will improve security not least for Lithuania and the other Baltic countries,” concludes the Danish ambassador.



*Lithuania's Ministry of Defence in Vilnius with a Nato sign in front and a Ukrainian flag next to the Lithuanian one.*



## Mental and social health issues focus during work environment conference

The number of work-related deaths in the EU fell by 57 per cent between 1998 and 2019. But the positive development has flatlined in the past four years. New vigorous action is needed to make a vision zero strategy for work-related deaths a reality.

### NEWS

30.05.2023

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The number of work-related deaths in the EU fell by 57 per cent between 1998 and 2019. But the positive development has flatlined in the past four years. New vigorous action is needed to make a vision zero strategy for work-related deaths a reality.

The Swedish EU Presidency and the EU Commission therefore hosted the Occupational Safety and Health Summit on 15 and 16 May.

300 politicians and civil servants from all of the member states, EU institutions and work environment experts came to Stockholm to take stock of the EU strategic framework on health and safety at work.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, EU-OSHA, presented its report “Occupational safety and health in Europe: state and trends 2023” on the opening day. EU-OSHA is headquartered in Bilbao in Spain and led by William Cockburn.





*William Cockburn leads the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work.*

“It shows that although great progress has been achieved, the development has stagnated,” Cockburn said.

The fact that just over 3,300 people died in workplace accidents in 2022 might not sound like a huge number in light of the fact that there are 170 million people in work in the EU. But most work-related deaths happen in slow-motion, as Michael Gillen put it. He is the senior occupational health and safety policy executive at the Irish employers’ organisation Ibex.

More than 200,000 people die from work-related illnesses every year, and more than 3.1 million accidents lead to more than four days of sick leave. Exposure to asbestos remains one of the major causes of death, even though the EU banned the use of asbestos in 1991.

Early exposure to asbestos still results in around 88,000 deaths in Europe every year and represents 55 to 85 per cent of cases of lung cancer developed at work. Europe’s green transition also means there is now a wave of renovations of older buildings containing asbestos, which must be handled safely.

The EU Commission, European Council and EU Parliament are in final negotiations to agree on how much to lower the exposure limit value for asbestos as well as a range of chemicals.



*A full house at Stockholm’s Münchenbryggeriet as EU Commissioner Nicolas Schmit and others spoke.*

Factors such as de-industrialisation contributed to some of the reduction of work-related deaths prior to 2019. The lowest-hanging fruit was picked first since much of the focus was on bigger companies. There is a clear link between the size of a company and safety awareness.

“Companies play a key role in handling health and safety at work. The first thing I often see when visiting a company is a sign which shows how long it has been since the last serious accident,” said European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights Nicolas Schmit.

“I have never seen – and studies will show this – a competitive, modern and innovative company with a high number of accidents and health problems among their workers. In order to be competitive, modern and innovative you have to look after your employees and health and safety must be a top priority in the social dialogue,” he pointed out.



*Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights.*

“If you look at costs, beyond the human ones, they are also frightening. The latest available statistics from 2019 show work-related accidents and health issues reduced GDP by 3.3. per cent because people were injured and ill. That is a cost of 460 billion euro which we cannot afford.”

But it is considerably harder to get information out to and check on small businesses. Different initiatives aimed at getting information to smaller businesses and tools to handle these issues were presented during the conference – see fact box.

The EU strategic framework on health and safety at work has a subheading: In a changing world of work.

“We have roughly half the number of employees in agriculture and a quarter fewer in industry, but service sector jobs



have experienced a 50 per cent increase since the 1990s,” said William Cockburn.

Workplace psycho-social risks were a main focus during the summit.

“The long-term consequences of not taking psycho-social risks as seriously as we take the physical risks could damage society as a whole,” said Paulina Brandberg, Sweden’s Deputy Minister of Employment.

Trying to reduce psycho-social risks is much more difficult. How do you determine what constitutes unhealthy workplaces?

“When you have a workplace accident because of a bad work environment, you can trace it back in order to see what caused it. The same does not go for the effects people suffer from a bad psycho-social work environment. If that fails, it grinds a person down over time and it can take years before the effects on the individual become apparent. That is why these things need to be taken more seriously,” Paulina Brandberg tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

### ***What can be done?***

“Firstly, we need to remove the stigma around mental health so that more people dare to talk about how they feel at work. Nobody should be afraid that this might impact their career opportunities.

“Secondly, we must systematically map work environments to discover mental health issues. The Work Environment Agency plays an important part here.

“Finally, we must make use of the tools we already have access to. There are several research-based tools in this area, but employers need the right information before they can start using them,” says Paulina Brandberg.



## All senses need to be tuned to safety

To reduce construction site risks, the Safety Park focuses on several senses. That is why you could witness dancing EU politicians and a Swedish labour minister trying out what it feels like being blind, as participants from the EU work environment conference came to visit.

### NEWS

30.05.2023

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“It is all about seeing, listening, doing and reflecting,” says Mattias Lafvas from the NCC construction company, who is doing a guided tour.

The Construction Industries Safety Park is situated a few kilometres from Stockholm Arlanda Airport and is run by an economic association founded in 2019 which comprises 56 member companies. 69 different providers of various safety systems are demonstrating their products. The concept originated in Finland, where there are three such safety parks.

The European study group is welcomed in a large construction tent in front of a small stage carrying a large black and white photograph of American construction workers taking a break, sitting on a steel girder during the construction of a skyscraper hundreds of metres above the ground. In this ver-

sion of the famous photo, however, they have been equipped with modern safety lines.



*Catharina Elmsäter-Svärd, CEO of the Swedish Construction Federation, shows the ID card that everyone working on a Swedish construction site must have – part of getting rid of cowboy operators. Over her shoulder, the image of American construction workers wearing safety lines.*

An introductory video shows a construction worker who forgets to attach himself to such a line and falls from a much lesser, yet still deadly, height. What is captivating about this video is that one-third of it is about the construction worker's family life before the accident, where he watches his daughter ride a bike for the first time and where they are throwing skipping stones on the beach together.

The sequence with the accident is brief, but the final third of the film shows the family doing the same activities, yet this time without a father.

"This video always makes me emotional," says Mattias Lafvas.

"But this is what our work to try to prevent fatal accidents is all about. The reality is that there is one fatal accident every month in the Swedish construction industry. In the first three years since the Safety Park opened, 2,000 people from construction companies have taken a course and 2,000 have finished our training programmes.

"It is one thing being told something. If you see it with your own eyes you remember it better and if you get to do something yourself you remember it even better. But you also need to reflect in order to understand how to use what you have learned in everyday life and on the construction site," says Mattias Lafvas.



*Nicolas Schmit witnessing one of the situations demonstrating various accidents. In this case, a not altogether convincing doll.*

This is what is best done in a group, and that is why the Safety Park will not be overtaken by computer technology simulating accidents – even if things might have looked more realis-

tic in virtual reality than the fairly basic dolls that have been placed around the Safety Park where they become victims of accidents, like having a concrete wall fall on them.

"But it is not impossible that VR could be used for a few things here at the Safety Park too," says Catharina Elmsäter-Svärd, CEO of the Swedish Construction Federation.

She helps out as the Swedish Deputy Minister of Employment Paulina Brandberg and other participants on the study trip get to experience how it feels to be blind and walk around a construction site, with bits of planks, plastic piping, shingle and ditches creating obstacles. When you cannot see, everything suddenly feels much more dangerous.



*Catharina Elmsäter-Svärd leads Paulina Brandberg around a route which shows how a construction site might look. The government minister has been given glasses that have been taped shut, preventing her from seeing anything.*

In one room the visitors get a demonstration of the link between weight and speed – a hammer dropped by someone from the tenth floor will hit a person on the ground with the same force as if you hold a 40-centimetre-long steel girder over your head and let go.

"All tools should be secured to your work clothes – one of these flexible tool lines only costs a few kronor," says Mattias Falvas.

The most common cause of accidents in the construction industry is people losing control over hand-held tools like knives, saws, nail guns or drills.

"Out of all the hand-held tools, knives cause the most injuries. The most commonly reported knife injuries are caused by Stanley knives, Mora knives and retractable utility knives. The most common type of accident is when the knife slips and people cut their fingers or hands", according to a brochure from the Swedish Construction Federation

# EU questions whether Sweden follows the working time directive

Does Sweden really have to ban 24-hour shifts? This has been hotly debated lately, with angry firemen taking to the streets to be allowed to continue to work for a whole day and night in a stretch.

NEWS

30.05.2023

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU & ARBETSRÄTT

It is because rules on daily rest periods have been tightened after the European Commission pointed out that collective agreements for municipal and regional workers were not compatible with the EU working time directive.

Others, like midwives and nurses and other healthcare workers, welcome the changes and see it as an improvement to the working environment. It was indeed complaints from one health sector group – ambulance workers – that made the Commission aware of the very long shifts that the collective agreement allowed. In reality, ambulance drivers could work for 30 hours straight.

The working time directive does allow for collective agreements that contain exemptions from the rule on 11 hours' rest in every 24-hour period. But if they do, workers must be guaranteed equivalent periods of compensatory rest or "appropriate protection", and there were no such rules in the agreement.

The employers' organisations the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR) and Sobona agreed with their trade union counterparts that the collective agreement had to be renegotiated.

The main rule in the new agreement is that 11 hours' rest must be included in each 24-hour period of work. That means an end, in principle, to the 24-hour shifts which are normal for rescue services, and around which firefighters have organised their lives, since the arrangement also gives them extra long rest periods.

Many of them also question whether it really is necessary to completely remove the opportunity to work 24-hour shifts and suggest the social partners have been too defensive in their collective agreement negotiations. Would it not have been sufficient to clarify the rules around compensatory rest

periods? That discussion seems to be continuing and there is no clear answer as yet.

What is clear, however, is that both the social partners and the Swedish government have been very focused on satisfying the Commission. In its written communication with the government, the Commission has in more general terms questioned Sweden's way of allowing the social partners themselves to make sure the collective agreements are aligned with EU law.

It doubts that this will really be sufficient to help individual workers understand and uphold their rights.

The government and social partners have hoped that the Commission will back down on this point if only the collective agreements in question are changed. It remains to be seen what will happen.

The working time directive is a hot topic for other reasons too, both in Sweden, Denmark and Finland. Recently, the Commission published a report detailing how all the member states have implemented the directive. The three Nordic countries come in for criticism on several points (the Commission does not assess how the EEA countries Norway and Iceland are doing).

The Commission is quite careful in parts. For instance, Finland "seems" to allow workers economic compensation rather than compensatory rest periods for missing day or week rest periods – which would be in breach of the directive. There are other examples.

The Commission is quite careful in parts. For instance, Finland "seems" to allow that workers receive economic compensation instead of compensatory rest for missing daily or weekly rest periods – which would be in breach of the directive.



There are more examples. The Commission is more firm on other points: The reference period for calculating of the average working hours for night workers is four months in both Denmark, Finland and Sweden, and that is too long says the Commission.

Reviews like this are being done regularly. The fact that a country is highlighted in these reports does not necessarily mean that the Commission is then prepared to bring it in front of the EU Court. The review can primarily be seen as a hint to member states about what they should be addressing.



## Swedish schools want zero tolerance for violence

Prevention and preparedness if the worst should happen – that is what working against threats and violence in Swedish schools is about. Cooperation could slow down the negative trend.

### NEWS

30.05.2023

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: IZABELLE NORDFJELL

Prevention and preparedness if the worst should happen – that is what working against threats and violence in Swedish schools is about. Cooperation could slow down the negative trend.

“Schools cannot solve the problem of threats and violence on their own. Neither can social services. But if we work together with the police we can find a solution,” Mikael Dahlberg, head of education in Höganäs in Skåne, tells the Nordic Labour Journal. Höganäs has 12 nursery schools, seven elementary schools and one upper secondary school, all of them municipal.

We shall return to how this municipality in the south of Sweden works to prevent threats and violence in schools, but

first, we will take a closer look at what the Swedish Work Environment Authority is doing, along with the Swedish Teachers’ Union.

### **A big increase in incidents triggered more inspections**

The Work Environment Agency launched inspections across the whole of Sweden this month to map how schools are working to prevent threats and violence against school staff. Some 1,000 elementary and upper secondary schools will be investigated in the coming year, both public and private. That is around one in five schools.

The reason for launching these inspections can easily be explained if you look at these figures:

**“Between 2012 and 2022, the number of reported threats and violent episodes in elementary and upper secondary schools more than doubled – from less than 400 to 850.”**



The quote is from the Work Environment Agency’s press release about the inspections. Director-General Erna Zelmin says she believes the increasing number of reported incidents stems from both staff’s willingness to file reports and a real increase in the number of incidents of threat and violence in schools.

The Director-General also points out that schools have a zero-tolerance for threats and violence, and that it is positive that those who are responsible for educational work environments – municipalities, foundations, and employers – live up to the legal requirement to report incidents to the Work Environment Agency.

The inspections will focus on:

- risks of threats of violence
- employed staff, all categories
- the local school and its abilities to prevent incidents involving threats and violence, plus local risk assessments and security routines.

#### **“Shut up, old hag”**

“What surprised us was that the biggest problems were found in the lowest years,” Johanna Jaara Åstrand tells the Nordic Labour Journal. She is the President of the Swedish Teachers’ Union.



She alludes to a report published by the union in 2021, called *”Håll käften kärring – en rapport om lärares utsatthet för hot och våld i fritidshem, förskoleklass och grundskolan årskurs 1-6”* (“Shut up old hag – a report on teachers’ exposure to threats and violence in after-school clubs, nursery classes and primary schools”). You can read the report (in Swedish) [here](#).

The report shows that teachers teaching nursery classes feel they are facing the biggest problems. Examples include a teacher being spat at by a pupil, having a spade pressed against the throat, being kicked and being bitten by a pupil.

The report also showed that:

- Seven in ten teachers had been put in a threatening situation by a pupil during 2020.
- One in five teachers had been put in a threatening situation by a pupil every week during 2020.
- 66 per cent of teachers said that at least once during 2020, a pupil had exposed them to threats of violence and 22 per cent said this had happened at least once a month.

#### **“When safety is broken”**

Similarly depressing numbers can be found in another report from the Teachers’ Union published in 2021, *“När tryggheten brister” – högstadiet, gymnasiet och inom vuxenutbildningen* (“When safety is broken – in secondary school,

upper secondary school and adult education”). It showed that 16 per cent of secondary school teachers and 14 per cent of upper secondary school teachers have considered leaving their occupation because of situations involving threats and violence.

“Many teachers are considering leaving the occupation where the situation is seriously unsustainable. They are worried not only for themselves but for students too. They know that there are children and young people who go to school planning to mess things up for everyone, including themselves,” says Johanna Jaara Åstrand. And that is also what has happened.

### **Serious school attacks after the reports**

Among all the reports received by the Work Environment Agency, there have been three particularly serious violent incidents in Skåne schools in recent years. One happened the same year the two reports were published when a 15-year-old boy injured a teacher in a school in Eslöv with a knife.

The following year, in January 2022, a 16-year-old boy injured a teacher and a student with a knife in a school in Kristianstad. A couple of months later, in Malmö in March, an 18-year-old upper secondary school student killed two teachers in a knife and axe attack.

### **Increased focus after threats**

Höganäs with its around 28,000 citizens has also had an incident in a school, though it did not result in physical injuries. A former student of the town’s upper secondary school was sentenced in 2020 for making unlawful threats.

“The municipality learned from what happened. Today, we work much closer with the police and social services. We meet when individuals or groups highlight unusual behaviour or if something has happened that means we must meet.”

The hub for this cooperation is the municipal safety officer who calls the meetings with schools and the police or social services.

“Every year we have between 50 and 70 reports of threats and violence both aimed at students and staff. There might be an overrepresentation since both special schools and schools for children with learning disabilities are part of the statistics. Here, most cases are students threatening staff. Elsewhere most reports are of threats and violence between students, and we know there are unreported incidents here,” says Mikael Dahlberg, who is pleased that things do get reported.

The Höganäs education authorities have just created an annual wheel in order to put their effort against threats and violence into a system. The planning includes active lethal threat scenario training for all staff every two years, with a catch-up for all newly hired staff and for those who missed

the first course. The aim is to increase knowledge and improve people’s capability to handle situations that involve or might involve lethal violence.

### **More lethal threat training**

A separate lethal threat training will take place every year and will be followed up at the workplaces’ so-called APT – short for *arbetsplatsträff* or workplace meeting – a forum for dialogue between employers and employees that the collective agreement says must be in place.

“It is about being aware of what is happening and creating routines for how we should handle threats and violence. We believe we have become better even though there are still students who are having issues.”

There are also independent schools in Höganäs, but the municipality has the supervisory responsibility for them too.

### **A longed-for inspection**

The Swedish Teachers’ Union also supports cooperation aimed at slowing down the negative trend.

“This is not a school problem but a societal problem. Society as a whole must back schools by addressing housing segregation, working with citizens’ associations, and securing cooperation between social services, police and child and adolescent psychiatry. Where there is good cooperation, we see the best progress, as opposed to where problems are just passed from one sector to the other,” says Johanna Jaara Åstrand.

She and the Swedish Teachers’ Union believe work environment programmes are underfunded overall, and that many of those who are responsible for educational work environments cannot handle the problems. Schools too are underfunded which leads to bigger class sizes and fewer teachers. The first casualties are often student health, teaching assistants and special pedagogues.

“These are key support functions that are important to students’ health.”

That is why Johanna Jaara Åstrand welcomes the Work Environment Agency’s inspections and says there must be a willingness to investigate and assess risk in order to prevent threats and violence.

“The biggest increase is seen in schools that have the smallest number of trained teachers and a high turnover of management. We have to create organisations that hold on to their teachers and can create safety for both students and staff,” says Johanna Jaara Åstrand.

“Already in 2017, we sent a letter to the Work Environment Authority as the number of reported incidents of threats and violence was escalating and demanded they investigated the reasons behind this and why routines around prevention were failing. So the inspections they are launching now come not a day too early.”



### Government measures

In addition to the Work Environment Agency inspections, Sweden's education act will contain extra provisions for protecting student health from 2 July 2023. The Swedish National Agency for Education writes:

"The mandate for educational health workers to support students towards reaching their educational goals and promote prevention and good health remains. Beyond that, the mandate is being clarified with the following:

- Work with student health should be done on an individual, group and school level and should be performed in cooperation with teachers and other staff.
- Educational health should be part of the school's quality improvement work.
- When needed, student health should be linked to health and care services and social services.

### ...but more money is wanted

There has been a heated debate since Sweden's new government launched its budget. The Swedish Teachers' Union claims schools will be left with a deficit of 12 billion Swedish kronor (€1bn) and municipal education councillors around the country are demanding more money from the government for municipal schools.



*Lotta Edholm, Minister for Schools. Photo: Kristian Pohl/Regeringskansliet.*

Sweden's Minister for Schools Lotta Edholm (The Liberals) addressed these demands in an interview with Sveriges radio. She said the government had invested more in education than at any time in the past 30 years, and that there are enormous differences between municipalities in terms of how much they are investing in schools.

She added that less than 10 per cent of a school's budget comes from central government and that the rest depends on the municipality's priorities.

Some of the government's targeted education measures include:

- 685 million kronor (€60m) to increase access to high-quality learning material.
- 600 million kronor (€52.5m) to increase access to specialist teachers and improve access to special learning measures.
- 100 million kronor (€8.7m) for holiday school support (*lovskola*) in lower year groups.
- 75 million kronor (€6.6m) to establish social teams in schools.

Annika Wallenskog, chief economist at the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions SKR, tells the Nordic Labour Journal that she understands the municipalities' cry of desperation when they are trying to balance their budgets, not only their school budgets.

"48 out of 290 municipalities have budgeted for a deficit."

According to Annika Wallenskog, the municipalities are facing severe cost increases, due to things like higher pension costs combined with high inflation. Schools that are renting the building they are in also struggle – rent has gone up 11 per cent in the past year.

"On top of this, there have been big cost increases across foodstuffs, maintenance, cleaning, and energy. This is hitting schools pretty hard," says Annika Wallenskog.

SKR fears the budget deficit for municipalities and regions will total 24 billion Swedish kronor (€2bn) next year and therefore wants to hear promises of increased state support from the government.

"The state support should take into account increases in prices, salaries and populations so that it is not in fact falling. But now the support is stuck on 2020 levels. It has risen but that was only to stop it actually falling," says Annika Wallenskog.

She also believes that if state support was turned into general funding, the municipalities would be guaranteed long-term support for the basic running of schools.

### Early intervention pays

Johanna Jaara Åstrand is frustrated. She talks about situations when schools sound the alarm and it is not picked up, alluding to reports of five or six-year-old pupils needing help and schools being told there are no resources.

Her frustration is amplified by the fact that problems grow so much bigger when they are pushed into the future and then become far more difficult to handle – sometimes issues become irreparable.

"All the money that goes on early intervention in these kinds of situations represents a pure win. The alternative is far more expensive. We need a zero-tolerance for threats and violence in schools from nursery classes onwards," says Johanna Jaara Åstrand.



# Norway tightens rules on hired labour

Norway is tightening the rules on hired labour. Trade unions are cheering while staffing agencies rage and have reported Norway to ESA for being in breach of the EEA agreement.

NEWS

30.05.2023

TEXT: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

There is also a new ban on hiring construction workers from staffing agencies for construction work in Oslo, Viken and the former county of Vestfold.

The new rules came into force on 1 April. An extension period for agreements that are already in place ends on 1 July.

## Trade unions cheering

“The government hopes the new rules will strengthen the serious, organised labour market which is what Norway should be known for. Providing secure and steady jobs will also strengthen recruitment to certain occupations and trades,” said the Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion Marte Mjøs Persen (Labour) on the day the new rules came into force.

The trade union movement was also happy on that day. The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions LO believes the

new rules will benefit working environments, safety, productivity and not least recruitment.

“We will definitely see more permanent jobs. The alternative to hired labour is permanent full-time positions,” said LO President Peggy Hessen Følsvik on LO’s own website.

## Some hire, others fire

And yes, stories have already emerged about entrepreneurs who hire when they can no longer get agency workers or temps, but there are at least as many stories – if not more – about staffing agencies that are firing staff.

“We are very apprehensive about what will happen on 1 July when the extension period ends. We will only see how the new rules work in the autumn,” believes Rune Ask, leader of



Bygghag Drammen-Bærum, a construction union that is part of Norway's United Federation of Trade Unions.



*Rune Ask from Norway's United Federation of Trade Unions thinks it was absolutely necessary to tighten rules on hired labour in the construction industry.*

He is visiting LO coordinator Jens Eriksen, who has been hired by the Norwegian Hospital Construction Agency in relation to the construction of a new hospital in Drammen outside of Oslo. The hospital is due to be ready in 2025.

On a normal day, some 800 people work on the construction site for around 120 companies. Around 20 of these are staffing agencies.

Part of the LO coordinator's job is to make sure the construction site is operating in accordance with Norwegian rules on wages and working conditions.

### **Big differences in scope**

Hired labour represents less than 2 per cent of the total number of full-time positions in the Norwegian labour market. Yet in parts of the construction industry around 15 per cent of workers are hired from agencies. There are regional differences too, which is partly why a ban has been introduced in the Oslofjord area.

Many companies have become dependent on hired labour, including most of those involved in building the new hospital in Drammen. The scope varies from only a few per cent to nearly 50 per cent of hired workers out of the total workforce.



*LO coordinator Jens Eriksen's job is to make sure big construction projects adhere to Norwegian rules on wages and working conditions. He is apprehensive about how the new rules will work.*

Faced with the new rules on hired labour, employers must find other ways of covering their staffing needs. So far it seems many are holding back while considering how to handle the situation.

"If there is a need to hire people from agencies there is also a need to employ people," says Ask.

He argues that the need to hire workers is in many cases a sign of bad planning and which results in lower productivity. Hiring agency staff has no doubt also been economically motivated.

### **Trying to circumvent the rules**

Some employers have already been found to be trying to exploit loopholes in the new rules, which say you can only hire agency workers when your company is covered by a collective agreement and a written, time-limited agreement with a workers' representative.

But what is a workers' representative? And what is a trade union? The LO-affiliated online publication Frifagbevegelse recently wrote about a company that had signed a hired workers agreement with the safety representative and not the workers' representative for the United Federation of Trade Unions.

That is an obvious example of someone trying to avoid the rules, argues the LO union, but the company disagrees. And that is where the case stands as of today.

There have also been instances of staffing agencies transitioning into "production companies", without actually changing what they have always been doing. The reason behind the change of name: While access to hired labour from a staffing agency has been strictly limited/banned, you can hire labour as before from a production company.

### **"Limits access dramatically"**

The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise NHO strongly opposes the new rules on hired labour.

"This dramatically limits access to hired labour and hurts many companies across the country. This was predictable, and NHO issued strong warnings against the changes before they were introduced. We are now getting a lot of feedback from companies across a range of sectors about the new agency worker rules. There is, on the whole, a lot of frustration and uncertainty," Nina Melsom, NHO's director of labour relations, tells the Nordic Labour Journal.





*NHO believes there is no need for new rules for hired labour, says Nina Melsom, director of labour relations. Photo: Moment Studio.*

“The changes will make it harder to find the necessary labour and therefore make life harder for many companies that are already struggling in today’s market. We are already seeing signs of this,” she says.

Melsom points out that even before the new restrictions were introduced in April, Norway had some of the strictest regulations on the use of temporary workers and other short-term forms of employment.

“Norway stands out from the other Nordic countries especially when it comes to having stricter rules on temporary employment and hired labour,” points out Melsom.

#### **ESA will investigate**

Even before the new rules came into force, Norway had been reported to the EFTA Surveillance Authority (ESA) for being in breach of EEA law. The organisation *Små og mellomstore bedrifter SMB* (Small and medium-sized enterprises) and several staffing agencies were among those reporting Norway to ESA.

ESA said in February that it would investigate whether the new rules are compatible with EEA law.

One of the things ESA questioned was whether Norway had been in breach of the EU posted workers directive, which says Norway must facilitate the freedom of movement of services between EEA countries. According to EU law, staffing agencies providing labour across national borders with the EEA constitute a delivery of services.

#### **Says Norway is not in breach of EEA law**

Yet the posted workers directive also says that if there is a need to safeguard a functioning labour market, governments can restrict the use of hired labour. And in its answer to ESA in May, the Norwegian government said the new rules on hired labour were not in breach of EEA law.



*Arbeids- og inkluderingsminister Marte Mjøs Persen (Ap) mener Norge ikke bryter EØS-avtalen. (Photo: Astrid Waller)*

“The adopted amendments in the legislation on temporary agency work are based on a desire to protect the fundamental principle of Norwegian working life and the Norwegian labour market model, where permanent and direct employment remains central.

“EEA law allows for interpretation and hence we have the opportunity to strengthen and protect the Norwegian model,” said the Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion Marte Mjøs Persen in a press release from the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion.

#### **“Must be postponed”**

The Conservative Party argues the rules on temporary agency work must be postponed until a conclusion is reached on whether they are in breach of EEA law.

“The ban and tightening of rules have been red-listed by ESA and could be in breach of the EEA agreement. The government has so far sent a 50-page-long answer to ESA in defence of its policy, but it says nothing about what is needed to lift the ban.

“We know that the government will evaluate this, but the construction industry in this area has no idea when it can hire labour again. Instead, companies are employing people whom they might have to let go in a few months, or else they are entering into enterprise agreements with foreign hired labour,” Anna Molberg (Conservative Party), a member of the Standing Committee on Labour and Social Affairs, told parliament in mid-May.

The research foundation Fafo and the analytical group Economics Norway have been tasked with evaluating the consequences of the ban on the use of temporary agency work in the construction industry in Oslo.



## Crisis at the top of Denmark's trade union movement

There is a change of leadership at the Danish Trade Union Confederation FH after allegations of inappropriate behaviour.

NEWS

30.05.2023

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: LH

International Workers' Day on 1 May 2023 did not turn out to be the customary day of celebration for the Danish trade union movement. Lizette Risgaard, President of the Danish Trade Union Confederation FH, had to step down the day before after allegations of inappropriate behaviour towards a number of young men in the trade union movement.

"I have said sorry and apologised unreservedly to everyone who has felt their personal boundaries breached," wrote the trade union boss on Facebook.

FH immediately ordered an investigation into what the men had told the media anonymously about having been inappropriately touched by their top boss Lizette Risgaard during parties and at work. According to several sources, the allegations were known to FH Director Michael Jacobsen but no action had been taken – until now. The Director has been suspended.

### Power struggle expected

When the investigation concludes, probably in the middle of June this year, Denmark's largest trade union confederation will launch a formal process to find a new President. Speculations as to who might replace Risgaard have already started, but there is no obvious crown prince or princess. There is

also no precedence for who should be given the position, so several observers expect a power struggle between public and private unions within FH for the prestigious post.

Lizette Risgaard was the first President of FH, which was created after the merger of LO and the Confederation of Professionals FTF in 2019. Before that, she was the LO President and she is particularly proud of the merger as she now looks back on her long career at the top of the Danish trade union movement, which has now come to a sudden end.

"I am proud of the many things I have been allowed to spearhead in my time as LO and FH President. Especially the merger of LO and FTF which gathered the trade union movement. The many tripartite agreements with different governments. The right to a dignified end to work for people who are worn out, giving them the right to early retirement – the first reforms for decades that benefited employees," wrote Lizette Risgaard on Facebook after stepping down as FH President.

### Leaves a vacuum

She also mentions the fight to keep the *Store bededag* ("All Prayers' Day") as a public holiday as one of her failures.

“We might have lost the fight for *Store bededag*, but we defended the Danish agreement model.”

Her departure and the vacuum at the top of the Danish trade union movement come at a very inopportune time. The day before she stepped down, the government with Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen at the helm called for new tripartite negotiations between the government, employers and trade unions on the government's proposed dismantling of the senior pension (earmarked senior workers who have poor health after many years in the labour market).

It also looks like there will be tripartite negotiations on extraordinary pay rises for public sector workers. FH's current Deputy President Morten Skov Christiansen has been made acting FH President.





## Iceland's heated trade union row over – but embers remain

On 28 April, The Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ) elected Finnbjörn A. Hermannsson as new president. He was the only one who ran.

NEWS

30.05.2023

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON, PHOTO: ASÍ

This marks an end to a difficult period for the confederation and for trade unions which have been through a period of serious conflict. It is not entirely over and has already led to a falling out between the three trade union leaders who have been the most vocal throughout. Or as Hermannsson himself put it in a radio interview the day after he was elected:

“We still can’t say that the confederation is a loving home but we have decided to work together on certain things that we have to cooperate on and take it from there.”

With this, Hermannsson mainly refers to pressure on the state and the government to do their bit to reduce inflation, something which both the trade unions and economists believe is very much needed.

### Three leaders

But more on that conflict. It has revolved around three trade union leaders – Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir, leader of Efling whose members are mainly low-skilled workers from the

Reykjavik area; Ragnar Þór Ingólfsson, leader of VR, the shop and office workers’ union, and Vilhjálmur Birgisson, leader of Akranes Trade Union and also the chairman of the Federation of General and Special Workers (SGS) in Iceland.

These three have for the last few years formed an alliance which had been very critical of the way the Confederation of Labour worked. They had argued it was too bureaucratic, out of touch with workers and not fighting enough on their behalf.

In the end, this led to the resignation of the President of the confederation, Drífa Snædal, in August 2022. She said that the formation of blocks within the unions and the communication with certain leaders made it impossible for her to continue. She especially mentioned criticism from the leaders of Efling and VR. Kristján Þórður Snæbjarnarson, who was First Vice President, took over temporarily.

### Efling laid off all staff

The most controversy has centred on Jónsdóttir at Efling. In April 2022, Efling laid off all its 12 staff. Two months earlier, Jónsdóttir had been voted in as chairman after quitting her job in October 2021 claiming that the staff drove her out. The layoffs were heavily criticised by other labour union leaders.

In the autumn of 2022, the conflict within the unions got more heated. The three leaders – Ingólfsson, Birgisson and Jónsdóttir – had all run for the role of ASÍ President, Second Vice President and Third Vice President respectively, but all of them withdrew their candidacy during the confederation's annual assembly in October. The reason, according to Birgisson, was that it was not possible to reach a common ground.

“I apologise to Icelandic workers that we were not able to unite. Unfortunately, there is too much personal hate between the leaders.”

This looked like a confederation that was split into two parts. To cool things down, the assembly was postponed until April 2023 and Kristján Þórður Snæbjarnarson was elected as temporary President until then.

### The big falling out

Efling is the largest union within the Federation of General and Special Workers (SGS), where Birgisson is the leader. Through SGS, Efling is a member of ASÍ. After the ASÍ assembly, the three trade union leaders said they would discuss a possible withdrawal from ASÍ. But then these three leaders fell out.

In December, the Federation of General and Special Workers reached a new collective agreement which is valid until 31 January 2024. Efling was not part of that deal and Jónsdóttir was severely critical of the agreement, claiming the deal was not good for her capital region workers. That did not sit well with Birgisson. Efling reached their own agreement in March after a series of strikes.

Earlier this month, Efling agreed in a general vote to leave the Federation of General and Special Workers and instead become a direct member of ASÍ. Only 5 per cent of Efling members voted and 68 per cent of them agreed to leave the Federation. Jónsdóttir said that Efling paid 53 million ISK (€350,000) for membership every year without getting any service. To which Birgisson reacted in an interview with Channel 2 in Iceland:

“The situation is that if you do not do as Sólveig Anna wants you to do, these will be the consequences. That's just the way it is and that's what I've found out. I'm just not the type to allow myself to be forced to cooperate and do things that are against my conscience.”

So, it would appear these former allies are allies no more.

### A placeholder President

But back to the ASÍ assembly in April. When it was clear that Snæbjarnarson did not want to continue as President of the confederation, the unions started to look for someone they could agree on to take over. They found that individual in Finnbjörn A. Hermannsson, who had recently quit as chairman of Byggið, which is a union of construction workers in Reykjavík and Akureyri. He agreed to take the position for the remaining term, which is 18 months. Ragnar Þór Ingólfsson was elected First Vice President.



*Finnbjörn A. Hermannsson, President, in the middle, with Hjördís Þóra Sigurþórsdóttir, Second Vice President to his right. Ragnar Þór Ingólfsson, First Vice President, is on the far left and Kristján Þórður Snæbjarnarson, Third Vice President, on the far right.*

Hermannsson is a very experienced trade union leader. He had been leading Byggið and its predecessors for 26 years. He had decided to retire after he quit that job, but since all the leaders could agree on him as President, he chose to accept the job. His career in the labour market has been a good one and he has earned the reputation of being good at settling disputes.

However, Hermannsson is not considered a long-term President – he only intends to remain in the position for one two-year term. So now the question remains – will he be able to unite the trade unions again under the confederation, and will the unions at the end of his term be able to find someone who has the general support of the union? That remains to be seen, but it is clear that the next few months will be a demanding time for the Confederation of Labour.

# "Saving the environment" with liquid-cooled data centres

Global data giants are looking to countries with a lot of renewable energy and high security levels to build environmentally friendly data centres. But as electricity prices skyrocket, they are also being accused of taking energy needed in other sectors.

## NEWS

30.05.2023

TEXT: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

The SINTEF research foundation in Trondheim has been looking into data centres and the environment and now launches an alternative model for data storage in very small, liquid-cooled data centres that can be positioned near district heating facilities.

The new and old technology differs a lot, according to Petter E. Røkke, research director at SINTEF Energi AS in Trondheim, and head of the HighEFF research centre.



*Petter E. Røkke is research director at SINTEF Energi AS in Trondheim and head of the HighEFF research centre.*

He points out that Norway is an attractive place for international data centre companies because of the access to clean Norwegian energy.

### Excess heat

"Data centres primarily use energy for cooling, in particular air cooling of data processors and the like. This produces a lot of excess heat which is difficult to use because of its low temperature – typically 40 to 50 degrees Celcius," he says.

"Liquid-cooled systems create excess heat with a higher temperature which means it is easier to use its potential in for in-

stance district heating systems. This is more expensive, however, so using air cooling is simpler and cheaper."

"The excess heat can also be used, for instance, to heat greenhouses that need stable temperatures year-round, stable and dry air. Nurseries have been offered government incentives to transition from fossil fuels to more environmentally friendly electric energy," he explains.

"Greenhouses have had to shut down due to high electricity prices. Data centres could therefore be a good match for fruit and vegetable greenhouses," explains Røkke, referring to the SINTEF blog "This is how we reduce data centres carbon footprint".

### Liquid cooling

A data centre usually contains server racks in corridors. They also contain systems for cooling and ventilation, extra electricity supplies, and systems for security, fire safety and monitoring. In other words, a lot of equipment that produces heat.

The company Green Edge Compute AS has just built a data centre using liquid cooling.

"We build very small liquid-cooled data centres using our own equipment from which we can hire out capacity," explains founder and CCO Patrik Hagelin.

"Our goal is to figure out how to build the world's most sustainable data centre while also taking into account future needs for technology."

The company was founded in 2017 and has built a pilot data centre in Trondheim.





ple. They will be tasked with looking after all of our data centres," says Hagelin.

"The idea is to run several local centres from one common operation central, although we also have several decentralised data centres."

"This is liquid-cooled. This allows for a high-density construction because liquid cooling is more efficient than air cooling," says Hagelin.

"We can fit far more equipment with liquid cooling into one rack, and this takes up very little space. The liquid cooling creates heat which we reuse in the city's district heating system," he explains.

In other words, people can take a hot shower with water heated by the data centre.

### **Cuts emissions**

Hagelin explains that liquid cooling reduces CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

"These are high-tech data centres that save money, heat the city and cut a lot of CO<sub>2</sub>," he says.

The City of Trondheim will soon start using the Green Edge Compute data centre, which is situated in the cellar of an office building.

"We choose locations that are as close as possible to district heating. This one is 100 square metres and the data centre has a capacity of 2MW. We don't build massive installations and this is the biggest difference. We can reuse up to 90 per cent of the energy we put in. The warm water that comes out has a temperature of between 50 and 60 degrees Celcius," explains Hagelin.

"The data centre uses 40 per cent less energy because it is not using airconditioning for cooling. Our 100 square metres centre allows us to cut more than 1,500 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> annually compared to other 2MW capacity centres."

"SINTEF tested the pilot and published a report last autumn. We will keep building and start to migrate clients now. Our goal is to manage with just a few employees, perhaps 10 peo-