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Theme: Circular economy



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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Björn Lindahl

EMAIL

nljeditor@gmail.com

WEB

www.nordiclabourjournal.org

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When sustainability becomes the fashion

The circular economy is only part of the solution for making our society greener. But it is very concrete and it is easy to measure its results. The circular economy is the theme for this edition, and we look at how it influences trade, fashion and the textile industry.

EDITORIAL

19.01.2023

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

What is the oldest item you own and still use? The question might make us think about how often we change clothes, vehicles and tools. Personally, I have some glass and porcelain which was bought or inherited early on in life, a cheese slicer which has survived many house moves and some screwdrivers that still gets regular use.

But most things are newer and many tools are rarely used. One frequently quoted figure when the circular economy is being discussed is that a drill is used just 13 minutes on average during its lifetime.

That example is also mentioned by Anna Strindberg, sustainability program manager at Clas Ohlson. The home improvement chain is known across the Nordics. Strindberg is one of the people who Bengt Rolfer and Gunhild Wallin have interviewed in their hunt for an answer to the question – what actually is a circular economy?

They get a surprising answer from Tim Forslund, an expert on circular economy at the Finnish Sitra foundation that monitors future generations' interests. He highlights Spotify as one circular economy company, because the company offers a way of listening to music without the need to own and produce CDs. I have just not thought about it like that before since I have associated a circular economy more with companies like Remake, Stockholms Stadsmission, which has redesigned donated clothes since 2002.

Marie Teike is both unit manager and designer at Remake. She loves fashion and the magic that clothes can represent. But she does not love the fashion industry.

“Today’s system is all wrong – in terms of how materials are produced, human conditions during production and the way in which products are transported. It is so wrong and I cannot imagine working in that industry,” she says.

Although it has taken a long time, changes are afoot also in the fashion industry. For the first time ever, Copenhagen

Fashion Week has implemented a range of sustainability requirements, writes Marie Preisler.

“It is a milestone and shows that the fashion industry is moving towards a greater focus on sustainability,” says Morten Lehman, owner of Tailwind, a consultancy firm advising businesses and organisations on sustainability.

Although we as consumers can make a change by making more sensible choices, there is a need for common rules and demands which make sure that what we can buy is more sustainable. What is happening in the EU right now might be very important in that respect. Irish Cillian Lohan presents the EU’s action plan for how to make production and consumption methods more sustainable and circular.

The plan consists of 35 different initiatives that are now being assessed. The aim is that by 2030, all products in the EU market should be sustainable and long-lasting, repairable and maintainable with spares, reusable and recyclable.

The Swedish Trade Federation, representing 9,000 members, is now going through all the new EU legislation which must be implemented. Magnus Nikkarinen is their director of sustainability:

“We are facing an avalanche of regulations,” he says.

Some worry about whether the many new regulations might be bypassed by companies operating outside of the EU.

“Our great fear is unregulated import via online platforms, with products that are completely unregulated when it comes to working conditions, materials and the use of chemicals. I support free and open trade, but that kind of trade is not sustainable,” says Magnus Nikkarinen.

Free trade is the EU’s very reason to exist, but in the past year, Iceland has experienced the upside of not being able to export or import electricity. The country is energy self-sufficient, and the energy is green. The price has hardly moved

in eight years, while the rest of the Nordics and Europe have been hotly discussing energy prices.

Iceland's stability – both in terms of weather and politics – attracts companies that are looking for green energy and cheap electricity.

When discussing the circular economy it is important to remember that the most important factor of all is people themselves. A working life that is so tough that the workers burn out can definitely not be called circular. This autumn, Sweden will introduce new working hour rules, after the European Commission criticises the Swedish rules and after six months of negotiations.

“It is great that we get longer periods of rest from the autumn, but this should have been done a long time ago. We work so incredibly hard when we work, so we are exhausted when we get home,” says Nadja Ståhl, a nurse at the Sunderby hospital north in Sweden.

Labour ministers play a key role when navigating the many initiatives being taken in the EU, the Nordic region or nationally. We portray four of the more or less fresh ministers in Sweden, Norway and Denmark.



Finland shows the way towards a circular economy

Finland wants to be a world leader in the change towards a circular economy. To do that, the country has taken a holistic approach and written the world's first national roadmap detailing the necessary measures.

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The roadmap consists of a range of pilot projects across several trades and businesses, different policy decisions and not least a massive education drive which is also being followed up by projects for lifelong learning in the workplace.

The initiative comes from The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, which is a bit like the spider in the web. Sitra is a public body and future house which studies future development scenarios.

“We cannot continue to consume as if we had four Planet Earths. That is why the circular economy must permeate the whole of society. It will also create new jobs,” says Tim Forslund, Sitra's circular economy expert.

No more use and dispose

But how do you define a circular economy? This might seem like a naive question for someone who has dedicated nearly their whole life to this, but Tim Forslund takes it seriously and answers.

“We can begin by describing how today's society works. Products have far too short lifespans and most often we actually use materials and resources only once. Cars are stationary and offices are empty most of the time. There is a lot of food waste. This is not efficient, it is a system failure.

“What we should be doing is move away from the use and dispose society towards a society where we keep as much value

in our economy as possible for as long as possible. We need things that last longer, that are used as much as possible and that can be fixed or reused. This is a key point."

Tim Forslund is enthusiastic about some solutions and mentions two examples that most people will be familiar with: Spotify – a way of listening to music without owning (and producing) CDs, and Airbnb – which increases the use of available housing by hiring it out as an alternative to hotels.

"This is about meeting a need and creating new ways of accessing resources that otherwise would not be used."

A circular business model

His favourite example is the Finnish company Lindström which designs, produces and rents out work clothes to companies. They also take care of cleaning and maintenance. Lindström cooperates with a company that recycles textiles, which means that when their products have reached the end of their lives, some of the textile fibres can return to Lindström as new fibre products. The company aims to recycle 100 percent of its products within five years.

"This is an old company built on a circular business model. Providing businesses with work clothes is a smart idea. Lindström can do this more efficiently than the businesses themselves and also build on existing long-term customer relationships. Lindström's service solution also frees up the businesses to concentrate on what they are good at, their core services. The idea is to provide products that last for as long as possible, not to sell as much textile as possible."

Another successful example is the electronic company Swapie, whose business idea is to upgrade second-hand mobile telephones rather than producing and selling new ones.

"My colleague's children came home proud about having a second-hand phone. It had become cool and had increased the mobile's lifespan. Then you have succeeded," says Tim Forslund.

He argues similar business logic can be used in many areas. Sitra has recently started four pilot projects in order to increase awareness around a circular economy in the labour market – one in the manufacturing industry, one in the chemical industry and two in the construction industry (one about construction and one about demolition).

Circular economy training across all levels

Over the past few years, the Finnish education sector has also been working on the world's largest circular economy drive. The training is mainly on a higher educational level, but the idea is for this mindset to permeate all levels of society. One project that ran in nine preschools introduced "meal-time pedagogy" with the aim of reducing food waste and creating closeness to nature.

The education drive and the targeted business support are the pillars of the Finnish strategy and the basis for the so-called roadmap from 2016. The roadmap has created a lot of attention and contains a long list of measures for how to achieve a climate-neutral society with the help of a circular economy. The support offered to businesses that want to be in front is one way of encouraging this development.

More work-intensive jobs

But how will the circular economy affect the labour market? Will there be more jobs or fewer?

There are no clear answers to this. The effect varies between different sectors, but most studies have pointed to a slight net increase in the number of jobs. The EU, for instance, predicts a GDP increase of 0.5 percent and 700,000 new jobs by 2030 if the ambitious circular economy goals are reached.

Tim Forslund points out that the circular economy means less mass production and more work-intensive jobs. More services, hire and repair mean more working hours per product.

More circularity also means less harmful exploration of natural resources. This could lead to fewer jobs in the exploration of raw materials like limestone, oil and iron ore, while more small-scale production could benefit rural communities.

But the largest job effect on a global level is expected in agriculture, according to Sitra's study "Tackling root causes" which was published in May 2022.

"This is about our own health"

So are we going back to the agrarian society then?

"Yes, but the Nordics or the rest of Europe might not be where we will see the main effect on jobs. The transition to more regenerative agriculture will mean more labour is needed. We have to disrupt the soil less, use more crop rotation and use fewer chemicals. We need to transition from agricultural practices where we waste and pollute our soil, to agricultural traditions that improve soil health and diversity. In the end, this is about our own health."

Positive "side-effects" would be saving biological diversity and the climate. With a rapid transition to a circular economy, biological diversity could recover to 2000-levels by 2035, according to the Sitra report. The food and agriculture sector is clearly where you could achieve the greatest effects.

"By reducing waste and making products with less input and increasing life spans, you use fewer resources. And when we use less land, the pressure on nature eases. If we also disrupt the soil less we can trap more CO₂, which is also good for the climate," explains Tim Forslund.



EU initiative will make circular products the new normal

Sustainable and circular products will be the new normal in EU markets. That is at least the idea behind the EU Commission's initiative for a new circular economy action plan which is now being scrutinised by the EU decision-making machinery.

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TEXT: BENGT ROLFER AND GUNHILD WALLIN

“This is a comprehensive shift compared to previous proposals. I see it as a beacon of hope that has been lit and we really need that these days,” says Cillian Lohan, member of the EU Economic and Social Committee (EESC) – a consultative body made up of both representatives from the social partners and civil society.

Cillian Lohan represents the Irish organisation Green Economy Foundation and in the EESC he is an expert and rapporteur on circular economy.



The EU's action plan aims to make the way products are produced and consumed more sustainable and circular. The plan contains 35 different initiatives which are currently being assessed. The aim is that by 2030, products in EU markets should be sustainable and long-lasting, easy to fix and maintain with spare parts, and be reused and recycled in a safe way.

Trades that are considered central to this effort include textiles, electronics, batteries, packaging, foodstuffs, plastics and construction. The circular economy will be scaled up to include everyone, not just "frontrunners".

Cillian Lohan from the EESC sees industry as the most active part when it comes to the circular economy.

"Industry is pushing this, they are ahead of the lawmakers. Most studies show that you create more jobs if this is implemented in the right way. But legislation must favour those who want to lead and not include regulation that punishes frontrunners," he says.

700,000 new jobs with a circular economy

For businesses, this means cooperating to create structures for sustainable products, which the Commission believes will create new opportunities within the EU and beyond. The action plan says the circular economy can potentially increase

the EU's GDP by 0.5 percent by 2030 and could create 700,000 new jobs.

For citizens, a circular economy means products of better quality, functionality and safety which are both effective and economically sound, according to the strategy. Products should also have a longer lifespan and be designed to be reused, repaired or easily recycled.

Some decisions have already been made – for instance the standardisation of mobile telephone chargers so that they can be used with any brand. But the strategy for a circular economy is bigger than that, says Mats Engström, senior advisor at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, SIEPS, who has been following EU environment policy for many years.



Mats Hellström, Senior advisor at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, SIEPS. Photo: Håkan Målbäck.

"We have had the Ecodesign directive for a long time, which regulates things like how much electricity a fridge should use. Now the plan is to make this apply to other natural resources besides energy. One part of this is to use as little material as possible, basically reducing the use of all resources and not just energy. This is what the Commission is now proposing," he says.

An ambitious green policy for the current period

The new action plan is part of the EU's Green Deal, which includes a range of decisions that are important for the environment being made in the final days of the Czech Presidency. They include the "Fit for 55" package, the EU's plan for a green transition by reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55 percent by 2030 compared with 1990 levels.

The EU's Green Deal is an umbrella term for some 50 new environmental initiatives and strategies that will eventually become legislation. It is an unusually ambitious environmental policy for this session which ends in 2024, says Mats Engström.

"The Green Deal represents a clear increase in environment policy ambitions for this Commission. A lot is being written about the climate, but circular economy issues are linked to the climate and are a very important part of it all. The ques-

tion is how high the ambitions will remain in face of high energy prices and a tough competitive environment in industry."

Like Cillian Lohan, Mats Engström sees that many companies have ambitious environmental agendas, while trade organisations, like Business Europe, believe it is time to row back a little, for instance when it comes to proposals that impact the packaging industry. Similar noises are being made by the conservative European People's Party group in the European Parliament, where the Swedish Moderates and Christian Democrats are members.

It is said that the old Eastern Block countries are more sceptical of the many climate and environmental measures being proposed. Mats Engström says it is not black and white. In general, this might be the case, but there are big differences between countries, and Slovenia and Slovakia are among the countries that have ambitious plans.

"It depends on which issue you discuss, but interestingly, consequence analyses show that the economic gain from a circular economy is often greater in central Eastern Europe. They would be more efficient and gain from it."

What can the Swedish Presidency do to drive the Green Deal forward?

"Most of the proposed legislation has already been tabled, so I think it will be an efficient Presidency which will try to reconcile the different positions," says Mats Engström.

An avalanche of new laws and regulations

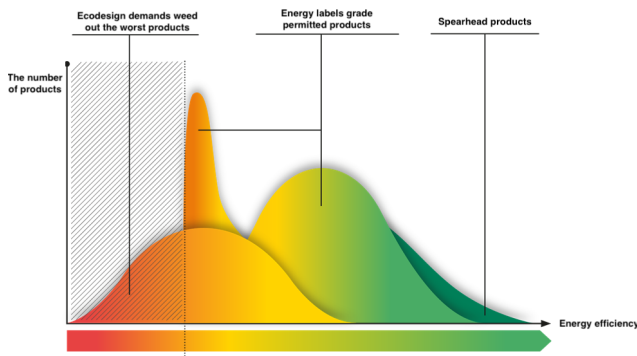
At the Swedish Trade Federation, representing 9,000 members, Magnus Nikkarinen is now going through all the new EU legislation which must be implemented – somewhere between 20 to 30 pieces of legislation on sustainability and a circular economy.



"We are facing an avalanche of regulations. A huge number of laws relevant to our members are coming during the EU Commission's current session which lasts until 2024. It is a challenge. The changes carry great potential, but this is large and comprehensive legislation where a lot of things intertwine," he explains.

He mentions two pieces of legislation which will have a big impact on trade. One is about sustainable products – an eco-design law. The other is a piece of legislation demanding businesses must show "due diligence" throughout the supply chain. They will be expected to know the complete history of a product before it ends up on the shelf, including human rights issues and work environments.

Nikkarinen's job is to understand the legislation and its consequences for trade. The federation studies guidance and information about the new conditions – what do the changes mean and how can they be efficiently implemented? Being prepared is alpha and omega and digitalisation is a must.



The Ecodesign directive will weed out the worst products from the market and reward spearheading products.

Sustainability has traditionally been a small part of what businesses do and has not represented a major cost. These changes are more comprehensive with stronger social and environmental aspects.

“Sustainability has been lifted to an entirely new level,” says Magnus Nikkarinen.

Despite the pandemic and war in Europe, 80 percent of Swedish Trade Federation members have pursued their work on sustainability, which includes small and medium-sized businesses.

“Right now we are seeing rapid changes on the consumer side of things, where price has become more important. Our challenge is to deliver products that are both sustainable and affordable. We must also offer small businesses our help. The larger ones manage better,” says Magnus Nikkarinen.

He points out another challenge – ensuring fair competition. Businesses that follow the legislation must be encouraged.

"Our great fear is unregulated import via online platforms, with products that are completely unregulated when it comes to working conditions, materials and the use of chemicals. I support free and open trade, but that kind of trade is not sustainable. Consumers know it, but we also know that price is important and unregulated import increases all the time. I want us to ensure that we do not become exposed to skewed competition."

Magnus Nikkarinen believes that new jobs will be created within the circular economy, not least in the textile industry. Clothes and other textiles will be collected, sorted and changed into new materials. Knowledge about materials and new business models will be needed. Nordic companies will compete on quality and he sees the circular economy as having great potential when it comes to Nordic cooperation.

“We already see increased interest among consumers for repairs, second-hand clothes and an expectation for knowing more about the products.”

What do you expect to see from politicians?

“The most important thing is that the new environmental legislation does its job and contributes to real change. There are far too many examples of ‘political greenwashing’ which only adds red tape and extra cost with unknown consequences,” says Magnus Nikkarinen.



How donated textiles become new clothes

Fashion and textiles are environmental bad guys in terms of raw material production, work environments and pollution from processes to finished products and transport. There are many ideas for circular solutions in all parts of the chain, but it will take time to turn this big ship around.

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TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN AND BENGT ROLFER

When the then Swedish Minister of Culture and Democracy Alice Bah Kuhnke arrived at the 2019 Nobel party, she wore a silk gala dress. It was made by Stockholms Stadsmission's company Remake Sthlm, which has been turning donated clothes into new designs since 2002.

Bah Kuhnke's dress was made out of donated silk shirts, including her own. The worn-out clothes had been cut up and transformed into cascading materials worthy of a Nobel party.

"We managed to show that reuse does not have a particular design, but that it can be anything at all. Donated and unwanted clothes can become ball dresses and suits," says

Marie Teike, the Remake founder, designer and unit manager.

Marie Teike loves fashion and the kind of expression and magic that clothes can represent. She does not, however, love the fashion industry.

"Today's system is all wrong – in terms of how materials are produced, human conditions during production and the way in which products are transported. It is so wrong and I cannot imagine working in that industry," she says.

A new brand based on second-hand clothes

Marie Teike has been sewing her own clothes since she was a young girl in a small town north of Gävle. She was already us-

ing second-hand clothes to create her own garments. It feeds her creativity and works as a kind of canvas which gives her an outlet for her fantasy within the framework of the material and the piece of clothing.

She spent ten years in London working as a model. He also made her own small collections with material from existing clothes, often on commission by artists. She ran a second-hand shop in Sydney for a few years and that experience led to a temporary job in one of Stockholms Stadsmission's second-hand shops.

This is where she got the idea to start a label within the organisation, securely anchored in social and environmental sustainability, in an organisation that was also working for a more human society. This became Remake Sthlm.



20 years later, the label is still part of Stockholms Stadsmission's organisation. There is a large atelier in the suburb of Farsta Strand, an online shop plus a retail space at the traditional NK department store. Remake Stockholm is a valued brand which has won the Elle fashion magazine sustainability award, NK's innovation award and the Damernas Värld magazine's prestigious Guldknappen award – to Marie Teike's joy and surprise.

“I have never been out of breath for so long.”

“Having our aesthetics awarded like this gave us self-confidence, and it confirmed that we were on the right track. It was huge,” she says.

Teike shows us around the space and tells us about how they are working. There are eight permanent employees. They also have some 20 people on work training in cooperation with the employment service. To help in this undertaking, Stockholms Stadsmission employs a full-time supervisor.

“Everybody has their journey, and there are many exciting encounters. I do not have to change jobs because so much changes around me here. The actual creative process changes too. We never know what material we will be working on, and that means we innovate every day.”

40 tonnes of clothes and textiles a week

Some of their clothes are exhibited in the entry hall, and our eyes are drawn to an orange outdoor jacket. Donated clothes have been given a new life and a new expression, a chance to be “re-loved”. In one atelier, an employee is working on “filleting” jeans. All seams, linings and zips are cut away. What is left is a piece of pure material in the shape of a trouser leg, which is then sorted according to colour or level of wear before being sewn into yard goods.

At one table an employee is embroidering colourful patterns onto a worn wool jacket. Another table is piled high with winter hats, balaclavas made from worn-out wool jackets. Next door are rows upon rows of clothes sorted according to material, colour and previous function. Marie Teike runs her hand across an orange jacket with visible affection for the material.

Every week, Stadsmissionen receives between 35 and 40 tonnes of textiles. Some are sent directly to the 23 outlets, others go to Stockholms Stadsmission's own projects, like warm clothes for those who need them. Remake get the clothes which they can increase the value of. Employees on the sorting desk look for particular colours or materials that Remake Sthlm send as suggestions. Sometimes the employees have their own suggestions for what they think might fit Remake Sthlm. The sorting office is like the organisation's heart, says Marie Teike.

One percent of the world's textiles reused

Every year, Swedes buy 13 kilos of textiles in the shape of clothes and things like upholstery, curtains and cloth. The average lifespan of a piece of clothing is 2.2 years. The world average is nine kilos per person, according to the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. Sweden's consumption of textiles has increased by 40 percent between 2000 and 2020, according to the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency.

Unlike many other materials, textiles aren't easily recycled and usually end up as general waste. More and more clothes shops do accept used clothes, but this is still on a small scale.

At the same time, the textile industry is the fourth largest consumer of raw materials and water after food production, housing and transport. Yet only one percent of the global consumption of textiles is recycled, according to the EU Commission's action plan for a new circular economy. The EU textile sector has started to catch up after years of structural change, but still, 60 percent of clothes sold in the EU are made outside of the Union.

The Commission now wants to address the problem through a special textile strategy. The aim is to strengthen the industry's competitiveness and innovation by encouraging the EU market to become more sustainable and adopt a more circular mindset. Much of this is about recycling textiles, but the strategy is also looking at so-called “fast fashion” in order to find new business models.

There are many proposals. Some focus on creating textiles that are recyclable, some on creating support for the reuse of textiles and for offering repairs, others on creating new business models which support a circular mindset within the industry.

The future way of shopping

Marie Teike is optimistic but also worried about the sheer scale of what is happening within the trade right now. It has become more acceptable to sell second-hand clothes and there are many new regulations coming from the EU.

“I worry on behalf of the entire industry – where do all the people who love to work with clothes go? At the same time, I am thinking ‘finally’.”

She is convinced that second-hand will become one of the main ways of shopping in the future. She never buys anything new herself. She sees circular fashion as a necessary future both for the environment and for social sustainability.

“This is out of respect for people and materials, while it also challenges the creative process. We still want to do what we did 20 years ago. We want to communicate our way of working with textiles and quality. Sometimes I hear that we are ‘dabbling in clothes’ but this is so much more. Today we know more about the effects our large consumption of clothes has on the environment and on people,” says Marie Teike.



Sustainability brings new Nordic retail jobs

Clas Ohlson is one of the companies striving to make a difference for the planet. It aims to be carbon neutral with a circular value chain by 2045 and is already underway.

THEME

19.01.2023

TEXT: BENGT ROLFER AND GUNHILD WALLIN

Clas Ohlson is top of the list for sustainability among hobby and leisure companies in both Sweden and Norway.

“To be prepared for the future we must have high ambitions in this area,” says Anna Strindberg, Clas Ohlson’s sustainability program manager.

The retail chain’s main business is home improvements and it runs over 220 outlets in Sweden, Norway and Finland staffed by around 5,000 people. But going forward their main focus is not necessarily selling as many new products as possible, but increasing their tool hire business and offering spares so people can fix things rather than buy new ones.



Anna Strindberg

“Of course we will continue to carry a broad selection of stock, but at the same time, we want to be able to offer more sustainable services. If we can use our large customer base to

become more sustainable, it is our responsibility to do so. We want to be part of the green change,” says Anna Strindberg.

Sustainable products, tool hire and spares

Beyond offering more sustainable products, Clas Ohlson also wants to hire out things and offer spares. Tool hire is already offered in all their outlets, and spares are now being rolled out across large parts of the company.

Anna Strindberg explains their strategy:

“I have read that a drill is being used on average for 13 minutes over its lifetime. That really makes you wonder whether you should buy a new one or rent one instead. The more people who can make use of a product, the lower the environmental impact. Perhaps we will sell fewer drills, but we believe this combination of customer service is the future.”

Sustainability permeates the way the company chooses products too. At a time when saving energy is uppermost in everybody’s minds, Clas Ohlson offers shower flow reducers, LED products and seal strips. Other examples include different storage solutions to reduce food waste.

100 sustainability ambassadors

In order to increase staff engagement and knowledge about their sustainability efforts, Clas Ohlson has set up a system of sustainability ambassadors. So far some 100 staff have volunteered for the role.



Clas Ohlson has 13,500 products that they sell across 2,300 shops. The company employs 5,000 people and has a turnover of 8.8 billion Swedish kronor (€ 789m). Photo: Clas Ohlson.

One shop that has been at the forefront of circular thinking is Clas Ohlson in Väla retail park outside Helsingborg. Andreas Sassart is one of the pioneers and also one of the first sustainability ambassadors. He told his trade union paper Handelsnytt he had long been worried about how often faulty products were simply thrown out.

He spent a long time arguing before having his ideas heard. Among them is a sales corner for returned products with minor faults plus stocking spare parts. Today, customers enjoy being able to for instance change the cutting blades of a hand blender rather than having to throw it away.

Anneli Hellmann is a salesperson in the Välo shop and also a trade union rep for the Swedish Commercial Employees Union. She runs some of the sustainability efforts together with Anna Strindberg.

“This is about ending buy and discard. We all do our best. We have a discovery corner in the shop where ex-demo products and returns are sold at a reduced price. We also hire out things like carpet cleaners – indeed, most tools that you don’t use that often can be hired,” says Anneli Hellmann.

The Väla shop is one of the test outlets for selling spares.

“It is super popular and will be rolled out across all our shops. It might be a new switch for your coffee percolator or a new vacuum cleaner brush head. Recycling is also very popular. Anyone bringing in an empty ink cartridge even gets 10 kronor as a thank you,” she says.

Changing working tasks

For staff, the sustainability drive means some new working tasks. Sustainability is also part of the online training programme which all employees must go through, points out Anna Strindberg. Trade union rep Anneli Hellman confirms that there is broad support among members for working like this and learning new things.

The question is whether this way of working will lead to more or fewer jobs. Anna Strindberg does not think the number of jobs will change in any noticeable way. She does believe, however, that existing jobs will become – well, more sustainable.

The Swedish Commercial Employees Union has over 150,000 members and embraces efforts to make the sector more circular – even if it might have an impact on retail sector jobs.



Linda Palmethofer, President of The Swedish Commercial Employees Union. Photo: Pontus Lundahl.

“It might well certain jobs disappear, but new ones are added so all in all the difference might not be so great,” says the union President Linda Palmethofer.

The union was one of the first in Sweden to work actively with climate issues. The union President remembers the reaction when this was decided during the 2016 congress.

“There were many raised eyebrows. Should we really work with something that would reduce consumption? But we concluded that it was sensible to have a consumption-based emissions goal.”

Today, this point of view seems to be generally accepted among members. The trade union’s own surveys show nine in ten members think the trade’s emissions must be cut.

“There is huge engagement among members. We must move away from a use and discard culture where it is cheaper to buy a new piece of clothing than fix the old. So it is important to find the correct circular model. We will be needing more people who can mend and fix, more who can assess second-hand goods and more who can change current goods with something else.

“So we are not talking about removing jobs from the retail sector, we will simply need new types of jobs. And many of the new tasks will need more workers than the ones that disappear, for instance when you need to tailor clothing,” says Linda Palmethofer.

Sustainability as an order or an opportunity

The union’s survey also shows that nine in ten members feel employees should have a greater say in the workplace’s work on sustainability.

“Many feel they are not involved in the workplace’s sustainability work, and that it is controlled from above. It makes things seem more like an order from above than something people can cooperate on,” she says.

A clear majority of members (85 percent) also think that current skills development opportunities do not live up to the expectations for increased sustainability.

“Members need to learn more in order to guide customers into making wise decisions, but in most instances, there is poor access to that kind of skills development.”

Linda Palmethofer is also very critical to the Swedish government’s proposed increase in VAT on repairs, including for clothes, from 6 to 12 percent starting 1 April. The plan is for a stepped increase up to the normal tax band of 25 percent. This sends out a completely wrong signal, she believes.

“The proposal goes against what is really needed if we are to make smart climate decisions. If repairs become more expensive, more people will buy new things instead, this is log-

ical. Politicians must provide incentives instead so that people will make the best choices.”

Anna Strindberg at Clas Ohlson is also critical to the proposal.

“As responsible for our sustainability strategy, I want to make it easier to make sustainable choices. We are living in a skewed reality where it is cheaper to buy something new than to repair things. It is crazy to make repairs even more expensive,” says Anna Strindberg.

Trade also critical

The Swedish Trade Federation with its 9,000 members has also voiced its dissatisfaction with the increase in VAT on repairs.

“We have been clear that we believe VAT on repairs is not a good idea, and we want to promote a combination of new sales with repairs. We also know that people who have tried it, often carry on doing it,” says Magnus Nikkarinen, director of sustainability at the federation.

He follows sustainability issues closely and calls the EU’s new legislation on the circular economy a structural change. Businesses will need new knowledge about new legal demands on sustainability throughout the entire value chain from design to recycling. They will also need to know how goods are handled before they end up in the shop.

“This means that businesses operating in the EU will be expected to have done their homework and to have enough information about human rights and work environments also. There will be a far higher demand on shops to self-monitor,” says Magnus Nikkarinen.

Right now, the Swedish Trade Federation is focusing on getting to grips with the new legislation and its consequences for trade.

“We highlight the importance of being prepared, informed and on top of your supplier chains – to work with the ones you can trust in order to be sure the production process is proper. It is also necessary to be on top of digitalisation in order to provide the correct information to other businesses, authorities and consumers.”

More skills development will be needed, but this will vary between sectors. The textile industry faces the most comprehensive need for change, where you will have many new occupations in reuse and recycling. Products being used here will need to be either renewable or recycled.

“We will move towards more circular business models and we need to secure the flow of products. At the same time, we need to consider how to make things economically viable,” says Magnus Nikkarinen.



Sustainability requirements at the Copenhagen Fashion Week

For the first time ever, the Nordics' largest fashion week has implemented sustainability requirements for participating fashion brands. A new era, but the road to a sustainable fashion industry is long, says expert.

THEME

19.01.2023

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: COLETTE DER KINDEREN, LOVECHILD 1979

Models at Copenhagen Fashion Week are about to make history between 31 January and 3 February when they will be showcasing the fashion houses' upcoming creations on the catwalk. For the first time ever, the fashion week has made several concrete sustainability requirements compulsory for the participating fashion brands.

Brands that will be showcasing models have agreed to stick to a set of minimum standards for sustainability, defined by the fashion week organisers. These standards came into force on 1 January 2023 and will cover the two six-monthly fashion weeks in Copenhagen that traditionally attract media, fashion creators and fashion houses from around the world.

This is an important new signal, argues Morten Lehmann. He owns Tailwind, a consultancy firm advising businesses and organisations – including those in the fashion industry – on sustainability, leadership and branding.



“This is the first time fashion brands have been presented with sustainability requirements which they must follow in order to be allowed to participate in the Copenhagen Fashion Week. It is a milestone and shows that the fashion industry is moving towards a greater focus on sustainability,” he says.

Morten Lehmann used to be head of sustainability for Global Fashion Agenda, an organisation that works to promote sustainability in the fashion industry on a global level, and has written several reports on the issue.

22 requirements

The fashion week’s main sponsor is Zalando – one of the largest online fashion retailers in the world. This sends a clear signal that global fashion brands see sustainability as necessary, thinks Morten Lehmann.

Fashion week participants have signed up to 22 sustainability requirements in order to be allowed to be present. Some of these focus on behaviour during the fashion week itself, for instance when it comes to the use of plastics.

But other requirements focus on the production of the collections which models will be showcasing. There should for instance be no unnecessary fabric waste and there must be good working conditions for the workers who are making the collections. The fashion week organisers have hired an independent consultancy firm that checks whether the participants actually meet the requirements.

Use and discard

The fashion industry is nevertheless far off becoming completely sustainable. According to Morten Lehmann, the fashion industry is still mainly built on a “use and discard” culture, and this underlying business model must be changed before the industry becomes truly sustainable.

“Fashion often focuses on seasons and trends. New collections are typically used a few times by consumers before they become unfashionable and are thrown away to be replaced by newer collections. And to make sure there are enough items in the shops, the fashion industry produces far more than consumers actually need.”

The fashion industry is responsible for 4 to 10 percent of global CO₂ emissions, and much of this comes from the production of clothes that will never be worn or that are thrown away after a short amount of time. But so far, there have been few incentives for the fashion industry to produce less. Cutting pollution has not been profitable, explains Morten Lehmann. Yet this is about to change.



During the latest Copenhagen Fashion Week, students from the Royal Danish Academy predicted this and other fashion trends for spring/summer 2023. According to Vogue, with the subtext of "hope for a waste-not culture". Photo: Colette de Kinderen

“The industry is increasingly facing legislation demanding sustainable production methods, including from the EU. The fashion industry is also beginning to feel the consequences of the climate and biodiversity crisis. It is already seeing a lack of raw materials, and they are becoming more expensive. This trend is set to accelerate in step with tighter regulation which hopefully will produce a greater incentive – also financially – to use more sustainable materials.

That is why we are now beginning to see new and more sustainable business models, explains Morten Lehmann.

“Some fashion brands have decided to only start production when retail customers have put their orders in, as this can reduce waste. Others rent out clothes and get them back later. There is also an increasing interest in reuse and recycling in the industry.”

Lehmann does not yet see an infrastructure to support a more circular fashion production model, however, and that also goes for the Nordic countries.

A Danish pioneer

The Danish fashion label Ganni has worked systematically towards greater sustainability since 2013, making them pioneers in the area. Still, Ganni's website states that "we're not a sustainable brand". The fashion label explains this with the fact that it focuses on new products and consumption, which is a major contradiction to the concept of sustainability.

tainability facts under the name "Ganni Lab", using platforms like Instagram.



Danish-owned fashion brand Ganni has worked for greater sustainability in the fashion industry for a decade. Photo: Bryndis Thorsteinsdottir

Instead, Ganni is focused on "becoming the most responsible version of ourselves" and has committed itself to halve its CO2 emissions by 2027.

The brand writes:

"We're not perfect but committed to making better choices every day, minimising our social and environmental impact [...] The time to create change is now, no excuses."

Ganni Lab

In 2020, Ganni launched its "Responsibility Gameplan" with 44 goals to reach by 2023. Beyond reducing CO2 emissions, the goals include cuts to suppliers' energy consumption and an increase in the use of materials that are either organic, reused or procured with a low carbon footprint. Ganni has made shoes from grapefruits and fibres from leftover textiles.

Most of the goals have been met, but not all. The company has tried various ways of giving its clothes a longer life by reusing materials and choosing circular solutions where clothes were returned from consumers – sometimes as a result of rental solutions. The latter ran into problems because of the Covid pandemic, but renting out fashion items is still a business idea that Ganni believes can mature further.

According to Morten Lehmann, Ganni is also a fashion company that tries to inform and engage its customers when it comes to responsibility. The company communicates sus-



How Iceland's industry benefits from being outside of the common energy market

Surging energy prices have been one of the many consequences of the war in Ukraine. This has mainly been felt in Europe since sanctions against Russia have led to considerable cuts in gas imports from there which in turn has pushed prices up.

NEWS

19.01.2023

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON

Iceland is one of the few countries that has not faced these difficulties. Household energy prices have remained pretty much stable for eight years, while it has gone up considerably in other Nordic countries – in Denmark in particular.

One of the reasons is that Iceland has enough renewable energy sources to be self-sufficient, mainly thanks to hydro but also geothermal energy. However, according to some of the leaders of the energy-intensive industries, that is not the only reason. The fact that Iceland is not connected to the common European market helps too.

Aluminium plants in Europe closing

Pétur Blöndal, CEO of The Association of Icelandic Aluminium Producers, points out that it is not only Iceland's sustainable energy sources that help the production in Iceland, and uses Norway as an example.



Pétur Blöndal, CEO at The Association of Icelandic Aluminium Producers. Photo: Samál

“There are parts of Norway that are not connected to the common European energy market. In these parts, the energy price has been more stable. This applies to the northern parts of Norway for example. But in the areas that are connected to the market, many aluminium producers have had problems.”

Blöndal says that aluminium production has fallen by 40-50 percent in the European Union over the past few years. The reason for that is that most of the aluminium plants have not had long-term energy contracts and have been forced to buy energy in the spot market. In some cases, the energy price was higher than the value of the produced aluminium.

Also, in most cases, the price Icelandic aluminium plants pay for energy is closely linked to the price of aluminium.

“The price of aluminium has been high this year, and producers in Iceland have therefore never paid more for power than they do now, according to a recent press release from Landsvirkjun, the main power company. It also said that the price paid by energy-intensive industries in Iceland is for the most part similar to that of neighbouring countries,” says Blöndal.

He points out that even if the energy crisis had hit Iceland, it would not have changed much in the short term for aluminium producers, because of their long-term contracts with the energy company Landsvirkjun.

“In general, the aluminium producers who have long-term contracts are doing fine. And it is clearly a strength for Iceland not to be connected to the common European energy market.”

Increased interest in data centres

Data centres are another big energy consumer in Iceland. The country has increasingly been marketing itself as an ideal place for them, not only because of the clean energy but also because of access to natural cooling. Sigríður Mogensen, director of creative industries at the Federation of Icelandic In-

dustries, says that when the energy market weakens in Europe it is an advantage for Iceland.



Sigríður Mogensen, director of creative industries at the Federation of Icelandic Industries. Photo: SI.

“This is because Iceland is not connected to the European energy market. So it has turned out well for us that we decided not to have an electric cable from here to Europe as was discussed several years ago. But the data centres see increased interest from European firms in their services .

“Every company, no matter what business they are in, but mainly technology companies, must use data centres, directly or indirectly. So there is increased interest from companies in coming to Iceland with their data.”

Mogensen says that this is clearly the time to market Icelandic data centres in Europe.

“What also helps is that we will soon open a new communications cable from here to Ireland. It has been a bit of a hindrance in the last few years that we have only had two cables connecting us to Europe. Now the third one comes at the same time that the energy market changes, which is very positive for us because the giant tech companies have been worried that connections are not solid enough here.”

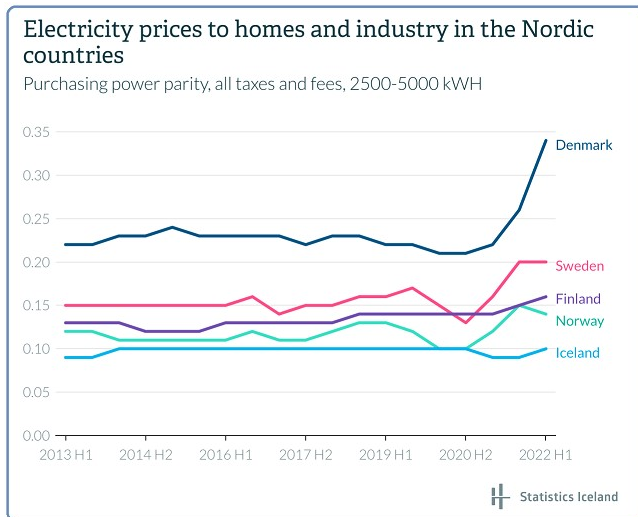
Mogensen says that when it comes to energy, the market price is not everything. Predictability is also very important.

“Energy prices have been fluctuating a lot but here they are much more predictable.”

Massive growth if a tech giant comes

Mogensen expects that the data centre industry will grow by 15-20 percent over the next two years.

“However, if a tech giant came to Iceland – someone like Amazon, Google or Facebook that have already built huge data centres in the Nordic countries – that growth would be double or more. And I think that is more likely today than just a few years ago.



The price of electricity in Iceland has hardly changed in the past eight years.

“The advantage of having a stable energy price is more obvious now during the energy crisis. And natural cooling in times of climate change plus the new fibre-optic cable are also big factors here.”

But political will is needed too, according to Mogensen.

“When one of the tech giants built a data centre in Finland, the prime minister welcomed it especially. The same happened when Microsoft built a data centre in Sweden – the minister of education considered it a good contribution to the country’s education system. The discussion hasn’t reached that phase in Iceland yet but this matters if the tech companies are really looking at Iceland as an option.”

This might come as a surprise, but Mogensen says that there is not too much green energy to offer in Iceland if you look into the future.

“We have had to pass on projects throughout the country because of energy shortages, especially since we’re in the process of reducing the use of fossil fuel. We are of course well off in terms of the green energy we have now, but we need more energy to develop our industries further. So there are still some obstacles to our development, not only for new businesses but also for the current ones to grow.”



Healthcare staff in Sweden look forward to stricter daily rest rules

A minimum of 11 hours of consecutive rest between shifts. That is the result of negotiations between Swedish trade unions and employers. Rules had to be changed after the European Commission questioned certain parts of the Swedish collective agreement on working hours.

NEWS

19.01.2023

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: YADID LEVY/NORDEN.ORG

“Negotiations were comprehensive and difficult with many people involved since this was about large organisations with 1.2 million employees in municipalities and regions,” Annelie Söderberg tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

She is head of negotiations at the Swedish Association of Health Professionals, which represents more than 114,000 nurses, midwives, biomedical scientists and radiographers in addition to students of those occupations. Negotiations with the Swedish Medical Association are still ongoing.



Annelie Söderberg, head of negotiations at the Swedish Association of Health Professionals. Photo: Ulf Huett.

“This was about the right for workers to have a minimum of 11 hours daily rest, and also about people’s right to support, healthcare and care services. There are a lot of rural areas in Sweden and we must always be able to secure these things along with access to water, food and medicines. At the same time, we must protect the workers’ right to daily rest,” says Annelie Söderberg.

In Sweden, the right to rest between shifts is not only regulated by the EU, but also through collective agreements and national legislation regulating working time. The national laws and regulations can vary, but the EU regulations – in this case, the European Commission’s working time directive – are binding for all EU member states.

Complicated issues, long negotiations

On 20 August last year, employers and trade unions sat down to start negotiating. More than three months later they had agreed and were able to present new rules for daily rest.

Jeanette Hedberg is head of negotiations and one of the representatives from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SKR.

“We are happy that we came to an agreement with the trade unions. It was a given for all involved that the agreement had to be compatible with the directive, but it is a complicated set of rules we have had to handle.

“We have taken onboard the Commission’s criticism and sharpened the rules around protection because it is important that these are clear – both for the individual worker and their ability to keep their rights and for leaders whose responsibility it is to make sure the rules are followed,” she told the Nordic Labour Journal.



Jeanette Hedberg, head of negotiations, SKR. Photo: Hans Alm.

The new agreement will come into effect on 1 October this year, because employers need time to process roster changes

for the huge number of workers who are affected by the new rules. At the time of writing it is not clear whether the changes will be accepted by the European Commission.

“We as parties believe the agreement lives up to the demands in the directive, but we will not know for sure until the Commission has given its answer,” says Jeanette Hedberg.

The need to catch up

Nadja Ståhl is one of those who are thankful for the new rules. She has been a registered nurse for 18 months and works at Sunderby hospital, between Luleå and Boden in the very north of Sweden.

“I began working on a ward, but was forced to quit because of the roster,” she says.

While working on the ward, Nadja Ståhl’s roster often included so-called “*vändpass*” which meant she had to work a day shift straight after an evening shift – from 1 pm to 10 pm one day and from 7 am to 4 pm the day after.

“After a *vändpass*, even if I was off until midday the next day, I did not have enough time to recover,” she says.

Today she works in the hospital’s emergency department. Her current roster gives her more time to catch up with a roster that follows these rules:

- 2–4 days work and 2–4 days off.
- 12–15 percent reduction in working time, equivalent to around 35 days a year.
- So-called buffer time with around 15 shifts a year that are not planned in advance.
- Everyone works day, evening and night.

“It is great that we get longer periods of rest from the autumn, but this should have been done a long time ago. We work so incredibly hard when we work, so we are exhausted when we get home. New rosters will help us all because these *vändpass* are not sustainable,” says Nadja Ståhl.

An old tradition

Nurse and midwife Emma Johnsson works at the Karolinska University Hospital in Stockholm. She also welcomes the new rules and the fact that daily rest must now be “regularly alternated”, which is also part of the new agreement. That means work followed by rest and so on.

“Everything we do in our job is based on science, but not our roster,” she says, alluding to the fact that research has shown the advantages of regularity of both work and rest.

Emma Jonsson works in a post-care pregnancy and child-birth ward and is also a trade union rep for the Swedish Association of Health Professionals. She often debates with her colleagues about working hours.



Emma Jonsson, Nurse and midwife at Karolinska University Hospital, and trade union rep. Photo: Ulf Huett.

“We have a roster computer program that makes sure we put in the right amount of hours. The program lets us know if we get less than nine hours of rest, but sadly not based on the rules which ought to be followed and are coming into effect from 1 October,” she says.

Some of her colleagues will put in an evening shift from 1 or 1.30 pm until 9.30 pm, followed by a morning shift from 7 am until 3.30 pm. The idea is that this creates continuity and will benefit patients who will see the same personnel on either side of the night, explains Jonsson.

“This is a strong tradition which the trade union has been working to change for a long time in order to get healthier rosters,” she says.

“Continuity is at least as good when you work two or three days or evenings in a row. That is the only way we can get the regular rest that researchers say is necessary in order to catch up properly.”

Emma Jonsson has already heard negative reactions to the new rules, like ‘this will not work, this particular ward is so important that they should be exempt from the new rules’. But she is determined.

“We cannot have too many local interpretations. The reason for 11 hours of daily rest and alternating work and rest is to give us a more sustainable job, and that is important if we are to work until retirement and manage to work full-time,” she says.

Support at hand

The new agreement also includes the setting up of a working hour authority and a working hour council which will advise and support local parties in relation to the new rules. This is something Emma Jonsson welcomes.

“To begin with, there will probably be many questions about how you get the rosters working in real life. What is it we don’t understand? How do we solve this? It is good to know there is someone who can explain.”

Unhappy neighbouring countries

Nurses are raising questions about their rosters in other counties besides Sweden too. In recent years, Norwegian and Danish nurses have been striking both for higher pay and in protest against their work environment.

The Nordic Labour Journal spoke to theatre nurse Camilla Dam at the Odense University Hospital. During a 12 weeks roster period, she works between eight and ten emergency shifts. During weekdays, this means that after having worked an eight-hour day shift, she can go straight into an emergency shift that lasts until 7.30 am the next morning. At weekends she can be on call from home.

Camilla Dam thinks the most important thing is to create a rule for how many hours a nurse is allowed to work during one week.

“There is no such rule right now, and that is why a working week can be made up of 12-hour shifts six days in a row, resulting in a 72-hour working week,” she says.

“My husband is a truck driver. There are rules for how many hours he is allowed to drive, he is not allowed to become too tired. There are no such rules for Danish hospital staff.”

The Nordic Labour Journal has been in touch with the Danish Ministry of Employment, which says the Danish government has not been presented with any criticism of the daily rest from the European Commission.



Four new Nordic labour ministers – and their challenges

In 2022, both Norway, Sweden and Denmark got new labour ministers. Here is your chance to get to know them better.

NEWS

19.01.2023

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, LINE SCHEISTRØEN AND MARIE PREISLER

Two ministers sharing the responsibility in Sweden

When Nordic labour ministers met in Oslo in November last year, Sweden's Johan Pehrson joked during their lunch that he ought to carry a sign reading "new employee". This was his first ever meeting with Nordic colleagues, but he was not the only fresh face there.

Pehrson shares his Ministry of Employment portfolio with Deputy Minister for Employment Paulina Brandberg, who started alongside him on 18 October 2022. Hosting the lunch was Marte Mjøs Persen, herself only eight months into her ministerial posting.



Pehrson and Persen. In November, Oslo hosted the Nordic labour ministers' meeting. Here Johan Pehrson is in conversation with Stefano Scarpetta, the OECD's Director of Em-

ployment. In the background: Norway's labour minister Marte Mjøs Persen. Photo: Simen Gald/AID

After the Danish election a few weeks later, and an unusually long period of negotiations, a new broad three-party coalition government was formed on 15 December. Social Democrat Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen is its Minister for Employment. That leaves Tuula Haatainen as the veteran among the Nordic labour ministers with her more than three years in the job, while Iceland's Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson has been Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market for one year and two months.

Johan Pehrson is also responsible for integration in the Swedish government. During a press conference on 14 December, he identified long-term unemployment as the country's most pressing issue. Foreign-born women from outside of the EU are hardest hit, he explained.

“We have failed to reduce long-term unemployment. While the EU is seeing lower unemployment figures, Sweden has not succeeded with this, despite economic progress and a massive post-Covid recovery,” he said.

To illustrate his point, he showed a list ranking EU countries according to unemployment figures, where those with the highest numbers top of the table. Ten years ago, Sweden would have been far down the list, but in 2019, Sweden overtook the EU27 for the first time. In late 2022, only four EU countries had higher unemployment than Sweden.

Meanwhile, Sweden does have a high employment rate and more people might be in work compared to other countries – “complex but not so strange”, as Johan Pehrson put it.

“Unemployment represents a large and important challenge because it is very painful for the individual not to be in work. It robs you of freedom and is bad for integration,” said Johan Pehrson.

He was relatively unknown in Sweden before becoming leader of the Liberal Party on 8 April 2022. Before that, he was an MP and served two terms as the Liberals' party secretary.

When Nyamko Sabuni stepped down as party leader, it also meant a change of direction for the Liberals who until then had refused to negotiate with the Sweden Democrats. The party moved closer to the other centre-right parties.

The Nordic Labour Journal wants to know whether Johan Pehrson himself asked to be Minister for Employment in the centre-right coalition, or whether this was just a result of the government negotiations.

“I chose it. If we can create a functioning labour market, we have the answer to most of Sweden's social challenges. It would give us resources for our welfare state, we protect our wealth, we empower ourselves. This means we can adapt to

all the ambitions we have to make Sweden greener and an even better place to live,” says Johan Pehrson.

As Deputy Minister for Employment, **Paulina Brandberg** is responsible for labour law and work environment issues. She is also Minister for Gender Equality. She too is from the Liberal Party, where she was the legal policy expert before becoming a government minister.

She was born in Lund and studied law at the university there. She has been a senior prosecutor and has worked on several high-profile gang crime cases. Her main focus since becoming politically active in 2020 has been legal policy.

Through frequent TV interviews, Twitter and opinion pieces, she has tried to shape opinions on stricter legislation and other crime-fighting measures.



Paulina Brandberg is responsible for how Sweden will handle the EU Commission's directive on minimum wages and platform work. Photo: Niklas Forsström/Swedish Government Office.

The Fokus news magazine voted her Swede of the year in January 2022, and she ran for a parliamentary seat for the Liberal Party in the same year. She failed but was immediately recruited to the government, which had identified fighting gang crime as one of its main priorities. Brandberg has also had to grapple with the EU Commission's directive on minimum wages and platform work early on.

Norway's new labour minister wants a generous welfare agency

Marte Mjøs Persen began her career pretty far out on the left of Norwegian politics. Perhaps it will help the Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion when she sets out to help people who have it particularly tough.

When the Labour Party gained power in 2021, Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre made Marte Mjøs Persen Minister of

Petroleum and Energy. She was new to the Norwegian parliament, but not to politics.

Before becoming an MP, she was an elected representative to the Bergen city council for 18 years – six of them as mayor – representing the Labour Party.

Her political career started on the far left, however, in the Red Electoral Alliance party (RV).

“When RV in my opinion took a big step to the left and merged with The Workers’ Communist Party AKP (m-l) to form the Red Party, I soon realised that this was not the place for me. So I left,” she told national broadcaster NRK in 2021.

Mjøs Persen became a Labour Party member in 2008.

From one ministerial post to another

As Minister of Petroleum and Energy, her first big challenge was the energy price crisis. She had time to help develop the electricity price support system before being given a new portfolio by the Prime Minister in March 2022.

Mjøs Persen took over as Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion from Hadia Tajik. Tajik stepped down as a government minister and deputy leader for the Labour Party after it emerged she had failed to pay tax for a commuter flat.

Like many labour ministers before her, Mjøs Persen has been criticised for her lack of “real world” work experience. She worked for a few years as a waiter and has also worked for the Norwegian Humanist Association. She is a trade union member and has held several roles within LO – the Norwegian trade union confederation.

Tidying up

Many are interested in seeing how Mjøs Persen plans to tidy up after the 2019 “benefits scandal” involving the Norwegian welfare agency NAV.



It has been unbelievably hectic for Marte Mjøs Persen on several occasions after she became labour minister. Here she is ending a teachers' strike in September. Photo: Simen Gald.

Thousands of people were wrongly accused of cheating the benefits system when accepting unemployment allowance and other support while living abroad.

However, as we enter 2023, what most Norwegians want to know is how to handle high electricity bills, increased food prices and more expensive mortgages. The number of people seeking financial assistance is skyrocketing according to the daily Dagsavisen.

Mjøs Persen wants NAV to be generous to people who are seeking help.

“I believe it is very important that people who now really feel they need help because of their financial circumstances seek help from NAV, because [the agency] is able to help them with advice and economic support,” Mjøs Persen told the VG newspaper.

Danish Minister for Employment faces busy spring



Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen will probably not get many days off during her first months as Denmark’s Minister for Employment. Several central and controversial issues from the new broad coalition government have landed on her table.

Depriving the Danes of one day off is the first political headache facing the Social Democrat Minister for Employment, and she already has the trade unions up in arms. They are incensed that one of the first jobs of the new broad coalition government will be to remove a holiday in order to finance increased defence spending.

The trade union movement considers it a breach of the Danish labour market model if the government as announced by Halsboe-Jørgensen passes legislation to introduce one extra working day without involving the social partners in the decision-making process.

She was the Minister of Higher Education and Science and then Minister for Culture and Ecclesiastical Affairs in Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen’s first government, and has been an MP since 2011.

She will also need her solid political experience when she sets out to reform Denmark’s entire employment policy are-

na – another task the new government's programme has promised to tackle.

The government is looking to cut three billion kroner (€403.3m) in 2030 in the employment measures while also getting more people into the labour market. Part of the plan is to shut down municipal job centres and give the municipalities themselves more freedom to implement measures.

The social partners and experts alike predict it will be extraordinarily difficult to make such deep cuts to employment measures while also getting more of the vulnerable unemployed into the labour market.

Denmark takes minimum wage directive to the EU Court

Denmark and Sweden will go separate ways after the EU directive on adequate minimum wages has been adopted.

NEWS

19.01.2023

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU&ARBETSRÄTT

Both voted against the directive out of principle, but while the newly elected Danish government has decided to try to have the directive annulled by the EU Court, the Swedish government has decided not to do so and implement the directive. EEA countries Norway and Iceland do not seem to have to implement it at all.

Denmark's new government came to power on 14 December. One item on its programme is to take an annulment suit to the EU Court to have the directive ruled invalid. This happened January 18 (press release in Danish).

The Swedish government had already announced it would not do the same. According to Deputy Minister for Employment Paulina Brandberg, Sweden got so many of its central demands through during the negotiations on the directive that the result "could be handled" without making changes to the Swedish wage negotiation model. Thus, the day after the Danish government made its announcement, a commission was tasked with looking into what Sweden might have to do in order to implement the directive.

The commission's starting point is that the Swedish labour market model must be protected and that the social partners' autonomy and right to negotiate and enter into collective agreements will be fully respected. The government underlines that the commission cannot propose other measures beyond those that are necessary to implement the EU directive. Among the issues it will consider is whether Sweden is doing enough to promote collective bargaining; what measures should be implemented if collective agreement coverage was to fall below 80 percent; and if the collection of data on minimum wages needs adjusting in some way so that Sweden can monitor the minimum wage protection and report to the European Commission in line with directive demands.

Like Denmark and Sweden, Norway too has questioned whether the EU really is able to adopt directives with the kind of content that the minimum wage directive has. But Nor-

way (and Iceland) have not been able to influence the negotiations on the directive as they are not EU member states, only part of the European Economic Area, EEA.

Norwegians have nevertheless been following the negotiations closely since most directives relating to labour legislation become binding also for EEA countries. Yet some are not – it all depends on a directive's importance to the function of the internal market.

When it comes to the directive on minimum wages, the Norwegian government has concluded that, unlike other directives relating to labour legislation, it is not relevant to EEA countries. The European Commission seems to have taken the same approach. This means Norway and Iceland do not need to implement the directive.

Finally: There is much talk about the Nordic labour market model. There are indeed many similarities between the Nordics, especially compared to other EU countries, but there are also important differences. Finland has welcomed the directive on minimum wages from the start.