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Why join a small syndicalist union when there are big bureaucratic unions? A perspective from Sweden

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Translated from the Swedish union paper Arbetaren. Written by Rasmus Hästbacka, member of the syndicalist union SAC.

Photos below: Rasmus Hästbacka / Syndicalist construction workers. Photographer: Private / Volodya Vagner.

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a small masterpiece from the best unions in North America. If you are interested in organizing sections and cross-union groups, have a look in the book Swedish syndicalism, written by me and published by SAC in cooperation with Federativ Publishing House.

When a syndicalist section plays its cards right, the section is usually the union with the most impact in the workplace – even if the section hasn't recruited most of the workers. A union that mobilizes the workforce and thereby has the greatest impact is simply the best union.

THE NINTH ARGUMENT

My final argument for SAC runs as follows. For every worker who joins SAC and engages in syndicalist forms of struggle, the prospects for introducing democracy at work improves. The struggle for democracy at work means nothing less than workers seizing all power currently held by employers. If such a democratization takes place on a broad front, it will challenge class society as a whole and pave the way for equal societies. Sounds good, eh?

Rasmus Hästbacka

More articles by the author in this library here.



According to the latest statistics, 69 percent of Sweden's wage earners are unionized. This can be compared with the peak of 86 percent in 1995. Most wage earners are members of the unions within LO, TCO and Saco. A minority are members of independent trade unions such as the syndicalist SAC, the Swedish Pilots' Association and the Dockworkers Union (the latter, however, is often a majority in individual workplaces).

As an active union member for more than 20 years, I have met countless workers who are frustrated with how LO, TCO and Saco work. The typical experience is that "the union sits in the lap of the employer" or that bosses simply sidestep the union. When workers try to act collectively through Swedish unions, they are usually run over by both bosses and union representatives.

MINORITY AND MAJORITY UNIONS

The typical reaction when I mention the alternative SAC is: "Now that's how a union should work". However, people hesitate when they expect that syndicalists will be a minority in their workplace (if employees change unions). A minority union is perceived as weak, at best, or as a factor dividing the workforce, at worst.

The big majority unions may be dysfunctional, but the minority union is perceived as even worse. The fundamental question then becomes: *Why should I and my co-workers act through SAC?*

SAC's numbers have shrunk from almost 40 thousand members in the 1930s to just over 3 thousand today. It seems that, for quite some time, Swedish syndicalists haven't been very good at arguing for membership. Some syndicalists emphasize that they are members for ideological reasons, as do I. But the ideology of SAC is about fighting for democracy at work through the union; thus, we are back to the basic question: *Why act*

meet regularly to arrange so-called extraction blockades against companies that haven't paid wages. A *sixth* argument for SAC is that our Locals are a platform for solidarity across industry boundaries. Members in different lines of business support each other.

The *seventh* argument for SAC is that even if you are the only syndicalist at work, you get standard support in terms of negotiations and labor law. This helps you, for example, in cases of wage theft. Compared to other unions, our negotiators do an impressive job. One example is the negotiators in Stockholm's Local of SAC, described in the book *Something has happened*. Another example is the negotiators in Mellannorrland's Local of SAC.

HELP TO ORGANIZE

The *eighth* argument for SAC is that you and your co-workers get help with organizing. By that I mean help to develop and use your collective strength. Even if you don't have a section supported by your Local, you can form a cross-union group with the support of the Local.

Our union offers courses and guidance in organizing that no other Swedish union offers. You and your co-workers get support in building a larger and stronger cross-union group. SAC's training of health and safety delegates is also unique in Sweden. We train delegates to become organizers. Members also get help with recruiting co-workers and starting a syndicalist section. The value of the union card grows for each co-worker you recruit and act with. A good combination is to have both a section on the job and an even larger cross-union community.

An important source of inspiration for our courses is the book *Secrets of a successful organizer* from Labor Notes (in Swedish translation: *Organisatörens handbok*). The book is

co-workers. Collective strength requires a strong sense of We on the job. Syndicalist organizers make the effort of being responsive, to be good listeners, and reconcile different views in the workforce into a collective line of action.

As said, syndicalists have a tradition of tactical creativity. This means that we don't have an exaggerated belief in legally binding collective agreements. Perhaps the worst myth in the Swedish labor market is the notion that as long as employers are bound by collective agreements, the working conditions are decent.

For syndicalists, the collective agreement is a tool among many. It's not a universal remedy for all problems. When syndicalist sections enter into collective agreements, a part of our strategy is to conclude agreements for a short period of time with a short notice period. Why? According to Swedish labor law, a no strike-clause follows every collective agreement. It can't be avoided.

If an agreement runs for three years or more, it means a long period of prohibition against industrial action – at the same time, employers have ample opportunities to worsen the working conditions by virtue of the management prerogatives. Employers can, for example, increase the work pace, slim the staff and restructure the business. Periods of “industrial peace” are periods when workers are expected to be peaceful but not the bosses.

SOLIDARITY BETWEEN WORKPLACES

My *fifth* argument for joining SAC is solidarity between workers in different workplaces. SAC is a federation of Locals (LS). Our Locals are open to workers in all industries. Members and sections in the same industry can form an industrial branch (in Swedish: syndikat). One example is the Construction Workers Branch in Stockholm. Members of the branch

through the minority union SAC? If workers have better possibilities to push the frontline forward through the majority unions, then that's where syndicalism has a future. If so, then SAC is superfluous.

I will answer the basic question here. But first, some sad facts: Swedish unions are ravaged by a crisis that's been going on for a long time. As you might have figured out, that includes SAC. The crisis is about declining numbers, commitment and competence to administer and run unions. I prefer brutal honesty. In a previous article, I conceded that although SAC harbors great potential and can demonstrate some progress here and there, the work of rebuilding a powerful movement remains. Those of you who become active in Swedish unions today are faced with the task of rebuilding the movement. It's not done during a coffee break but something we need to do together.

From a syndicalist perspective, our smallest building blocks are *sections* and *cross-union groups*. A syndicalist section is a local job branch. Sections are open to all employees except bosses. A cross-union group is a group of co-workers who meet regularly, regardless of union affiliation, to discuss and fight for common interests. Below, I will first discuss the point of forming sections and cultivate cross-union cohesion among co-workers. Then, I will discuss opportunities that syndicalists have even without sections.

NINE ARGUMENTS FOR SAC

There are at least nine arguments for choosing the minority union SAC. My *first* argument is that members are treated as adults. Our sections are self-governing in local affairs and practice direct democracy. The collective of members decides which union demands to pursue and what pressure to use when the

employer rejects the demands. No agreement is made with the employer without the approval of the member base.

My *second* argument for SAC is that syndicalists have a tradition of tactical creativity. Syndicalists have a rich flora of pressures at their disposal. Blockades and strikes are only a small part of our toolbox. This helps us to choose the appropriate pressure for the situation at hand.

A *third* argument for SAC is that members have the union's backing and are free to act without loyalty bonds to employers or political parties. When a syndicalist section is formed, it is usually the smallest union in the workplace, but syndicalists still form a majority with their co-workers against the bosses. It's a myth that the biggest union is always the strongest union. It's a kind of numerical mysticism to believe that a large number of members or high union density always reflects real strength. A big union can be an empty shell or a dead bureaucracy.

Co-workers don't become strong by being many in a membership register. Co-workers become strong by being many who stick together and act together. The best union is therefore the organization that unites and mobilizes the workforce in collective action.

Co-workers don't become strong by being many in a union's register, especially not if decision-making power in the union is concentrated in the hands of representatives and these representatives cultivate a close consensus with the employer. Then the union usually stands as a bureaucratic brake pad in front of the workers, rather than as support behind the collective. The union may have recruited a majority of the workforce, but the union bureaucracy is still an obstacle to collective action. Thus, the strength is an illusion. The beautiful union statistics becomes a façade or a bluff that the employer will call.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT INFLUENCE

The *fourth* argument for SAC is that our sections can improve the conditions for all employees through cross-union cohesion, direct and indirect influence. So, what do I mean by that? A direct influence means that syndicalists and other employees raise common demands and pressure the management. Swedish syndicalists have addressed a wide range of issues this way: from employment security, health and safety concerns and the rights of pregnant workers – to wage theft, wage raises and the right to take breaks. I have highlighted successful examples in a separate article.

When syndicalists exert indirect influence, it means that the section pushes other unions ahead of it. Such influence is often exerted in a triangle drama in the workplace. In many Swedish workplaces, there are not just two parties (union and employer) but three. These are *the workers on the floor* and at the top representatives of bureaucratic *consensus-seeking unions* and *the management*. Consensus-seeking unions dampen the workers' demands and fighting spirit and make it easier for management to implement its plans.

When a section begins to pursue common interests of the workforce, both the consensus unions and management get new incentives to meet the workers' demands. Otherwise, even more workers might change union to the section and increase the section's militancy. If representatives of consensus unions nevertheless side with management, the section can recruit more workers and become even stronger.

DUAL TRACKS

Both the direct and the indirect influence requires that syndicalists organize on dual tracks, i.e. that syndicalists build the section *and* promote cross-union cohesion between