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Sweden: How Do Successful Unions Operate?

Rasmus Hästbacka

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“I want to summarize the current state of the labor market in the following words: amazing opportunities for militant unions, but amazingly untapped potential.” So writes Rasmus Hästbacka, lawyer and coordinator of the syndicalist union SAC, and suggests solutions for local unions in crisis.

In Sweden, we have become accustomed to the employer side – not workers – pushing the frontline forward. The ability of unions to push back is not in good shape. Why is that?

One reason is the loss of members. On September 4 this year, a headline in the newspaper Dagens Nyheter read: “Workers’ unions are bleeding members.” The article is about the big Social Democratic LO unions having lost 20 percent of their members since 2006. LO’s chairman Johan Lindholm gives an explanation: “We’ve been lousy. We need to be out at the worksites and listen with bigger ears and a smaller mouth.”

100,000 shop stewards are gone

Another factor behind the weakening of Swedish unions is a

decrease in the number of local shop stewards (union delegates). In 2021, the book *Den svagaste länken* by Jonas Nordling highlighted that about 100,000 local delegates have disappeared from the Swedish labor market in two decades. Considering population growth, this means that the number of delegates has been cut almost in half.

Even more important is probably the lack of engagement in the unions' membership base.

Syndicalists have not escaped the Swedish union crisis. SAC's membership has dropped from over 30,000 in the 1930s to just over 3,000 today. Within SAC, we constantly struggle to fill various union boards and committees with delegates. Even though syndicalists are more active than members in many other unions, there is probably only a small minority of our membership that push for union issues at work.

I want to summarize the current state of the labor market in the following words: amazing opportunities for militant unions, but amazingly untapped potential.

Successful unions

I'm not surprised that Swedish unions have trouble attracting and engaging members. Most unions have abandoned the very foundation of a successful union.

This can be captured in a metaphor: *Successful unions drive in the middle of the road and avoid the ditches*. One ditch is the union only negotiating. The other ditch is trying to wage collective struggles without the ability to negotiate. Driving in the middle of the road means organizing at workplaces. It's the patient organizing work that ties together collective struggle with successful bargaining.

Organizing is not the same as recruiting members. Organizing means that workers build cohesion and act for collective demands.

Toothless unions

Unions that don't invest in organizing become quite toothless and sooner or later hit a dead end. Why? If there's no organizing going

on among workers, the union becomes a thing outside the collective of workers. If workers aren't the driving force, then external negotiators, representatives and lawyers take the lead.

External comrades can provide help in terms of negotiating individual grievances and legal disputes, but they can't wage labor struggle on behalf of the workers; and it is labor struggles on the shop floor that create pressure at the bargaining table. Without pressure from the floor, the results are usually small or zero. That's why the union becomes pretty toothless without organizing.

The negotiation ditch

Today, all Swedish unions are stuck in the negotiation ditch, more or less. Sure, syndicalists sometimes organize with their co-workers. I myself have listed examples of collective struggle. But if we're honest, we are primarily occupied with negotiations, usually in individual cases.

When unions are stuck in the ditch, the member activity and numbers tend to drop. It's simply rather pointless to only negotiate without organizing. Then it's no wonder many local unions shrink and disappear. SAC is a federation of Locals (LS). In 1935, SAC had 726 LS. Today, there are 20 LS.

Negotiations nonetheless

It should be noted that negotiating without organizing isn't always pointless. There are exceptions. When employers break laws and collective agreements, it's sometimes productive to negotiate on the basis of those laws and agreements.

A big and important exception is the situation of migrant workers. There, laws and collective agreements are constantly breached and negotiations often yield good results. The book *Something has happened* contains many successful examples from the Stockholm Local of SAC. These negotiations have also attracted many new members.

At best, union negotiators can defend workers' rights to the full. But that's where it ends. To advance the frontline, workers must

then apply pressure on their employer. Otherwise, they hit a dead end.

Every member is a potential organizer

As mentioned, the situation of migrants is an exception compared to the rest of the labor market. The fundamental problem in the labor market isn't that employers break laws and collective agreements when they exploit workers and steamroll the staff. The fundamental problem is that employers exploit and steamroll workers with the support of laws and collective agreements.

It's entirely possible for employers to pursue awful policies and still abide by laws and collective agreements, for example, by understaffing and using day laborers. After all, we live in a class society and the legal order protects the employers' superior position. That's why it's important both to defend workers' limited rights and to fight for stronger rights, i.e. for better conditions and more influence.

Here, it's important not to fall into black-and-white thinking, an either-or mindset. A successful union needs to master *both* negotiations *and* help members take on the role of organizer on the job. To use the metaphor I started with, it's about driving in the middle of the road and not sliding into the negotiation ditch.

Workers' power

My next metaphor runs as follows: *Unions that want to drive in the middle of the road must battle a crosswind*. It's a crosswind that blows unions into the negotiation ditch. What does that mean? To negotiate grievances on the basis of law is what everyone expects from Swedish unions today. That's what the state apparatus and employers expect, and it's what union members expect.

To invest in organizing is therefore to work against this crosswind in order to get back on the road. It can feel like something entirely new and often requires union members to radically change their perspective on union work. The power to improve the situation of workers does not lie in the hands of paid officials at the union office, primarily, but in the hands of workers themselves.

on the shop floor make decisions about the union demands, methods of pressure and agreements with employers. We welcome all wage earners except bosses as members. Collective struggles are driven by and for members, independent of political parties. If there are better structures than syndicalist structures, I don't know of them.

Everything to win

I mentioned that the number of Locals of SAC has gone from 726 to 20, but I'm still optimistic. I believe we can reverse the death of Locals and start new Locals again.

A hundred years ago, SAC's pioneers had precarious employment, no legal protection and were often mobile workers. They endured long workdays, starvation, and harsh repression. Yet they managed to build collective strength in more and more workplaces, backed by more and more Locals. It's probably easier for us to succeed today.

If syndicalists manage to get back on the road, we can start pushing the frontline forward for real. Then we can recruit more members and finally move toward democracy in the workplace – again.

Surely, every Swedish union should invest in organizing. Surely, every reasonable soul is in favor of democratizing working life. But maybe the union bigwigs of LO, TCO and Saco don't want to play with SAC? Well, that doesn't matter. Syndicalists can still build a cross-union community with their co-workers. We have nothing to lose but our lack of imagination.

Rasmus Hästbacka

The author is a member of the Umeå Local of SAC and has written the book (free online) Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice. See also the article How Can Syndicalism Grow?

“Worker power comes from workers having relationships with each other that enable them to take collective action to win demands and get their needs met. The workplace is the central location of worker power. First, the workplace is where co-worker relationships are formed. Second, it is also where collective action is directed by either withholding labor or directly implementing desirable workplace practices.”

How, then, can organizing be done in a systematic way? North American unions have revived a method centered on personal conversations. Organizers talk to all co-workers, preferably one at a time, and are good listeners. That’s the starting point for mapping the workplace, finding concrete issues and formulating demands that unite the workforce.

The next step in the method is to make an action plan. It’s an agreement or joint decision about who does what and in what order. When the plan is put into action, workers escalate the pressure in the bargaining process. The final step is to evaluate the struggle and its results. Then organizers start over with personal conversations to find the next issue to pursue, and so on.

The method is taught by both the cross-union network Labor Notes and IWW. Variations exist but it’s basically the same method.

Formal structures

If organizing is to survive the ebb and flow of class struggle, a formal structure needs to be added. I won’t comment on suitable structures for unions within the Swedish LO, TCO or Saco. I’ll stick to SAC.

Through our Locals, members can help each other build workplace sections, cross-union groups and syndicates. The section is a job branch. A cross-union group is a group of co-workers who meet and pursue demands regardless of union affiliation. A syndicate is an industrial branch.

Why are these structures suitable? They are based on member democracy, solidarity and independence. This means that workers

What should be done?

If it’s true, as the LO chairman said, that “we’ve been lousy,” what can unions do to go from defense to offense? The standard answer from Swedish unions is to pay more union recruiters and representatives to recruit more members and negotiate more cases. That can sometimes yield results.

In recent years, the Stockholm Local of SAC has managed to recruit many migrants and win more of their cases through more paid representatives. That’s impressive but it is not to organize. Therefore, it’s not something that develops the collective strength of workers. The acute problem in our Locals is not what we do (negotiate) but what we don’t do (organize). Thus, we need to add organizing, not remove the bargaining machinery.

What needs to happen for organizing to take off in Swedish unions? Three things, I believe. First, the myth of the so called “union promise” needs to be buried. Second, organizing needs to be pursued in a systematic way. Third, we need formal structures that promote (and don’t hinder) organizing. So, what does that mean?

Bury the so called “union promise”

LO has produced a myth that Swedish unions are strong by virtue of a “union promise” (*fackliga löftet*). The myth is told in three different versions. The first version is that a group of workers in the 1800s promised each other to stick together and not underbid each other, and therefore the promise is alive today.

The second version is that everyone who becomes a union member today makes this promise, and therefore the promise is alive at Swedish workplaces. The third version is that the promise is embodied through collective agreements.

Workers don’t need union myths but a union community to stand strong. A community doesn’t arise just because a union is formed. The community must be organized into existence. Co-workers develop community, for example, when they support each other at work and back each other up against management, when they establish norms of solidarity, resolve internal conflicts

independently of bosses, and arrange social activities outside working hours.

TIPS: WHAT CAN SYNDICALISTS DO?

In 2017, SAC released a study showing that many radical unions outside Sweden succeed in growing through patient organizing. So, what can our Locals (LS) and industrial branches do to promote organizing?

- LS can appoint people to the local board with the task of arranging courses about organizing. It can be as simple as getting a basic book on organizing and arranging study circles, physically or digitally. It could be, for example, *Secrets of a successful organizer* or any of its translations. A good investment is to offer members courses during paid working hours, i.e., members take one or more days off and LS compensates for lost income.
- At LS member meetings, anyone who wants to organize their workplaces and recruit co-workers can take on the organizer role. At regular meetings, members can share how far they've come in the organizing process and get help moving forward.
- LS can appoint tutors who support workplace organizers. Tutors can sit on the local board or a special organizing committee. If organizers and tutors struggle to keep up with their tasks, LS can pay them part-time.
- Similarly, a syndicate (that is: an industrial branch) can arrange study circles and appoint tutors but focus on its specific industry. Meetings can be about the participants' workplaces and the

possibilities for organizing there. The industrial branch becomes a forum for anyone who wants to start workplace sections and cross-union groups of co-workers.

- Organizing requires us to prioritize. Our LS and industrial branches need to focus their limited resources on certain workplaces for a certain time.

Is it hard to find members who want to be tutors and organizers? Then a nominating committee can be paid part-time to phone the membership. Negotiators too can be recruited this way. If negotiators struggle to keep up with all cases on a non-paid basis, pay them!

Again, it is important not to fall into black-and-white thinking. *On the one hand*, a syndicalist union can't just rely on paid representatives. If so, SAC would become just a small version of LO. Thus, we would be stuck in the negotiation ditch. *On the other hand*, the union can hardly be built solely on non-paid activism. We need a mix of paid and non-paid engagement that is tested and regularly evaluated.

Small glossary

LS Local union for workers in all industries in a locality

Syndicate Industry-specific branch

Section Job branch

Cross-union group Includes co-workers regardless of union affiliation

Systematic organizing

The driving force of organizing is the concerned workers themselves. A certain American organizer emphasizes that successful organizing creates good relationships between co-workers: