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Oct 28, 2022

Theme: New ways of attracting skilled labour



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New ways of recruiting skilled labour

2023 has been designated the European Year of Skills by the EU Commission. Skills are about more than simply having knowledge, it is about having the ability to use them to carry out tasks and solve problems.

EDITORIAL

28.10.2022

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

That is why skills are important in the face of the green change and all other challenges thrown up by demographic changes and digitalisation. But it is not only employees who need to be skilled. We need skilled recruiters too.

Because young people are not queuing up to get training. More and more sectors face labour shortages. Recruiters must therefore be both innovative and less biased.

Åland has taken this to heart.

“In all my conversations with tech companies, one issue keeps coming up – the lack of people with different types of digital skills like system developers and coders. Demand far outstrips supply and traditional educational institutions do not train enough people,” says Fredrik Karlström, Åland’s Minister for Industry and Trade.

He has been one of the drivers behind the grit:lab project, a two-year programme for coders which opened in Åland in late August this year. No former experience is needed, but the aim is for students to learn more than what the teachers know – and actually, there are no teachers. Instead, students will be solving tasks together. Read our story about how this is going.

It is a paradox that the Nordic countries, which often top all kinds of gender equality rankings, have such gender-segregated labour markets. Men dominate technical occupations while women dominate the care sector. Many measures have been launched to get the underrepresented gender to choose differently.

But getting more people of the other gender into jobs does not work as long as the view remains that certain occupations “belong” to a certain gender. A conference hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers together with several Norwegian government ministries and authorities focused on just this issue.

Among the participants were representatives from Boss Ladies, a Danish organisation where women in the construction and other male-dominated industries visit schools to talk about how it is to work in those sectors. They also advise construction companies that face demands to take on both male and female apprentices. We followed one Boss Lady ambassador to a workplace in Ørestad, where she met men who rarely or never have had female colleagues.

Less gender-segregated workplaces might also lead to more motivated employees and a better work environment. But it does not lead to more people being available to do jobs. Iceland’s tourism industry has recovered quicker than expected after the pandemic. 8 % of jobs are now vacant. The leader of the country’s travel and tourism organisation, Jóhannes Þór Skúlason, despairs that paperwork to hire a person from outside of the EEA can take 36 months.

In Finland, Norwegian recruiters try to tempt Finnish nurses to Norway. Double pay for half the effort is a message that sounds tempting but does not represent a long-term sustainable solution. It is not just enterprises that need new competence. Ragnhild Lied, who heads the Unio trade union confederation, worries that the medium age among trade union activists is too high. In Denmark, trade unions also face competition from the Krifa union, which is founded on Christian ideals and does not believe in strike action as a weapon. It is a cheaper alternative than traditional trade unions and a few years ago Krifa also opened a Norwegian chapter.

In this edition, we also report from the Council of Nordic Trade Unions’ congress in Oslo, where crises and the climate were top of the agenda. The Nordic trade union confederations coordinate their work in the European Trade Union Congress, but how has the issue of minimum wages impacted on their relationship with trade union movements in other European countries? Will Sweden or Denmark go to the EU Court of Justice to try to nullify the directive on minimum wages?

This could be difficult for Sweden, which takes on the EU Presidency in the first half of 2023. In Denmark, nothing will happen before the general election on 1 November. The change of government in Sweden on 18 October has already had consequences. The new Minister for Employment, Johan Pehrson (Liberals) has said he wants to “tinker with” the new student support which was introduced on 1 October. This makes it possible for Swedish wage-earners to study while taking home 80 % of their pay. We look at how that support works, and talk to one of the first people to apply for it.



Åland's coding course attracts international talent

70 people of varying ages, from different countries and different student or occupational backgrounds, have started a joint journey in Åland. They have been accepted to the brand new grit:lab course where they will learn how to become creative computer coders – a skill which is sought-after nearly everywhere in the world.

THEME

28.10.2022

TEXT: HELENA FORSGÅRD, PHOTO: KJELL SÖDERLUND

70 people of varying ages, from different countries and different student or occupational backgrounds, have started a joint journey in Åland. They have been accepted to the brand new grit:lab course where they will learn how to become creative computer coders – a skill which is sought-after nearly everywhere in the world.

grit:lab has bright offices at the headquarters of gambling company Paf in Mariehamn. Students can come and go as they please, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Christoffer Barreby knew Åland from holidays there, and did not think twice about swapping Stockholm for Mariehamn when he was accepted to *grit:lab*. *The first online test included cognitive games testing applicants' logical reasoning and memory. They were given no instructions and had to figure out how to solve the problems themselves.*

Christoffer Barreby from Stockholm is one of the 70 people who got through the selection process to secure a space. He sits in front of one of the computers trying to solve a problem. He has always been interested in the world of computers but has not been working with or studied anything linked to it before.

“Everything is new to me. Including the way in which we learn. We have no teachers, and everything is based on self-learning and cooperation with others. It takes quite a bit of self-discipline but the programme suits me,” he says, adding that he is looking forward to two interesting yet challenging years.

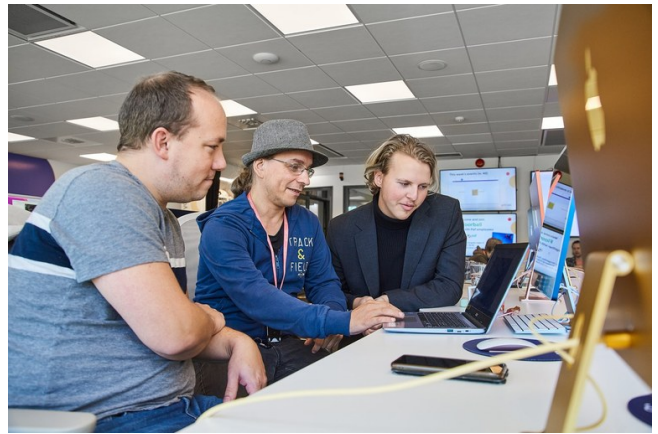
“The selection tests were really tough and things are continuing in the same vein,” he says.

Big demand, small supply

Fredrik Karlström, Åland's Minister for Industry and Trade, was one of the movers behind the *grit:lab* project.

“In all my conversations with tech companies, one issue keeps coming up – the lack of people with different types of digital skills like system developers and coders. Demand far outstrips supply and traditional educational institutions do not train enough people.

“I also want to see higher immigration to Åland. We need and welcome more driven individuals from different backgrounds and with different experiences.” he says.



Learning how to cooperate and help each other is part of the grit:lab training. Richard Crauston, Tommy Mathiesen and Wincent Westerback (right) passed all the initial tests and now face two years with exciting challenges.

In other words: The *grit:lab* initiative will hopefully allow Åland to kill two birds with one stone!

The training is free for the participants. They have to be self-sufficient (some get support from their home countries) and they get help finding accommodation in Åland.

Anna-Lena Svenblad, Corporate Development Director at Paf, is the course project leader.

“This sector is developing so fast that the most efficient way of doing things is not always 'learning what the teachers know'. At *grit:lab* we focus on how students can learn how to learn. The training is one hundred percent project-based. You get new challenges and the degree of difficulty increases,” she says.

Helping each other

The word “grit” was chosen to show that you need passion, courage and stamina in order to get through the two-year programme.

Cooperation is an important cornerstone. Students must help each other during their journey. Nobody should be alone in a corner, doing everything on their own. Nor should anyone rely on “everybody else” to solve the challenges.



"The start has been intensive with long days running into 12 hours. I have also been here at weekends," says Tommy Mathiesen from Åland.

During the course, the students learn three coding languages and during the final six months, they can choose to specialise in one area, for instance app development. Mentors from Åland's tech industry are also involved at various stages during the two years.

The fact that participants come from different backgrounds in terms of qualifications and work experience, age and nationality is seen as an advantage.

"They bring different perspectives and that is a great plus for the group's dynamics," says Anna-Lena Svenblad.

Settle in Åland?

Minister for Industry and Trade Fredrik Karlström of course hopes that as many as possible will stay in Åland after finishing grit:lab.

"There are jobs! Companies in Åland have already said they want to hire grit:lab participants. I also believe some of them will choose to start their own companies and work remotely from Åland. But I am of course aware that this is a global labour market and competition for trained people is tough.

"It is obviously up to each individual to choose where to settle, but we will work even harder to make Åland one of the best places in the world to live so that they will want to stay. Those who do choose to move away after their time at grit:lab hopefully have had such a good time that they become good ambassadors for our autonomous region," he says.

Want to learn Swedish

Korin Lim from Singapore used to work in a business lounge at Helsinki Airport and saw the grit:lab course as an opportunity to launch a new career. Coding was completely new to her.

"It has been challenging working at least eight hours every weekday and five to six hours at weekends, but I like it. I also

feel welcome in Åland and will start learning Swedish. We are being offered free lessons via grit:lab," she says and adds:

"Åland feels like a quiet and safe society. I wouldn't mind moving here."



"We don't have a set schedule, but can go to grit:lab when it suits us – even in the middle of the night," says Richard Crauston who moved from the USA to Åland seven years ago.

Richard Crauston has roots in the USA and came to Åland seven years ago with a degree in economics in his luggage. He enjoys the way grit:lab is organised.

"We have no schedule and no fixed hours. Everything is based on taking responsibility for yourself and self-discipline. This suits me, as I have a family with small children and also a business that I run," he says.

Tommy Mathiesen from Åland used to sell and fix computers. Now he is getting into coding.

"At grit:lab we focus on one thing, and don't spend time on a range of other subjects which is often the case on other courses. So far I have been working up to 12 hours a day, but I'm enjoying it," he says.

A new group in 2024?

grit:lab has got attention beyond Åland and Anna-Lena Svenblad often gets asked about the concept. It might also be carried on into the future. In which case the selection process will begin towards the end of 2023 which would allow a new group to start in the autumn of 2024.



grit:lab participants are studying at the gambling company Paf's bright and airy headquarters in Mariehamn. They may come and go as they wish, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Why Finnish nurses choose Norway over their native country

In the largest hall at the Messukeskus conference centre, Finnish DJ Darude springs a surprise tune. Sandstorm blasts out to an enthusiastic audience made up of nearly 2,000 nurses from the whole of Finland during the annual nurses' days in Helsinki.

THEME

28.10.2022

TEXT AND PHOTO: BENGT ÖSTLING

In the convention hall, tens of recruitment officers are waiting in their exhibition spots for the audience to come streaming out. They want to talk about the advantages that their particular hospital, health centre or retirement home can offer.

There is a lot of popcorn, chocolate and recruitment brochures on offer. But the municipal recruitment officers in particular admit that it is hard to get people's interest right now. The private companies look like they have a bit more success with their campaigns.

But everyone is waiting on the conclusion of the drawn-out industrial dispute, which was still ongoing when the Nordic Labour Journal visited the convention.

Tempting to change jobs when wages stagnate

The timing could not be better for the recruiting staff. Nearly half of the nurses' trade union Tehy's members say they are considering changing careers.

Nurses' pay negotiations have been going on for six months and the fight has been hardening all along. This time it has been extra difficult to reach a collective agreement for the healthcare sector, as the trade unions have been pushing for a higher wage increase than all other sectors.

Nurses see themselves as underpaid and their jobs have been particularly tough during the pandemic – and there is a sense of a lot of public support for their case.

The nurses' trade union Tehy and nursing assistants' union Super carried out selective strikes to hurry up negotiations on wages and work conditions. This time the trade unions also announced that members would refuse to carry out safety work which guarantees staffing in intensive wards despite the strike action. A court ruled that they were not allowed to use that particular weapon.

In response to this, nursing staff have threatened mass resignations. 500 health workers have even returned their licenses which allow them to work in the care sector. They have already changed sectors in order to avoid being forcibly called in to do shifts during a crisis.

Attractive Norwegian jobs

Knowing all this, it can be tempting to listen to the Norwegian recruitment officers at the Messukeskus conference centre. Norwegian Marthe Einseth works for the Swedish company Dedicare. She can offer double the pay and half the stress compared to jobs in Finland.

Many Finnish health workers have gone to Norway to work as nurses and assistant nurses over the years. There is a healthcare staff shortage in Norway, and the country has done what Finland has chosen not to do – increase wages and improve working conditions.



Dedicare connects workers to retirement homes and to home care providers. Finland is an important market, explains Marthe Einseth. She gets many questions from interested Finns about wages and working conditions during the nurses' days and at similar events.

"Norwegian wages are tied to experience. We do hear rumours that healthcare workers earn 15 to 18 euro in Finland. In Norway, if you have ten years or more experience, you can earn up to 28 euro basic pay," explains Marthe Einseth to interested Finns.

Sounds like a holiday

She explains that nurses enjoy a lot of flexibility in Norway. Many are tempted by the fact that care workers can decide when they want to work and for how long.

"It means you can work intensively in Norway and then take some time off. Many take a break from their job in Finland in order to work in Norway. Others go on leave or work part-time."

Their work in Norway is on top of their permanent jobs in Finland. Most workers do this for some periods of their careers and not as a permanent solution for the rest of their lives – although some do that too, explains Marthe Einseth.

Dedicare needs all kinds of staff across the whole of Norway, for most fields of work. The only thing they look for is previous experience in the same field, explains Einseth. Some language skills are also needed.

There are also summer jobs for nursing students. Dedicare also has a division that can provide doctors, psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses. The company is the largest provider of health sector staffing in Norway, says Marthe Einseth. But it also provides staffing to Sweden and Denmark. She travels to Finland to recruit people up to four times a year.

She does not know how many Finns she and her company have recruited to work in Norway. But it is a big number, she says.

The interest is clearly visible during the nurses' days in Helsinki too. It has grown lately because of the labour market unrest in Finland, says Marthe Einseth. You can tell that health workers are tired and need a break.

Better than expected solution to conflict

Just a few weeks after the nurses' days in Helsinki, a solution to the health sector labour conflict was found.

In early October, the national conciliator presented an offer that was accepted by all parties, including the municipal employers' organisation and the new welfare areas which will take over health and social care sectors from municipalities at the end of the year.

It is a good deal, according to Millariikka Rytönen from the Tehy union. Wages will rise on average by 17.3 % over five years. This is an average figure for all Tehy wages covering a five-year period until 2027.

The agreement covers 180,000 health workers. Both employees and employers are relieved that the agreement is in place and that there is now industrial peace in the Finnish health-care sector until 1 May 2027. Employers underlined that industrial peace and patient safety is now secured for three years (**FIVE years?**)

Moving plans on hold?

Nobody knew this during the nurses' days at the Mes-sukeskus conference centre in September, although many were hoping things would get solved. Some people's plans for changing jobs or moving to better-paid jobs abroad might change now that wages rise in Finland.

But Marthe Einseth can still offer double the pay for half the work.



Is foreign recruitment unethical?

Is it ethical to recruit staff from countries which also have labour shortages, for instance, the Philippines? It is not a sustainable alternative, especially when the most qualified are the ones who are the most likely to leave.

THEME

28.10.2022

TEXT AND PHOTO: BENGT ÖSTLING

The chance to travel is of course great for a young, newly qualified health worker, says Helena Leino-Kilpi, professor in nursing science.

She graduated as a nurse in the early 1980s. 30 of the 48 people in her cohort left for Sweden, where they were paid, as it was seen back then, “enormously more”.

The most important things she learned were that in Sweden gender equality and diversity were very much appreciated, and this was not the case in traditional Finland, and perhaps not even today. The common denominator in the Nordic region is very good health services within a welfare state, with good education and research within the healthcare sector.

She quotes her own mother: A health worker education can be used for many things. You just need your education, a work pass and a toothbrush and you can manage most anywhere in the world as a nurse.

It is of course good for nurses to be able to travel and try something new and exciting, but are there some ethical issues here? As individuals they ought to have the opportunity to leave, says Helena Leino-Kilpi. But if that happens because Finland cannot offer career opportunities and decent wages, it turns into something negative for Finland.

There are also some ethical issues because the labour shortage is global.

“There is much that can be improved in Finland. We need to reconsider how we organise services that help people. We highlight the value of healthcare, school and social care, and claim to hold the staff in high regard. But Finnish society has not been prepared to pay what it costs. Our appreciation must be visible, and this is about organisation, education and pay,” says Helena Leino-Kilpi.



Nordic men face different challenges from women in non-traditional jobs

Young women training to join typically male-dominated occupations make difficult choices but are also spurred on by family, teachers and politicians and end up with a high-status job. But when young men choose healthcare jobs, they get neither status nor good pay.

THEME

28.10.2022

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

That is what you might end up thinking after attending the conference “A gender-equal Nordic Region” in Oslo on 27 September. The conference was jointly hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers, three Norwegian government ministries and The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir).

Under the headline “Young and untraditional”, Daniel Tørresvol Stabu and Kimiya Mo from Norway, and Anna Axelsen from Danmark, explained how their surroundings reacted to their choice of occupations.

“I have not faced any prejudices when I tell people I have two educations – first joiner and then building engineer. It has

been more like ‘Wow, how cool – you can make and build things!’,” said Anna Axelsen, who is part of the Danish Boss Ladies project, where women who have chosen untraditional occupations work as ambassadors in schools and colleges. They also give presentations in male-dominated workplaces.



Anna Axelsen is a member of the Danish Boss Ladies project and was part of a conversation during the conference.

Daniel Tørresvol Stabu studies to be a nurse, and has a different story:

“I face prejudices all the time. ‘Are you gay or are you here to pick up girls?’ is the standard reaction. And that is not only from those who do not know better. I have also heard it from lecturers and student councillors.”

The gender-segregated labour market in the Nordic region has been called a paradox. Why do genders mean so much when people choose occupations in the most gender-equal countries in the world? There are various initiatives aimed at creating a more gender-equal labour market. Girls are encouraged to study data and technology, while boys are urged to check out the healthcare sector.

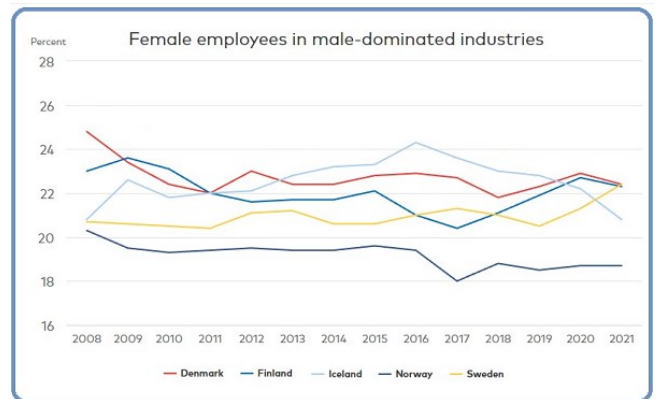


Mari Teigen from Core.

Mari Teigen from Core, a Norwegian gender equality research centre, summed up the development, and said the situation is fragmented:

“There is a tendency for polarization. We see more women at the top and also at the bottom. Some women are lifted up to the jobs with the highest wages, but at the same time there is a slight increase in women in the lowest-paid jobs.”

Current statistics show that not much is happening.



The graphs show that the number of women in male-dominated occupations has not risen notably in the Nordic countries. The number is lowest in Norway by some margin and has been falling. In the other countries, the number has fluctuated more. Source: Nordic Statistics Database.

The number of men in female-dominated jobs in the Nordics varies between 21 and 27 % for 2020, with the lowest number in Finland and the highest in Denmark.

Two contradictory needs often emerge in the debate about the gender-segregated labour market:

More men are needed in the healthcare sector because of ageing demographics. The conference heard numbers from the Norwegian government’s Outlook Report which showed 110,000 more healthcare jobs will be needed in Norway by 2035. Today the sector employs 13 % of the total labour force. By 2035 it will be 18 % and by 2066 31 %.

At the same time, more women must be tempted into new, green companies. How do you square this circle without importing even more labour from abroad?

Fredrik Bondestam, head of the Nordic Information on Gender NIKK, summed it up thus:

“This is about manifold or men.”

Mohamed Amaleti, a local politician for the Labour Party in Fredrikstad who also works in elderly care, is an example of both diversity and maleness.

“I am happy with working with older and vulnerable people. What I enjoy most with my occupation as a care worker is providing welfare to others,” he says.

Mohamed Amaleti arrived as an unaccompanied minor from Somalia and applied for asylum aged 17.



Mohamed Amaleti.

He has one wish, however – to get a full-time job. He currently has three different part-time jobs in elderly care in order to work nearly full-time.

While Mohamed Amaleti needs no convincing for joining the care sector, it is often more difficult to hire men and keep them there. The Swedish organisation Män i hälsa (men in healthcare) works on breaking down prejudices, inspired by a similar project in Norway, with the same name.

It targets male jobseekers aged 25 to 55 who are looking for a career change and who are curious about the healthcare sector. They are offered a course and during what is called the recruitment period get to see what the occupation entails, with the guidance of a mentor. If they are still interested they get an education and a certificate.

“It is often a relief for a man to be able to talk with another man about working in the healthcare sector,” says Petra Lindberg.

Because it is a fact that men also experience ending up in education and jobs where their gender is not taken into consideration. There are parallels to women who struggle to find work clothes that fit or who have to put up with posters of naked women in the changing room, says Gísli Kort Kristófersson, associate professor at the University of Akureyri.



Gísli Kort Kristófersson, associate professor at the University of Akureyri.

“When I studied to become a nurse, it was common practice to get a bodybuilder in for anatomy lessons in order to demonstrate different muscle groups – well-oiled and in tiny swimming trunks. We were 170 women and three men. But when the lesson was over, only one male student would remain,” he says.

Today he also works for a Nordregio project that involves the Østfold University College and the LAB University of Applied Sciences as well as the University of Akureyri. It is called Share the Care and will run until 2024. The aim is to increase the number of men taking a healthcare education, as well as to find reasons why so many men who chose to do so, leave before graduating.



The tough road to male occupations in Denmark

Amalie Schwartz is a newly qualified electrician and the only woman in a workplace with 80 people. She is busy changing that disparity every day at work and as an ambassador for the Boss Ladies project.

THEME

28.10.2022

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: THOMAS BERTELSEN

“It is not at all difficult for you to hire women. We can do the work just as well as men, and you don’t have to set up women’s-only barracks at the building site,” says 22-year-old Amalie Schwartz and looks at the group of master builders who have gathered at a general meeting to discuss how to increase the number of women working in their businesses.

“But many of you employers in the building and construction industry believe women mean trouble on the construction sites. This is a myth. In my experience, workplaces with a mixed workforce have a better environment and atmosphere. Men even start fixing their hair before going to work,” says Amalie Schwartz with a smile.

The master builders smile back and listen carefully. They are all men and subcontractors to the entrepreneur company BAM Denmark, which is currently constructing three new schools and an indoor swimming pool for the City of Copenhagen.

It is a big job. The project owner expects subcontractors to participate in today’s general meeting, and they must include a certain number of apprentices in the projects – creating apprenticeships for students who are training to become craftsmen.



Amalie Schwartz in conversation with painter decorator Bo Bjerregaard and carpenter Christoffer Crillesen.

Some of these apprenticeships should of course go to girls, argues Amalie Schwartz. But it is difficult for a girl to get an apprenticeship, even though there is an acute lack of labour in the building and construction industry and it is struggling to find apprentices.

“I had to be extremely tenacious before my current employer agreed to give me an apprenticeship. I spent several school holidays there as an intern and then spent a long time going every week to ask before I succeeded in securing an apprenticeship,” she says.

"Girls should go to college"

The meeting is taking place in barracks in the Ørestad neighbourhood of Copenhagen – the headquarters for the management of the school and indoor swimming pool project. Amalie Schwartz's day job is at an electrician's company in Lolland, but she has said yes to driving to Copenhagen to represent the Boss Ladies' ambassador corps at the general meeting.

The participating subcontractors have been invited by the project owner and the main entrepreneur BAM Denmark, whose project director Carina Dahl Philipsen wishes everyone welcome and expresses support for the work that is being done by Amalie Schwartz and Boss Ladies to get more women into the construction industry.



As a Boss Ladies ambassador Amalie Schwartz visits schools and construction sites to make it easier for girls to get into male occupations.

Amalie Schwartz is one of more than 350 female apprentices and fully trained female craftspeople who are ambassadors for the Boss Ladies project.

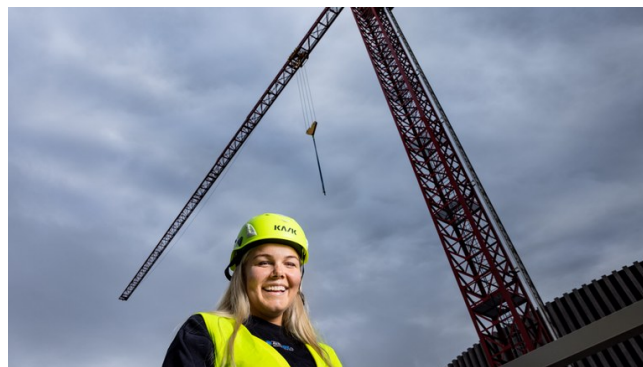
They visit elementary schools and technical colleges and meet parties in the construction industry to tell them about how girls can find exciting work in the construction business and in maritime and technical professions – which all traditionally attract mainly boys. They also tell employers about the benefits of choosing girls.

Amalie Schwartz's personal experience is that girls who are tempted to get an education in construction or technical subjects are often asked to drop their ideas – both by their own families and friends and by careers advisors.

“I dropped out of college after six months because I couldn't sit still for long enough, and got pushback from both my family and the college careers advisor who told me I was too smart to become a craftsman.”

She would face further obstacles to getting a craftsman education down the line. She was the only girl in her class at the technical college that trains craftsmen, and as she began her specialist training to be an electrician she met so much mistrust from both male teachers and other students that she almost broke down, she says.

“I was very close to giving up because everyone considered me to be less clever because I am a girl – despite getting top grades in every subject.”



22-year-old Amalie Schwartz loves her job as a newly qualified electrician.

Luckily for Amalie Schwartz, she got unreserved support from the employer where she did her apprenticeship, and where she now has a permanent job. She is already in charge of her own construction projects.

“But we need to give other girls an easier way to become craftsmen than the one I experienced,” she points out.

One woman, many men

Fewer than 10 % of all workers in the building and construction industry are women and most of these work in service positions. That means female role models are scarce and it is one of the reasons why the non-profit organisation Divérs set up the Boss Ladies project four years ago, says Trine Bentsen, head of development at Divérs.

“Women in these trades were typically the only girl in technical college, the only female apprentice in the workplace and at the end of their education, they are often also the only female worker on the construction site and in the barracks. If there are other women, they typically work in the office in an admin job.”

Boss Ladies’ ambassadors work as role models and try to make more girls interested in craftsmanship and technical subjects. Boss Ladies also lobby the social partners on all levels to ease the way for women into these trades.

Expelled for sexism

Boss Ladies identify five main obstacles for getting more women into craftsmanship and technical trades, explains Trine Bentsen:

- Girls are advised by families, schools and friends to choose ordinary college
- They are overlooked by technical colleges
- They face sexism from some teachers in technical college
- It is very hard for them to find apprenticeships – some write 100 applications before succeeding
- They face tough and sexist talk in many workplaces in the building and construction industry

One Boss Lady ambassador was told by a teacher at technical college that “I cannot concentrate on teaching when you stand there with sawdust on your breasts”.



Two apprentices in conversation: Amalie Schwartz and Osama Louati who is training to be a ventilation technician.

Amalie Schwartz has also experienced sexism. Once, at a construction site where people from many contractors worked in tandem, she was spoken to in such rough language that she

approached the foreman. One of the male builders from a different contractor had encouraged her to “spread her legs”.

“I chose to become a craftsman because I am relaxed about a direct and jokey tone of voice, and all my colleagues behave in a proper manner. But sometimes a male worker from a different company will speak out of line.

“We must come down hard on this kind of thing, and luckily that is what happened in the situation I mentioned. The worker concerned was immediately kicked out,” says Amalie Schwartz.

Bo Bjerregaard, the owner of decorating firm Malerfirmaet 2B which is working on one of the schools being built by the City of Copenhagen, agrees that the conversation on construction sites can be rough. He speaks up and says a third of his staff are women, and that in his experience having women there improves the way people talk to each other in the workplace.

“The decorating trade is the only one in the building and construction industry that has a high level of female employees because girls often want to be painter decorators. That makes it easy for me to hire women, and I do so gladly.

“In my firm, there is less locker room chatter because I have female employees. On a big construction site they might meet a guy who tries to be funny, but because the atmosphere in our firm is good this kind of thing does not scare my female employees,” says Bo Bjerregaard.

Female-friendly barracks

The City of Copenhagen is Denmark's largest municipality by far, and hence a major player in the building and construction industry. It takes an active role in efforts to attract more women to the industry. This can take the form of cooperation with and demands made of entrepreneurs, explains Jonas Rønsholt Rasmussen, CSR consultant at the City of Copenhagen.

He represents the project owner at the general meeting and gives a presentation where he invites the participating entrepreneurs to cooperate.

“The City of Copenhagen has not introduced female quotas, but we are asking the building and construction industry to work with us: Do you want to be part of creating the changes that are needed to get more women into the trade?” he asks the gathered entrepreneurs.

He explains how the City of Copenhagen has entered into a strategic cooperation with Boss Ladies on a pilot project aimed at changing the culture in the building and construction industry.

One of the demands from the City will be to make sure barracks at municipal construction sites are living up to the newest standards. Older models cannot be locked from the

inside when people are changing clothes or showering, and there are no refuse bags for sanitary products.

This follows one of the recommendations that The Danish Association for Responsible Construction (ARC) presented in a report in 2021 about the culture in the building and construction industry and women workers' welfare in the sector.

The ARC represents more than 100 members working for a responsible building and construction industry. The association has published five points of advice for project owners who want to work toward more gender diversity among partners and suppliers:

- Demand that staff use a good tone
- Health and safety plans should include the psychological work environment
- Have a place where workers can report perceived harassment
- No posters of naked women in barracks
- Create communities on the construction site



Sudden growth creates problems for Icelandic tourism

Icelandic tourism has bounced back faster than expected. The head of the travel industry likens it to champagne flowing when the cork has popped. Thanks to government support most of the tourist companies survived.

NEWS

28.10.2022

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRIÐASON

Tourism saved Iceland from the financial crisis of 2008. That is the general view of many experts. Before the crisis, there were around 600,000 foreign tourists in Iceland a year. After the eruption in Eyjafjallajökull in 2010, Iceland became a much more popular tourist destination and in 2014 the number of visitors reached over one million for the first time.

In 2019 the number reached over two million. So the growth was fast during the decade after the collapse.

But then came the pandemic and tourism shut down almost everywhere – and Iceland was of course no exception. Even though Icelanders travelled quite a lot domestically during the summers of 2020 and 2021, and the government pro-

vided support to travel agents, hotels, restaurants, and other companies that had to shut down or cut down a lot, tourism income fell dramatically.

Most of the tourist companies survived, however, and were functioning when foreign tourists started to return.



Jóhannes Þór Skúlason. Photo: SAF

Jóhannes Þór Skúlason, CEO of the Icelandic Travel Industry Association (SAF), says the assistance given by the government saved most of the companies. This assistance included support to keep staff on payroll, severance pay for those who were laid off and the freezing of loan payments.

“Even though there were more bankruptcies in 2020 than in the previous year, they were fewer than we had initially feared,” says Skúlason.

Demand increased fast

Skúlason says that when the effects of the pandemic faded, a big increase in demand was expected.

“We knew that when the cork was popped, the champagne would flow simply because there was a lot of need for travelling after this long break. But it happened with a lot more force than we expected.”

In 2021, 700,000 tourists came. The forecast for 2022 was 1.1 million tourists, but it has now reached between 1.6 and 1.7 million, which Skúlason believes is realistic.

“What also happened was that the tourists who came here left more behind than previously, which was a very positive thing. And the tourists were happy with what they experienced in Iceland,” he says.

Lilja Dögg Alfreðsdóttir, Minister of Tourism, gave high praise in a recent article to how rapidly tourism got back up and running after the pandemic. She referred to numbers from the International Tourism Association, that showed Icelandic tourism had regained 95 % of its strength from before the pandemic, while tourism in the whole world had regained 57 %.

Skúlason says it has been very nice to see the tourists arrive again, and that it of course has been useful for the companies that are starting to enjoy a steady income again. But this has not come without problems.

“As demand has grown again, the companies had to get their operations going quickly with less capacity than before the pandemic. This has caused problems.”

Staff shortages

One of them is getting the staff. Skúlason says the companies have had a hard time filling all the vacancies.

“Right now 8 % of jobs in tourism are not filled. This causes a lot of stress for the owners of the companies. The pandemic also meant staff were lost to other sectors and we haven’t been able to get all of them back.”

Another problem the companies faced was that during the pandemic all investments were down, including equipment updates.

“And when all liquidity is gone it is hard to start necessary investments quickly when the demand is up. Despite the support from the authorities, many companies have a lot of debt which has not gone away. That also reduces the capacity for investment. These are problems that will not go away for the next few years because these take time to solve,” Skúlason says.

High inflation is also causing problems for the tourism sector.

“This of course means less income for the companies after they have covered all the expenses. And that also reduces our possibilities for investment.”

The housing crisis in Iceland has caused problems for the tourism sector too. A housing shortage has forced prices up, although this has eased somewhat in recent months due to higher interest rates.

“Because there is a labour shortage in Iceland we have to get staff from abroad, and it is very difficult to find accommodation for them because of the general housing shortage,” says Skúlason.

Funds are needed

Skúlason has identified many ways of solving these problems. One way would be to simplify getting staff from abroad.

“I will go so far as to say that the system for getting staff from outside of the EEA is in shambles when you have to wait 36 months for the licence to get an employee.”

He also wants a special investment fund for tourism.

“Because companies have low or no equity, the tourism industry has bad competitiveness compared to other industries – when it comes to getting staff and new equity and investment.

“We are not eligible for any funds from the Icelandic research funds because we don’t fit into that category. So we believe there is much need for a special fund which focuses on tourism, like the one we already have for intellectual property. This will provide us with tool for our marketing to focus on attracting tourists who spend more money, for which there has been a demand in Iceland. Right now we are behind other Icelandic industries in that area,” Skúlason says.

“We can’t grow too fast”

Recent forecasts made for the Icelandic Tourist Board suggest that there could be more than 2.3 million tourists already by next year, which would equal the record set in 2018. By 2025 the number could reach 3 million in 2025. A more uncertain forecast says that by 2030, the number of tourists could possibly be 3.5 million.

Skúlason is optimistic that Iceland’s tourism industry can do well in the future, but he thinks it would be better if it grew more slowly.

“It would be ideal to grow 2 to 3 % a year, and simultaneously work on building the infrastructure needed for good tourism. Then this should work. We can’t grow too fast – the growth has to be sustainable,” Skúlason says.

The Swedes studying on nearly full pay

Up to 80 % pay. That is how much adults in Sweden on permanent contracts can be paid if they want to study in order to improve their basic education or change careers. Applications started flowing in as soon as the new support scheme became available.

THEME

28.10.2022

TEXT: FAYME ALM

Jennie Wallerström first heard about the career readjustment support scheme in a brief radio report. Soon after, on 1 October when the application process opened, she listened to Sverige Radio's flagship business news programme. It covered the new opportunity to finance studies offered to people on permanent contracts in the private and public sectors, as well as to the self-employed.



Jennie Wallerström was one of the first to apply for the new career readjustment support. Photo: Privat

"I used to work as a chef. Now I have a permanent job as a salesperson at a construction sector rental agency, but I am currently on study leave. Both jobs are action-packed and it is not always possible to plan around them.

"I enjoy solving unexpected challenges, so I jumped on this course. It suits someone like me who believes my time should be used for something good," says Jennie Wallerström when the Nordic Labour Journal catches up with her the day after one of her exams.

She is currently studying Green Logistics Management, a two-year vocational course at the Teknikhögskolan i Jönköping, a vocational post-secondary school. As the name

suggests, it focuses on environmental issues. It is a course for those who want to do "a project focusing on combining environmental issues, efficiency and cost issues in order to create well-functioning logistics with a sustainability focus," according to the course programme.

Information via Sveriges Radio

The business news programme informed Jennie Wallerström that in order to apply for the support, the employer needs to be associated with one of Sweden's so-called transition organisations. Any application must go to that organisation as well as to the CSN, The Swedish Board of Student Finance, which handles student finance in Sweden.

"My employer has a deal with TRR (one of the transition organisations). I could see this on their intranet. So on that same day, I sent in my application for support for my last term, which starts in January, both to them and to the CSN," she says.

A few days later, Jennie Wallerström met an advisor from TRR and made a checklist with them to see whether she ticked all the boxes for support.

"That's when I found out that it is possible to apply for support in the middle of a course if you are over 40 – and I am 43," says Wallerström, and adds she will not know whether she fulfils all the criteria for getting the support before she hears back from the CSN.

Aiming for the future

Jennie Wallerström felt it was important to choose an education that fitted her personally but also one that is needed in the labour market.

"Since this is a technical education which was created to match a need in the labour market, there is a lack of logisticians," she says. Now she is waiting for the answer from CSN, which has got TRR's statement that the course strengthens her position in the labour market.

CSN has said the earliest reply from them will come in 10 to 12 weeks. There has been a high number of applications, with 3,457 on the first day alone. A positive result would mean a lot for Jennie Wallerström. She would no longer have to take up loans from CSN as she has for the past three semesters.

“Not adding to my debts would absolutely be the greatest advantage. It is already pretty high because we have two children and I have also taken out other loans on top of the student loans for my first three semesters,” says Jennie Wallerström. She adds that she is very grateful for being given the chance to apply for the new career readjustment support.

“If I don’t get it, there is probably a reason why. But that won’t affect my education. I will carry on until I graduate as a logistician.”

New support, new knowledge

TRR, the transition organisation which Jennie Wallerström contacted, is a collective agreement foundation that works for the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and PTK, a trade union which represents private sector white-collar workers.



Johan Lagerhäll, CEO of TRR. Photo: Jeanette Hägglund/TRR

TRR received some 500 applications during the first week after the career readjustment support scheme was launched, says CEO Johan Lagerhäll. It was not possible to accept them all, however, because some applicants were not qualified to receive the support.

“We saw so-called early adapters – people who looked for information about the support scheme on their own since we had been lying low with our own marketing until we knew how much interest there would be.”

Johan Lagerhäll says his and other organisations have to learn as they go. He refers to the fact that the Swedish parliament on 8 June this year passed a “career readjustment package for long-term improved flexibility, the capacity to re-train and labour market security”, and that TRR’s partners two weeks later signed a new collective agreement where the

career readjustment support agreement was a part. This came into effect on 1 October.

“The career readjustment support scheme is new for us too, so we are on a learning journey and will adapt as we go based on the volume of applicants.

“We have a lot of experience guiding people who for one reason or other have become unemployed. This is a different target group. We are now getting going and will deliver on this,” says Johan Lagerhäll.

A welcome reception

The head of PTK’s negotiation group, Martin Wästfelt, says he has had nothing but positive feedback about the career readjustment support scheme from TRR’s 25 member unions, representing one million salaried employees in the private sector.



Martin Wästfelt, head of PTK’s negotiation group. Photo: Juliana Wiklund.

“This is a clear indication that many look forward to being able to strengthen their position in the labour market,” he says.

Martin Wästfelt considers the state support to be a foundation for those who are granted the career readjustment support, which TRR can supplement.

“If you earn 50 000 kronor (€4,530) a month, this will be very important. You can not manage on 21 000. While that might be a decent level of support, you have to have something on top of that,” says Martin Wästfelt.

The economic resources available to TRR is a result of agreements made in the 1970s between the trade unions and business, says Martin Wästfelt

“Already at that time, it was negotiated that TRR should have funds available to support members, while employers got a greater say in things. That is why TRR has the means today to top up the benefits for those who are granted the career readjustment support,” he says.

The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise is also positive to the reeducation support scheme. Their Deputy Director General Mattias Dahl told the Nordic Labour Journal that, over time, Swedish employers will now have access to a pool of far better educated workers.

“The public education system might be worried that it cannot provide the courses needed in for instance IT development, but other than that our members are looking forward to Sweden becoming more competitive with a skilled labour force.”

A long-term measure

1.3 billion Swedish kroner (€117,485,000) has been set aside for the career readjustment support scheme in the 2023 budget. This should cover some 5,650 full-time students.

The new reeducation support scheme will be expanded in the coming years and be fully rolled out by 2026 with a budget of between six and nine billion kroner (€543,600,000 to €815,500,000).



Nordic trade unions “too distant from rest of EU”

Who gains the most out of being a fly on the wall at the Council of Nordic Trade Unions congress in Oslo – the journalist or the social anthropologist? I suspect the latter, but since I am a journalist I will present the big news first: Iceland will host a tripartite meeting on green and just reform on 1 December 2023.

NEWS

28.10.2022

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Why is that so important? Why is there spontaneous applause in the conference hall at the hotel in Holmenkollen when Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir delivers the news over a link from Iceland?

The explanation is to be found in the way the social partners are organised in Europe and in the Nordic region, where there is a gap – employers have no organisation to cooperate on a Nordic level. The hope is therefore that the Iceland meeting could be the beginning of something larger.

The Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS) is an organisation for cooperation between national trade union confederations

in the Nordic region. Its members differ hugely – from the Swedish Trade Union Confederation with its 1.4 million members to Faroese Samtak with 6,000 members.

NFS was founded in 1972 and celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. It was established because Denmark, Norway, Ireland and the UK had applied for membership in the EEC, which the EU was then called. There was a risk that Nordic union cooperation might splinter, while it was not at all clear how union cooperation would be organised in an expanded European community.

The result was the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). It gathered trade union confederations that took their inspiration from “socialism, economic democracy, Christianity or communism” as it says in a book that describes the founding of the organisation. Today, ETUC consists of 92 confederations from 39 countries with a total of 45 million members.

NFS represent 8.5 million of these or nearly one-fifth of the total. Thanks to the high level of trade union membership in the Nordics, NFS is three times stronger within ETUC than it would have been if you only considered the size of its staff.

European employers gathered in BusinessEurope, which represents national industry and employers' organisations across 35 countries, and in CEEP, which represents employers of public services.

While the Nordic confederations in NFS coordinate their policies within ETUC and other international organisations, there is no Nordic equivalent among employers. This means one of the three pillars which make up what is known as the Nordic model is missing on a Nordic level. Cooperation with governments, however, is comprehensive – both directly and through the Nordic Council of Ministers.



Kristina Hafóss is Secretary General for the Nordic Council of Ministers and represented the Nordic institutions.

Trade unions bemoan the fact that employers are missing from a Nordic level, especially when cross-border issues like climate change are being discussed.

If you want the green change to happen, things have to be fair, argues the trade union movement.

“As President Obama said, if all countries were a bit more like the Nordics we would have a better world. That is conditional on us having a Nordic model of course, with a very strong trade union movement and collective agreements. I believe that without this the climate fight will be hampered,” said the seasoned MEP (but brand new Swedish MP) Jytte Guteland (S) when asked to sum up why NFS is important.



There is plenty of time for group work and conversations around the tables in the conference hall. Here, Professor of Nordic issues Johan Strang converse with the Swedish TCO leader Therese Nordström (facing away from the camera) and others.

But the Nordic model is also about culture and a unique way of working together and solving problems. This is where the social anthropologist comes in. And to avoid any misunderstandings: The fly on the wall is a metaphor – there is nothing secret going on at the NFS congress. I have been invited as a member of the press and simply act as a hobby anthropologist too.

What strikes me is how informal the congress is and how confederation leaders unquestioningly join in with all activities proposed by the NFS secretariat. It is made up of only four people led by Magnus Gissler, and it has also got a former secretary general, Loa Brynjulfsdóttir, to be the congress moderator.



Luca Vinsentini, the ETUC Secretary General, speaking by the "campfire" in the middle of the conference hall during the NFS congress. Most of the delegates knew that he he has also published poetry, both in Italian and English.

In order to energise the congress, several techniques are being used – like audience response systems allowing the del-

egates to guess which of the three claims made by speakers is false. Meanwhile, a digital bonfire has been created in the middle by arranging three TV screens in a triangle.

Every so often, José Pérez Johansson from the secretariat shouts: “Workgroups now!” and everyone eagerly enters discussions around the tables, writing down keywords on flip chart paper before pinning them to the wall.

“There is a big difference between ETUC meetings and this congress, where the use of new methods turns it all into a kind of classroom. This could never happen at ETUC, where you get long speeches, often prepared in advance, but not from the French or Italians. They deliver loooong introductions and descriptions of how they view things, and perhaps at the end, you get a proposal for what ETUC should do for us. There is a major cultural difference here,” says Ragnhild Lied, head of the Norwegian Unio trade union.



The results from group work is hung on the wall.

Loa Brynjulfsdóttir jumps between speaking Danish, Swedish and Icelandic – or English when introducing the international guests.

The walls around me are adorned with the Nordic flags, except Åland’s, as their trade unions do not have their own confederation (they are part of the Finnish confederations). Here is also an EU flag, which makes invited guest Jesús Gallego sit up and take notice.

“It surprises me to see the EU flag on the wall. Is this a joke? Will it be taken down and burned on the final day?” he jokes.

The NFS has had a problematic relationship with ETUC in recent years mainly because of the opposition from Danish and Swedish trade unions to minimum wages. It culminated with the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, in late 2021 deciding to freeze relations with ETUC and stop paying their membership fee.

“We cannot allow them to represent us, we must speak for ourselves,” LO’s contract secretary Torbjörn Johansson said in a comment at the time.

In early 2022 the hatchet was finally buried and Swedish LO resumed paying their membership fee. Claes-Mikael Ståhl, the ETUC Deputy General Secretary, sums up the cultural differences like this:

“We in the Nordic region like to write long letters, while you in the south of Europe are more theatrical.”

Jesús Gallego, however, cannot help but be a little frustrated with the Nordic countries’ relationship with the EU.



Jesús Gallego, International Secretary for the Spanish trade union confederatio UGT.

“There is this feeling that the Nordics have nothing to do with the EU. And this is not about the fact that some of the countries are not members. It is more about considering the EU to be an enemy rather than a partner. It seems some of your politicians, regardless of political affiliations, feel the need to present some kind of criticism of the EU in order to appear strong.

“All this also happened before the debate around minimum wages. You are, in other words, no ‘fans’ of the EU. But think about Greece – how big a fan was that country after the 2008 financial crisis? Or the Spanish steelworkers who lost their jobs when Spain joined the EU, or Italy’s voters who recently sent a strong message to the EU. They are not ‘fans’ of the union either.

“We all have had issues with the EU, but why do we then think that it is the Nordic region that has a problem with the EU? Is it because you are so different from us? We have a Spanish saying along the lines of ‘we are all so very different that we begin to resemble each other’.

“So perhaps that is what is happening: You are very different, but that does not make you more different than us.

"The greatest mistake we can make is for us to believe you were wrong and for you to believe that we were wrong in the debate over minimum wages. We were fighting the same fight. We all wanted better conditions for our members, but we believed it was better to have that tool while you believed it was better not to," says Jesús Gallego.



Climate and crises top of the agenda at the NFS congress

What signals were the most important to come out of the NFS congress in Oslo? We asked Ragnhild Lied, President of the Union confederation, to sum up her impressions. “What is clear now is that we are experiencing so many crises at once,” she says.

NEWS

28.10.2022

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Ragnhild Lied attended her first Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS) congress in Ålesund in 2012 and served as its President in 2017.

“Before, there was a lot of focus on progress and our own fights in the labour market. We were already aware of the cli-

mate challenge in 2012 but it is so much more obvious and common now. Then there is the war in Ukraine and what follows in its wake. We have seen how democracy is being challenged in different ways, which is what we discussed for much of the first day.

“My impression is that we agree on what the crises are but struggle a little to identify the most important things the trade unions can do to solve the problems. There are not so many concrete answers. We need to discuss this further, but also make sure that young people get organised and join the trade union movement.”

On that last point – during the congress, I noticed one of the younger delegates talked about “adult unions”?

“Yes, it is thought-provoking when we see that the elected representatives are around 60. We might have expected that those working around us were younger than us, but they are also 50 plus. Getting younger people involved is a big challenge.”

Did you make any decisions that you want to highlight?

“The NFS is more about cooperation, we do not decide on a binding protocol. It is more about agreeing on a common platform within the European Trade Union Congress, ETUC. Sometimes we disagree on certain issues, but that is OK too. What’s important is that we understand each other and agree on the overall picture.”

But you are very different – some confederations have more than a million members while others have fewer than 10,000?

“Yes, we are different. But we all share the same challenges in our meetings with governments, the EU and so on. This is true also for the Nordic unions in relation to the Nordic Council of Ministers. We see that the ministers talk with each other and exchange experiences – we need to stand together not only in the face of European policies.

But then there is a missing part. There is no employers’ organisation on a Nordic level. During the congress, Iceland’s Prime Minister announced a tripartite meeting on green change next year. Perhaps that can be treated as an opportunity to create a body on the employers’ side? And, in your view, why has this not happened?

“I have been wondering about the same thing. We have tried to get employers involved on a Nordic level. Could it be because they are organised in different ways? On the employee side, things are more universal.

But the employers are organised, too. In Norway, most of the large private enterprises are part of the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, NHO. There are similar organisations in the other countries although the differences are somewhat bigger within the public sector.

“We have asked to have joint meetings and we have also sometimes written joint letters to the employers about differ-

ent challenges, but for some reason, they do not want to commit to something Nordic.

“The Icelandic Prime Minister’s invite was actually a surprise. But it is a very clever thing to make it about the climate and green change since there is so much common interest there. We must solve the climate challenge together because there are no borders. So that is very positive.”

When you contemplate your own confederation Unio, whose members are trade unions representing university and college-educated employees – that is perhaps not the group that is hardest hit by climate change? Who among your members are worst affected?

“There might not be many occupations within Unio that will disappear, but the way people work will change. People who teach have experienced a very high degree of digitalisation without having had much training themselves. They have often been forced to develop their own skills. We try to be humble when it comes to fair change. Some occupations will disappear, but it then becomes our job to find new jobs for people who have lost theirs.

“We can offer a lot of knowledge and competence; we have teachers from kindergartens all the way up to college and university levels. We are in a slightly different situation than those who work in companies that are disappearing. What is important is to not only support people who become unemployed but to find them new jobs – the most important thing for a good life.

“But then we have groups like machine operators. Unio also represents the Norwegian Union of Marine Engineers, a union that is seeing enormous changes both at sea and on-shore. The green change means vessels are moving onto battery technology or hydrogen as fuel, which means an increased risk of fire. An explosion would hit them badly.”

The congress pointed out that certain occupations have lost status and need to be reappraised. This concerns teachers I suppose? They are no longer the only source of knowledge, and their knowledge is now more about how to teach?

“One of the teachers’ challenges today is that democracy is being challenged because of things like fake news. They must teach young people how to find information they can trust, and learn how to trust each other as well as trusting the main social institutions and research. This is what has changed teachers’ situation so much, while their own education has not changed that much at all.

“Teachers have to a large degree had to learn all this on their own. Look at how they teach students critical thinking, freedom of expression and what it means to live in a democra-

cy. That involves accepting hearing something you disagree with.”

Norway recently saw a major teachers’ strike which the government and parliament ended by law. Did that help improve teachers’ status?

“It does feel like a setback, but at the same time, it was argued that the strike had to end because it represented a danger to people’s lives and health. Using such an argument has never happened before. It says something about how crucial it is to have large social institutions that can offer security and help you think differently when you sit alone at home in your room and picture yourself in the world out there.

“I think we need to use what happened to build and strengthen the value of teachers’ work – and how it is being valued by others.”

Denmark and Sweden's EU dilemma over minimum wages

Should the government go to the EU Court of Justice to have the directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union nullified? That question is now being debated in Denmark and Sweden after the directive was adopted with an overwhelming majority. But it is far from given that any of the two countries' governments will take action.

NEWS

28.10.2022

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EU & ARBETSRÄTT

Denmark and Sweden were the only countries to vote against the directive when it was adopted on 4 October. The Danish government also made a statement in the protocol underlining that it appreciated the efforts of different presidencies to accommodate Denmark's concerns, but that it could not support the directive out of principle. Sweden had made a similar statement at an earlier meeting of the Council.

The question is what will happen now.

Voices in the Danish trade union movement immediately called for the Danish government to bring the issue before the EU Court of Justice to try to nullify the directive. The rationale being that the EU has overstepped its competence because one treaty rule clearly says that the Union cannot adopt directives covering wage issues.

In Sweden, the social partners have been conspicuously quiet after the adoption of the directive. Researchers, however, have argued that the government ought to take the case to the EU Court of Justice.

This would have to happen within two months after the directive is published in the EU's official journal. However, it is not at all clear whether this will happen. Now, the issue is about politics and not simply a legal matter. Nobody yet knows what kind of government Denmark will have after elections on 1 November, nor what that government will do.

Sweden also has just got a new government that has a lot of other things on its plate. For Sweden, matters are even more complicated since the country takes on the presidency of the EU on 1 January 2023.

It is considered good manners that a member state taking on the presidency tones down its own interests to the benefit of what is important for the EU as a whole.

It would surely be seen as a gross provocation if the government went to the EU Court of Justice in this situation to basically "sue" its colleagues in all of the other member states.

Time will tell.

"Yellow" trade union struggles to gain foothold in Norway

Krifa claims to be a good alternative to traditional trade unions in Norway, especially as union membership is up among employers but down among employees. Traditional unions feel Krifa is too close to employers and disagree with their anti-strike policy.

NEWS

28.10.2022

TEXT: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

The Krifa trade union was established in Denmark in 1899. Krifa's Norwegian chapter opened in 2007. Its leader, Kristin Fjellman, believes people get the best possible working environment when the parties support each other.



"We feel Krifa is a good alternative in a time when union membership is rising among employers and falling among employees. We have to try to create the best possible work

environment together. Both the parties in the labour market need support in order to create good job satisfaction," she says.

Helping companies

Fjellman explains that Krifa works together with companies to improve job satisfaction.

"We can help companies improve job satisfaction among employees. Krifa helps, assists and supports workers. This summer we published a report in cooperation with small and medium-sized enterprises – SMEs – which maps Norwegian workers' job satisfaction," she says.

"When we participate in debates, it turns out that we actually agree with politicians from different parties, the employers represented by SMEs and the workers represented by Krifa. We agree that job satisfaction is a good thing. The question is how to improve it."

Fjellman studied job satisfaction in Århus and Copenhagen in Denmark, where Krifa offers training that leads to university credits.

"For me, visiting companies is both rewarding and fun. We assess where the land lies, we measure the effect of various changes and provide help through workshops," she explains.

"We currently work with measuring job satisfaction at around 10 companies that employ between 10 and 300 people. We look at what is needed to have satisfied staff," explains Fjellman, and points out that fair pay is one of the things that is of most importance to workers.

Krifa works with lowering the threshold for workers to speak up if there is something they need.

"This kind of focus leads to less hierarchy and a team working closer together. We focus on developing what leaders can do

to make employees feel happy at work. That leads to improved results, lower sick leave levels, increased productivity and more."

Fjellman uses the term "*livslykke*" – happiness in life – when talking about employees.

"Employees who enjoy work experience improved *livslykke*. This is of socio-economical importance because it leads to lower levels of sick leave," says Fjellman.

A test for everyone

Krifa recommends its members to test their own job satisfaction.

"When we visit workplaces, I first send out a survey to all employees. This gives us an anonymised report which lets employees and leaders see where the land lies. Everything is anonymous. These are good tools for good employee performance reviews. The dynamics are absolutely fabulous when you have fun at work," she says.

"We do a lot of research on good job satisfaction in Denmark. We want to promote job satisfaction, motivation and security in working life. We also employ legal experts. But at Krifa we like to say that we think differently and want to be more than a trade union."

What do you mean by that?

"Everyone is seen and heard and everyone is equal," she says.

Krifa Norwegian membership has hovered around 2 000 members for a long time but is slowly growing, according to Fjellman.

Why should someone join?

"We focus on employees and job satisfaction and provide legal aid from day one. We are cheaper and you get direct help without having to go via employee representatives. We help employees with their issues, but also want them to be motivated and enjoy work. We want to give them more than what traditional trade unions do. Members pay 239 kroner (€23) a month," she explains.

Krifa has more than 200 000 members in Denmark, and the Norwegian chapter works closely with the Danish one.

What do you feel you are achieving right now?

"On a legal level, we help people to move on and provide security and assistance. Some people get help to get out of difficult situations or to move forward in the workplace. We are driven by helping people and workplaces," she says.

"Sick leave and stress are not sustainable for companies. We want to help lower sick leave levels in Norway. It is normal to have difficult days at work now and again, but over time

this wears people down both at work and at home," explains Fjellman.

"We want to help create job satisfaction because people spend so much of their time at work. When employees are successful in the workplace, their private lives improve too. In order to succeed in the workplace in the long run, you have to be in a situation where you want to go to work," she says.

Krifa has four permanent staff and five consultants.

Very content with the union

Neda Maria Kaizumi works with quality for renewable energy company Scatec. She has experience working in various countries and has been a member of Krifa since the union started up in Norway. She is very content.



"In Norway, it is important to be a trade union member. LO (the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions) is often in conflicts that only make things worse for society, in my opinion. Krifa does not share that philosophy. Strike action is very negative for society. Employers lose a lot from strikes. I call it 'mafia business'. That is why I chose to join Krifa, because everything can be solved through dialogue. We are all adults," says Kaizumi.

"We have to talk together and solve problems rather than go on strike. A strike is just making a point," she says.

Kaizumi has worked across many trades and feels a good dialogue with the employer is the solution.

"Dialogue is appreciated. It brings to the fore knowledge and values, and you look after everyone's interests.

"Strike action only creates a bad atmosphere. Take the recent teachers' strike in Norway. Krifa would have solved the conflict without a strike. It could have been solved with dialogue and no strike action," says Kaizumi.

"Trade unions take strike action too easily, rather than choosing dialogue. This creates unnecessary tension."

Traditional unions sceptical

Kristine Nergaard is a researcher with the independent social science research foundation FAFO, set up by LO in Norway in 1982.

"We make reports on trade union membership numbers in Norway. They show that Krifa has not gained a substantial foothold here."

Both Sweden, Finland and Denmark have higher levels of trade union membership than Norway, where just under 70 % of workers are organised. The figure for Norway is 50 %.

"Krifa was originally Danish and the Danish organisation initially financed the Norwegian chapter that was set up in 2008. This might have become more costly than they thought it would be. They have not managed to get many members in Norway and perhaps have not had the impact they had hoped for," says Nergaard.

Some 1.3 million workers are trade union members in Norway.

"We know that at least one workers union in one of the Christian organisations have joined Krifa. But by and large, it does not look like Krifa has made much of an impact in competition with traditional trade unions."

Bigger in Denmark

Trade unions that are not involved in negotiating settlements with employers have more members in Denmark than in Norway.

"These so-called yellow unions, or company unions, have emerged in Denmark first and foremost due to regulatory changes that opened up for establishing "*a-kasser*" (unemployment insurance) serving different trades. This allows Krifa – that does not organise workers according to trade or occupation – to compete with traditional trade unions," explains Nergaard.

"An *a-kasse* in Denmark pays out unemployment benefits to those who need it, while in Norway this is the job of the Labour and Welfare Administration NAV. Workers must sign up for an *a-kasse* and pay a fee to be covered. The Danish

benefit system is administered by *a-kasser* which are closely linked to the trade unions. This is also the case in Sweden and Finland."

Norway had *a-kasser* until the 1930s, but the state took over when these went bust.

"Krifa and some other Danish organisations have not had ambitions to negotiate collective agreements or to have employee representatives in workplaces. They would rather organise widely, offer individual benefits for members and offer *a-kasser*," says Nergaard.

"Company unions are big and growing in Denmark, partly to the detriment of Danish LO. This is not the case in Sweden and Finland," she says. These kinds of unions do not exist there.

"The debate now is whether a new trade union confederation should be established and if this type of trade union should become part of the tripartite cooperation," she says.

Krifa in Denmark has already become part of some collective agreements. The traditional trade union movement has been critical to several of these agreements, arguing they are worse than their own – meaning Krifa gives employers collective agreements that cost them less."