



INTERNATIONAL



International Trade Union-Political Cooperation

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation

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Preface

IN ORDER TO REFORM SOCIETY, trade union activities at places of work seemed insufficient and therefore the Swedish trade union organisations participated in the founding of the Social Democratic Party. Wage earners also needed a political say. Thereby, we became strong enough to make changes in society and step by step build up a democratic model for society which was based on wage earners' interests.

Thus, the trade union-political cooperation turned out to be an important instrument for the labour movement to achieve changes in society.

Today the political and trade union arena is more comprehensive than ever before. It now covers the whole world. The question is therefore, if we can, when working at European and global levels, learn something from our success with the trade union-political cooperation in Sweden. For example, how can we make use of trade union-political cooperation to strengthen our demands for human rights in working life? Can wage earners in other countries benefit by our experiences from the trade union-political cooperation in Sweden? And do we have anything to learn from other countries?

The above and other issues constitute the starting point of this handbook. It can, hopefully, inspire to major future discussions on possible joint ways to reinforce our international political and trade union work. I hope that many people will participate in this discussion.

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Introduction

THE WRITER AND SOCIAL DEMOCRAT Svante Forester was once asked the question what the most beautiful words are. He answered “voting claimed and is to be implemented”, since these words describe the very essence of democracy – one person, one vote. It was in the structures of the labour movement, in the very first trade unions and in other people’s movements that this democratic way of decision-making developed.

The first trade union in Sweden was founded in 1846, and only a few decades later the trade union movement became a force which those in power in those days could not ignore. However, the very first trade union organisations encountered intense, and sometimes violent, opposition. Demands for justice and democracy met with violence and suppression also in our country. Imprisonment and maltreatment of trade union activists occurred also in Sweden.

LO and the Social Democratic Party – two branches of the same tree

BEFORE LONG, THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED Swedish trade union movement realized that the struggle for a just and democratic society could not be achieved only by way of trade union activities at places of work. The working class also needed a say in politics. Therefore, in 1889, the Swedish Social Democratic Party, SAP, was founded. Nearly a decade later, in 1898, The Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, the collaborative organisation of the Swedish trade unions, was founded.

According to the initial statutes of LO, there was an obligation for the trade unions to affiliate to the Social Democratic Party, which, however, two years later was superseded by a recommendation of affiliation. At the Congress in 1909, this recommendation was instead replaced by so-called collective affiliation, i.e. the possibility for trade union organisations to collectively affiliate their members to the party, but with the possibility for individual members to opt out. The system of collective affiliation was, in 1991, replaced by the present order, i.e. the local trade union organisation can, in its capacity as organisation, affiliate to the party without the individual members becoming party members.

Trade union-political cooperation is based on mutual interests. The trade union movement needs the party and the party needs the trade union movement. Wage earners have a direct say in political bodies, the party has a strong electorate as well as a structure which reaches out to places of work.

Today it is more common to form social democratic workplace associations which organise trade union members politically. By making more trade union members active in party activities, LO strives for getting opinions, arguments and demands, which are discussed at places of work, passed on to the local political debate and the decision-making process at municipality level. This organisational cooperation signifies that the trade union movement and the party participate jointly in the election work and in each others' training of members as well as other activities at local and regional levels.

Sharing the same basic values is the core of the trade union-political cooperation. This does not imply that the LO and its affiliates are of the same opinion as the party on all political issues. Opinions might vary regarding which instruments to use in order to achieve joint objectives. LO and the party also have separate fields of responsibility. LO and the national unions are to represent their members' interests in society. The Social Democratic Party additionally represents many different groups and, at the same time, is to handle different parliamentary situations which may arise.

To discuss:

Can you mention improvements in the Swedish society which are the results of trade union-political cooperation?

How should we develop our cooperation with the Social Democrats into an effective instrument which makes changes feasible also in the future? What ought to be changed?

New arenas

“Our trade union struggle is, basically, the same as it was a hundred years ago. The difference is that the arena has widened. At the beginning, there was the individual workplace and then the nation. Today it comprises the whole world”.

THIS IS A QUOTATION MADE BY Bertil Jonsson, the then President of LO, at the LO 100th Anniversary in 1998.

Trade union-political cooperation has, without doubt, played an important part for wage earners' influence in Sweden, for our social security and for our labour market. The question is whether such cooperation also is practicable in transnational situations, as for instance within the EU and within various global bodies.

The Nordic arena

The trade union-political cooperation between the trade union movement and the Social Democratic Party is, to a great extent, a Nordic phenomenon. Similar models developed simultaneously in the other Nordic countries.

SAMAK, a forum for Nordic trade union-political cooperation, which has existed for more than a hundred years, is a concrete example of this phenomenon. SAMAK assembles the Social Democratic Parties and trade union confederations in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and the Faeroe Islands. In the last few years, SAMAK has, among other things, drawn up joint Nordic programmes on the EU, welfare policy, human rights, globalisation and democracy.

SAMAK has today five main objectives:

- To strengthen and develop the cooperation of the Nordic labour movements on trade union and political issues, national as well as international issues.

- To reinforce and develop the labour movement's role in the Nordic cooperation.
- To promote trade union-political collaboration and uphold the social democratic values in the Nordic countries, as well as in the European and international spheres, in which the member organisations are active.
- To harmonize views and experiences and formulate common views on issues of central importance for social democratic policy in general as well as for the work in the Nordic Council and in the Nordic Council of Ministers.
- To launch an inter-Nordic discussion on issues regarding the future.

To discuss:

What possibilities do we have to develop the Nordic trade union-political cooperation?

The European arena

THE EUROPEAN COOPERATION is growing stronger. This cooperation generates many questions for the union movement, as regards for instance the resilience of union strength and the methods of regulating labour markets in the future. Cooperation between union organisations in Europe has therefore become more important. The European Trade Union Confederation, ETUC, of which LO, TCO (The Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees) and Saco (The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations) are members, provides a platform for such cooperation. In the same way, the Social Democratic parties in the EU cooperate through the Party of European Social Democrats, PES.

It is, however, not obvious for the ETUC to pursue trade union-political cooperation with the PES in the same way as unions in the Nordic countries do with the Social Democrats. Even if the motive for the trade unions' emergence was the same all over Europe, they have, however, over time developed distinct traditions under very diverse circumstances.

While the Swedish trade union movement is divided into blue-collar workers, white-collar workers and university graduates, the union movement in many other European countries is grouped according to political conviction or religion. In some countries, there have been links between the unions and the social democratic movement, while others have cooperated with the communists or other left-wing parties. There are also trade union organisations with Christian orientation which cooperate with Christian Democratic parties. Some European trade unions are neutral as regards party politics.

There are, on the European level as well, examples of successful trade union-political cooperation. One such example originates from 2004, when the European Commission presented its proposal to facilitate trade in services in Europe, i.e. the so-called Services Directive.

The Commission's proposal would have made it impossible for trade unions to demand the presence of an employer's representative to negotiate with in cases when a company performs work in a foreign country on a temporary basis. In addition, the Commission proposed the

so-called “country-of-origin principle”. This signified that wages and working conditions of the company’s country of origin should apply, not the conditions prevailing in the country where the services were performed. This would, according to the joint analysis then made by the LO international department and experts from the LO-TCO Legal Bureau, result in low-wage competition and undermining of collective agreements.

LO therefore took action in several instances in order to bring about amendments to the Commission’s proposal. Since the Social Democratic Party was in power in Sweden in 2004, LO could make use of its good relations with the Social Democrats. Gradually, the government was made aware of the drawbacks of the proposal, and was convinced to act in the EU in order to have labour law exempted from the Services Directive. Besides, LO and TCO drew up a joint union document with proposals for amendments and submitted it to the ETUC.

While LO deployed its good relations with the Swedish Social Democratic MEPs, the ETUC used its contacts with union-friendly MEPs from various countries and convinced them to submit the trade union standpoints to the European Parliament. As a result of tenacious negotiations, the Social Democrats in the European Parliament eventually succeeded in attaining a compromise with the Conservative/Christian Democratic group.

The ETUC, LO and TCO were satisfied with the compromise, even if not all of the union standpoints gained support. The essential points had, however, been included. The country-of-origin principle was deleted from the Directive and labour law was exempted. In addition, there was no longer any ban on demanding the presence of an employer’s representative in negotiations. The European Commission as well as government representatives in the Council of Ministers thereafter approved the principles of the compromise.

To discuss:

What possibilities are there to develop trade union-political cooperation on the European Union level?

The global arena

“There are no national trade union issues, all issues that we are to deal with today in the union movement are international issues as well. They concern all of us”.

THESE LINES WERE EXPRESSED BY Guy Ryder, the then ITUC General Secretary, at the founding of the ITUC in Vienna in 2006. In the main, the new world federation is made of two former confederations: the ICFTU, which can broadly speaking be described as having had a social democratic orientation and the WCL, which had a Christian or Christian democratic basis.

The main reason for the founding of this new international trade union federation, of which the LO, the TCO as well as the Saco are members, was the challenges that the world's trade unions are facing due to globalisation. The ITUC has 168 million members and its main task is to encourage the founding of strong, democratic union organisations in the entire world. The ITUC also works for globalisation based on the respect for human rights in working life.

Since long, these rights have been laid down in the conventions of the ILO, a UN body which is significant to the union movement. The ILO is a tripartite organisation, in the work of which workers', employers' and government representatives take part on equal terms. The ILO Conventions cover a large scope of social issues and core labour standards. The fundamental ILO Conventions are:

- Right to organise in trade unions
- Right to collective bargaining
- Prohibition of slave labour and forced labour
- Prohibition of child labour
- Prohibition of discrimination

Through the ITUC and through Global Union Federations, influence is also exerted on the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other global bodies.

Political parties also cooperate across national borders. For instance, the Swedish Social Democrats are members of the Socialist International, SI. As regards the ITUC and the Socialist International, there are of course contacts, but just like the case on the European level, the possibilities to pursue “Nordic” kind of trade union political cooperation are limited by the fact that the ITUC gathers trade union organisations of different political colours.

The ITUC and the SI, as well as the ETUC and the PES, participated in the global Anna Lindh seminar in Stockholm in 2006. The objective of the seminar arranged by LO and the Social Democrats, was to discuss the challenges posed by globalisation on the labour movement and the political democracy. The seminar resulted in the following joint guidelines for trade union-political cooperation in the international field:

- Right to organise freely and to bargain collectively
- Respect for the fundamental human rights at work (core labour standards)
- Reform of the international financial institutions
- Respect for human rights and democracy
- Free and fair trade including social security as an essential component
- Sustainable development leading to full employment

To discuss:

How can we endorse the conclusions of the Anna Lindh seminar?

How can we develop trade union-political cooperation on the global level?

Cooperation in international solidarity action

IN INTERNATIONAL ISSUES AS WELL, LO and the Social Democratic Party in Sweden have common views. LO and the Party have worked together on issues such as fighting apartheid in South Africa, supporting colonial liberation, fighting the military junta in Chile and other Latin American countries, as well as supporting the democratic movement in the former communist Eastern Europe.

The international department of LO also participates in the international work of the Social Democrats. Thanks to this cooperation, LO has for instance contributed to the distinct emphasis that the issue of core labour standards is given in the international program of the Swedish Social Democratic Party.

Moreover, LO was one of the founders of the Olof Palme International Center, the joint body of the Swedish labour movement for international development cooperation and public opinion-moulding in international issues. In addition, some of the international projects subsidised by LO and Social Democrats consist of supporting trade union-political cooperation abroad.

The example of Brazil

With support from the Olof Palme International Center, the LO affiliate IF Metall has over many years co-operated with the Brazilian metal workers' trade union CNM and the central trade union organisation CUT regarding training, organisational development and other trade union issues. In the early 2000s, IF Metall received support from the Olof Palme International Center to enhance the trade union and political knowledge of CNM/CUT leaders on the national, regional and local levels, as well as to support trade union-political cooperation with the Brazilian Workers' Party, PT, which at present holds government power in Brazil. The bonds between CUT/CNM and PT are very strong. Both of these trade union movements are the results of the fight against the military dictatorship. The President of Brazil, Lula da Silva, himself has his roots as a trade union activist in the metal workers' trade union CNM.

In order to achieve the greatest possible distribution of the project activities, IF Metall and the Brazilian trade unions have organised study circles at workplaces. The purpose was to inspire and prepare local trade union activists to engage themselves politically and to take on political tasks. During the project, which lasted from 2002 to 2004, over 13,000 people participated in various trade union and political training activities. This trade union-political work is now being continued by the Brazilian trade unions.

The example of the Philippines

Since 2002, the Social Democrats in Uppsala have had the main responsibility for a cooperation project aimed to develop trade union political cooperation between the Social Democratic Party, Akbayan, and the central trade union organisation APL. To make trade union activists see a connection between local workplace issues and national policy has been an important objective. APL and its affiliates have over the years developed extensive cooperation with the Swedish trade union organisations, for example the Swedish Union for Service and Communication Employees, the Swedish Food Workers' Union as well as the Swedish Forest and Wood Workers' Unions.

The Philippine adult education institute LEARN plays a key role in this activity. LEARN was created by a number of independent trade union organisations and other groups. The purpose was to promote trade union solidarity, a collective wage-earner action and education of the future trade union and political activists. LEARN has been supported by the Workers' Educational Association of Sweden, the LO-TCO Secretariat of International Trade Union Development Cooperation, the Olof Palme International Center and the Danish LO.

The most important basis for the development of the initial trade union political cooperation in the Philippines has been laid by the APL and Akbayan trade union and political activists themselves. The Swedish cooperation partners have supported the development, provided suggestions and ideas and inspired them in various areas, for instance by describing Swedish experiences and giving Philippine representatives the possibility of visiting Sweden.

Conclusions

IN THIS DOCUMENT, we have presented three forms of trade union-political cooperation on international issues:

- Cooperation between trade union and social democratic organisations in Sweden on international issues pursued jointly. We acted in this way as regards apartheid and in the same way we can, for instance, work in the case of the on-going oppression in Burma as well as in the fight for human rights in working life. In this way we can together exert influence on the Swedish government's actions in various international contexts.
- Cooperation across national borders, for example between the ETUC and European Social Democrats, as well as between ITUC and the Socialist International. Possibilities of such cooperation are limited by the fact that the ETUC and the ITUC also include trade union organisations with another political orientation. Nevertheless, there are many issues on which those other trade union organisations and Social Democrats share the same approach. Such example was the cooperation on the issue of the EU Services Directive as well as the joint conclusions on workers' rights at the Anna Lindh seminar in 2006. There is a scope to accomplish more as regards these issues.
- Projects aiming at developing trade union-political cooperation in other countries. Such projects naturally require strength and endurance as well as resources and money, which often implies cooperation with central organisations within the labour movement.

How should we proceed?

YOU DO NOT NEED TO BE A national officer or a centrally elected representative to be able to participate in the labour movement's international activities. New technology has for instance facilitated for everybody to take part in discussions and networks together with trade union and political colleagues in other countries. For example the ETUC, the ITUC and the Socialist International as well as many of our trade union and political sister organisations all over the world, have their own discussion groups on websites, such as Facebook.

Trade union activists at local level can also engage in the international work of local branches of the Swedish Social Democratic Party and party districts, and there share trade union experiences. Here, as in all trade union-political cooperation, the main purpose is joint benefit. Social democratic work is strengthened through the trade union perspective, for instance as regards the importance of core labour standards. Furthermore, through political experience, we, trade union activists, can learn more how to exert political influence, not only in our own country but also all over the world.

Those who contemplate the possibility of launching development projects together with colleagues in other countries can learn a great deal from the experiences gained by IF Metall and Uppsala Social Democrats through their projects in Brazil and the Philippines.

– Projects like those we carried out in Brazil require first and foremost long-term thinking. We have cooperated with the Brazilian trade unions since the late 1970s, which we were able to develop further. Furthermore, for a long time past in Brazil, there has existed solidarity between CNM/CUT and the Labour Party PT, especially owing to President Lula's own trade union background.

According to Erland Lindqvist, IF Metall has moved on and received support from the Olof Palme International Center for a similar trade union-political project in Colombia, where IF Metall has had an extensive contact network for a long time.

Bertil Kinnunen is today a national officer of the Social Democrats in Uppsala. He has participated in a trade union-political project in the Philippines during many years. According to him, the whole project began when the representatives of the Swedish Food Workers' Union in Western Sweden met their Philippine colleagues at a conference with the International Food Workers' Federation during the 1980s.

– There was a great interest for international issues at the Food Workers' Union in Western Sweden. After the union had heard about the Philippine trade unions' need of premises for training and administration, they got in touch with AIC, now the Olof Palme International Center. AIC then contacted the Workers' Educational Association of Sweden, which maintained contact with the Philippine adult education institute LEARN. The Swedish Union for Service and Communication Employees joined them as well, since the union had prior cooperation experience with the Philippine seamen's trade union organisations.

Bertil Kinnunen would like to see more of joint trade-union political efforts on international issues:

– We have all the time maintained close contact with the Swedish organisations involved and we have all made the same analysis, Bertil Kinnunen states and continues:

– It does not matter how good you are at training trade union activists, if the labour legislation counteracts trade union activity. And if the laws and structures are to be changed, there is only one scene to do it on – the political one. And if they do not have any political party who is keen on listening, they should create their own. As we did in Sweden and as they have now done in the Philippines. In this way we can accomplish changes in society as a whole.

To discuss:

How can we develop trade union-political cooperation on international issues together with the Social Democrats?

What possibilities are there to use our own experience of trade union-political cooperation when working with colleagues in other countries?

Which of our experiences can be passed on to other countries?

What can we in Sweden learn from them?

