

Three Short Pieces

About employment protection, individual wage setting and the 6-hour day in the Swedish labor market

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Constant Lies About "LAS" – The Employment Protection Act

Published on October 30, 2024

In 2022, the already weak employment protection in LAS became even weaker. It was the culmination of decades of lies about it being "too hard" to fire workers in Sweden. No, it has never been difficult to fire people, at least not legally difficult, just financially expensive in some cases. According to a certain section of LAS, it has always been the case that employers can fire workers at any time and on any grounds and then buy them out against their will. It's section 39.

The nature of section 39 is such that even if your employer fires you in violation of the law, and even if a court determines that it's a violation of the law, the employer can always exempt itself from the court's decision by paying damages specified in section 39. So, you can be fired because you are a trade union activist or a woman or a homosexual or whatever. If your union then sues the employer and wins in court, the employer still wins the dispute when the employer buys you out against your will.

There was an urgent need to reform LAS in 2022. But while workers needed stronger employment protection, we got weaker protection instead, with the support of the top union leaders in Sweden.

The only guarantee that you will keep your job, when the employer wants to fire you, is that the co-workers will go on strike. But you know what! In 2019, it was made illegal in Sweden to force employers to respect the employment protection through strikes. This ban too was supported by the top union leaders in Sweden. Fortunately, this is not going on abroad, because then we would be talking about corrupt and yellow unions.

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Individual Wage Setting Rewards Lap Dogs

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In Sweden, the leaders of most trade unions are positive towards so-called "individual wage setting", more precisely a system where bosses make subjective decisions about wages. This is madness because it is pure employer politics. One of the few unions that wants to abolish individual wage setting is the SAC – Central Organization of Workers in Sweden – the syndicalist trade union in this country.

So, what's the problem with individual wage setting? There are at least six problems: that growing pay gaps are the result and the stated purpose, that bosses are given power to set wages on subjective grounds, that discrimination becomes more difficult to prove when managers can excuse pay differences with vague criteria, that the system leads to negative competition between co-workers and subservience to the boss, that individual wage conversations waste working time for everyone involved, and in the worst case, that pay serves as a means to punish, silence and divide workers.

Syndicalists fight for better wages in a spirit of solidarity. We demand that the lowest paid people and occupational groups receive the largest wage increases. The gaps should be evened out. The remaining pay differences should be based on criteria that don't allow for managers' subjective decisions, such as work tasks, length of employment and education.

It's hardly possible to create a perfect wage system that suits all workplaces. The important thing is that the workforce formulate demands and propose a new wage system. Then the collective of workers need to put weight behind their demands through appropriate pressure on management. Syndicalists believe that collective agreements should be reached that are approved by the workforce through direct democratic voting. In this way, workers can wipe out all wage differences except those that a majority consider fair.

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The 6-hour Day Requires More Worker Militancy

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It's crazy that we don't already have a 6-hour working day in Sweden – or other variants of shortened working hours (while maintaining the wage level). When employers and politicians oppose the reduction of working hours, they come out as enemies of workers' freedom, health, education and family life. Who becomes free by obeying the boss's orders for 8 hours a day or more? Who has the energy to alternate work with education when work consumes all time and energy? Which worker benefits from work shortening the life expectancy? Finally, what happened to our children in the equation?

Perhaps even more crazy is that Swedish politicians have raised our retirement age. In addition, politicians have the nerve to tell the lie "We can't afford it". It's outrageous.

Nevertheless, lately Social Democratic politicians have begun to speak in favor of legislation on shortened working hours. The party's support body, the LO unions, are of course on board, but not in the way one might wish. For LO tycoons, it's more about promising political salvation from above than conducting class struggle from below. It's about vote fishing and strengthening the unions' loyalty to the party. It's a shame.

When the 8-hour day was introduced, it was a great achievement. It was not the legislators who introduced the 8-hour working day. No, it was workers who fought for 8 hours directly on the job and won. In Sweden, construction workers took the lead. They introduced the 8-hour working day as early as 1904. The workers inspired more groups of workers to also fight for a reduction in working hours. Only then did the legislators react and confirm the progress by law in 1919.

The hope of further reductions in working hours rests once again in union struggles from below. But for many workers, my talk about "union struggles" probably sounds like a joke. Many have never been in a workplace where unions are present or alternatively, union representatives have appeared as toothless or corrupt figures. I know, Swedish unions are ravaged by a long-term crisis. It's about declining commitment, numbers and competence to run and administer

unions. Unfortunately, this also applies to the union I belong to, the SAC – Central Organization of Workers in Sweden – the syndicalist trade union in this country.

Those of you who become active in trade unions today are faced with the task of rebuilding the union movement. It's not done during a coffee break, but something we need to do together. How can this be done? SAC and Federative Publishing House have just published a book with several proposals. The title of the book is Swedish syndicalism. Syndicalists believe that unions should be controlled by workers on the shop floor, not by tycoons at the top. Co-workers need to unite across occupational boundaries, instead of being divided into different craft unions. It's also important that more workers begin to take a stand on union issues and put pressure on their employers.

A reduction in working hours is unlikely to be implemented in one fell swoop across the entire labor market. What we need is for co-workers to get together, raise demands and grind on, month after month. Small groups of workers can inspire larger groups. The more people who put pressure on the employer side, the closer we get to the goal.

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Read more about the syndicalist SAC.

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Three polemical texts written from a syndicalist point of view. Originally published in various Swedish newspapers in 2024 (using the web tool Insändarmaskinen). More articles by the same author here.

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