

Swedish Unions in Crisis – What Solutions Do Syndicalists Offer?

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Swedish unions are governed from the top down and are therefore bad at serving workers' interests. So writes Rasmus Hästbacka of the syndicalist union SAC. Based on his new book, he suggests how worker-led unions can be rebuilt.

It's a truism that capitalism is not a democracy; capitalism means economic dictatorship, which is most evident in our workplaces. But truisms have the merit of being true and as long as workers live under the employers' dictatorship, there is every reason to repeat this truth and fight for democracy. Another truism is that the fight needs to take place primarily on the job through labor unions. But not just any union will do.

Many people outside of Sweden look at our country and believe they see an exemplary union movement. I'm sorry to break the news, but nowadays Swedish unions suck. Three pieces of evidence should suffice. First, the leaders of Sweden's biggest unions supported the introduction of an anti-strike law in 2019. To my knowledge, the only union that has developed a strategy to tackle this law is the syndicalist union SAC.

Second, the same leaders who supported the anti-strike law also supported the weakening of Sweden's employment protection act in 2022. Third, a labor market slum is growing where migrants are brutally exploited, which might dump working conditions across the board. The syndicalist SAC is the only union that provides effective counterfire.

Now, someone might ask: What did Swedish union leaders demand in exchange for supporting the 2019 anti-strike law? Brace yourselves: nothing. Literally nothing.

To be honest, I can think of only one well-functioning Swedish union: The Dockworkers Union. Our syndicalist union SAC has shrunk from almost 40 thousand members, in the 1930s, to just over 3 thousand today. Our union harbors great potential and can demonstrate some progress here and there, but the work of rebuilding a powerful movement remains.

So, which recipes for building a movement do Swedish syndicalists propose? The first step is to recognize reality. We need to understand the situation in order to change it in a reasonable direction. So let me expand a bit on the truisms.

The current dictatorship in our workplaces divides the population into roughly two classes: on the one hand the majority who sell their labor power, on the other hand company owners, private and public bosses who rule over everyone. Workers don't have the right to participate in the important decisions at work, not even the right to vote for suitable bosses or remove unsuitable bosses.

If this dictatorship is likened to a disease, the symptoms are clear. The employer side gains from ordering a minimal workforce to toil to the max for minimum pay. The consequences for workers are understaffing, stress and low wages. The result for business owners and managers is fat profits and bonuses.

Under the unfettered rule of employers, health and safety is not a priority. Last year, 65 Swedes died in workplace accidents. Over 770 workers die each year from work-related stress. Around 3000 Swedes die prematurely each year due to problems at work (and remember that Sweden is a small country with less than 6 million wage earners). These are symptoms of a fundamentally sick working life.

The economic dictatorship also sets strict boundaries for political democracy. As the American liberal John Dewey put it: "politics is the shadow cast on society by big business".

The primary way to combat the symptoms of economic dictatorship is through union organizing. Even if this struggle is necessary, it's insufficient as long as the disease itself remains.

Imagine for a moment if we instead had democracy at work, i.e. worker-run workplaces. Then we could put human needs at the center, instead of employers' greed and lust for power. Then work could be a place where we develop and thrive instead of being pushed around and robbed of the wealth we produce. Every worker should be able to feel joy on Monday morning instead of anxiety on Sunday night.

How can democracy be introduced at work? There is a strategy almost as old as class society itself. The strategy is about workers stepping up the union work to seize power over their workplaces. Thus, the purpose is to conquer not only a bigger piece of the bread but the whole bakery. Syndicalism means precisely this, step up the work to take power. For the readers of ZNetwork, it might be of interest to note that European syndicalism is to a large extent identical to the industrial unionism of IWW in North America.

If a union is to be run *for* the workers, it must be run *by* the workers. Therefore, syndicalists believe that unions should be controlled by workers on the shop floor, not by union tycoons at the top. Sweden is a backward country in this respect. Unlike our neighboring countries, there are almost no member-led unions here. Therefore, we need to build unions where the member base decide which demands to pursue, what kind of pressure to put on employers and which deals to approve.

Everyone knows unity is strength. Therefore, workers need to unite across occupational boundaries and not be divided into different craft unions such as the Swedish Saco unions. Furthermore, workers need to carve out maximum space for collective action. Thus, unions should be independent of political parties, not be the support bodies of, for example, the Social Democrats as many Swedish LO and TCO unions are. Likewise, unions should be independent of all religions but respect the religious freedom of every worker.

In short, the syndicalist view is that unions should be based on democracy, solidarity and independence. Syndicalists form local job branches which are called operating sections since the long-term vision is for workers to take over and operate the production of goods and services.

But is it really that simple? A summary of syndicalist recipes may sound simple, but building member-run unions requires hard and patient work. As soon as we relate the recipes to union practice, it's easy to fill a book with comments. And oh, that's just what I have done. The title of the book is Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice. The book is released by SAC in cooperation with Federativ Publishing House. It can also be downloaded as a free PDF file.

By building member-run unions, workers can develop the collective strength and competence to implement worker-run workplaces in the entire economy. Thus, to organize on the job is to sow the seeds of the future: a society of free and equal people.

Such a future would be a socialism worthy of the name – or, if you like, a liberalism worthy of the name. The liberal John Dewey famously rejected capitalism as a kind of “industrial feudalism”. He wanted “industrial democracy” to take its place. Even conservatives in Abraham Lincoln's Grand Old Party understood that “wage slavery” (as it was called back then) is an abomination.

Rasmus Hästbacka

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