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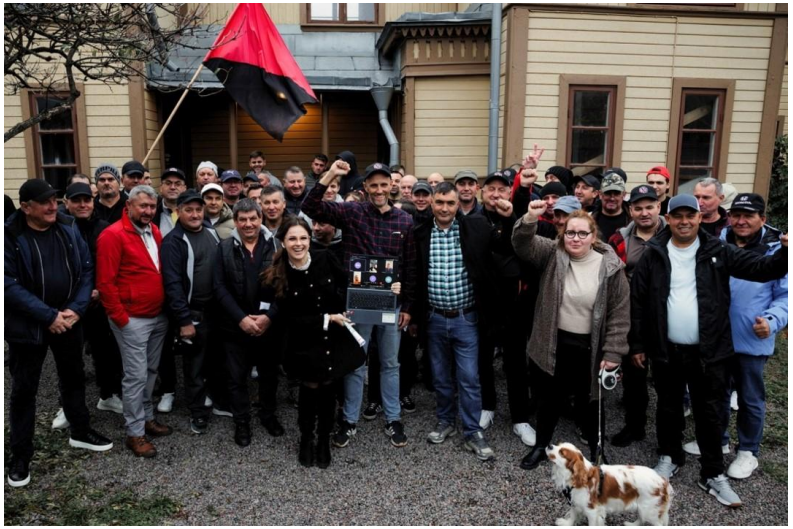
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More articles by the author here. Photo below: migrant workers after the agreement was signed. Photographer: Valeriia Eltarenko.

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Landmark Collective Agreement for Migrant Workers

Rasmus Hästbacka

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Workers at the construction of Microsoft's data center outside the city of Gävle in Sweden secured a collective agreement under threat of strike action through the syndicalist union SAC. The case has attracted attention from a large number of European media outlets.

The Guardian has published a five-month investigation into conditions for migrant workers on data center sites across Sweden, Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands. The investigation uncovers evidence of dangerous conditions and unpaid wages, including at the Microsoft site outside Gävle.

"Days before publication of this investigation, the syndicalist union, representing 70 Romanian workers at Microsoft's site in Gävle, brokered a settlement with BenBau, which it says will give workers back pay and allow union access to sites," reports the Guardian. The back pay amounts to 15 million Swedish kronor (roughly 1, 5 million US dollars).

On October 25, this group of workers voted unanimously for a collective agreement with BenBau AB, one of the companies building Microsoft's server halls, reports the Swedish newspaper Arbetaren. The deal raises wages to 260 kronor an hour (26,46 US dollars), includes a time bank for longer leave periods in the workers' home countries, and allows the workers to elect health-and-safety delegates from their own ranks.

The agreement opens with the statement: "This collective agreement is the first Swedish collective agreement written by and for migrant workers." Since the deal was struck, even more workers have joined the union at the construction site.

This outcome is the latest result of the syndicalist union's years of organizing among migrant construction workers, particularly those from post-Soviet countries who use Russian as a common language. Freelance journalist Volodya Vagner has reported extensively on these efforts. "By confronting exploitative employers with aggressive litigation and long-forgotten methods of struggle, like blockading the construction sites of contractors

with wage debts, the union has managed to redistribute millions of dollars in unpaid wages and damages," writes Volodya Vagner.

The collective agreement at the Microsoft site is consistent with SAC's new collective agreement-strategy articulated in 2020. This strategy is a response to a Swedish anti-strike law that entered into force in 2019. The strategy was presented on the Counterpunch news site: "According to our assessment syndicalists can still fight lawfully for both collective agreements and alternatives to such agreements", SAC representatives stated.

Yet collective agreements are nothing new for Swedish syndicalists. During the 20th century, Swedish syndicalists entered into hundreds of collective agreements.

SAC was founded in 1910. Fittingly, the vote on the 2026 collective agreement took place in the childhood home of the legendary Joe Hill.

This rewrite was made by Rasmus Hästbacka, labor lawyer and member of SAC