

News

New whistleblower act challenges
Sweden's unique freedom of expression

Editorial

Nordic nuances regarding
whistleblowers and paternity leave

News

Norway's labour shortages stretch to "the
furthest island"

News

Iceland's union chief quits among
infighting

Aug 18, 2022

Theme: Paternity leave in the Nordics



Newsletter from the Nordic Labour Journal 6/2022



Financed by
Nordic Council of
Ministers

NORDIC LABOUR JOURNAL

Work Research Institute
OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University,
Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, NO-0130
Oslo

PUBLISHER

Work Research Institute, OsloMet
commissioned by the Nordic Council of
Ministers.
The Nordic Council of Ministers is not
responsible for the content

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Björn Lindahl

EMAIL

nljeditor@gmail.com

WEB

www.nordiclabourjournal.org

An email edition of the newsletter can
be ordered free of charge from
www.nordiclabourjournal.org

ISSN 1504-9019 tildelt: Nordic labour
journal (online)



Contents

Nordic nuances regarding whistleblowers and paternity leave	3
Dads on equal footing with mums in Denmark's new parental leave law.....	5
Faroe Islands: Four weeks enough for father and child?	8
New whistleblower act challenges Sweden's unique freedom of expression	11
Iceland's union chief quits among infighting.....	13
Norway's labour shortages stretch to "the furthest island"	16
Sweden lands new landmark main agreement	19
Are left-handers discriminated against?	21

Nordic nuances regarding whistleblowers and paternity leave

Nordic citizens have many rights that can seem nearly utopian to people elsewhere in the world. But in certain areas, there are surprisingly large differences also between Nordic countries. Paternity leave is one example.

EDITORIAL

18.08.2022

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

From August this year, Danish fathers get nine weeks of earmarked parental leave. Left unused, they cannot be transferred to the mother. This makes a real difference from the two earmarked weeks fathers used to have.

In other Nordic countries, like Iceland, at least three earmarked months of paternity leave have been the norm for many years.

A report released in 2019 showed that in Iceland and Sweden, the fathers take roughly 30 percent of the total available leave. In Norway, the figure is 20 percent, and in Denmark and Finland 10 percent.

What the law says and what happens in real life is not always the same, however. In the Faroe Islands, parents are in principle free to share as they see fit 34 out of a total of 52 weeks that new parents can take off. But because there is a ceiling for how much pay can be compensated, women tend to take most of the leave because they earn less on average.

Magnus Rasmussen, the Faroese Minister of Industry and Trade, has promised to raise the ceiling from 25,000 danish kroner (€3,360) a month to 27,000.

“The ceiling should be at least 45,000 kroner (€ 6,050) a month to be sufficient,” says Mai Laksáfoss Simonsen in a commentary. She heads the Faroese Gender Equality Commission Javnstøðunevndin.

Another difference we look at in this edition is the level of protection extended to whistleblowers. Reporting on irregularities – be it abuse, dangerous work environments, tax avoidance or environmental crime – is protected by law in several Nordic countries. But Finland is trailing behind. The Finnish government will finally propose whistleblower legislation later this year, as a response to the so called whistleblower-directive from the EU commission..

Sweden is ahead of the Nordic pack on this issue. No other country has more far-reaching protection for employees who want to go public with irregularities in the workplace. The Swedish Work Environment Authority has also been tasked with setting up a control body which will make sure 30 Swedish authorities have routines and mechanisms to deal with whistleblowers.

Can the legislation go too far?

The latest changes to the whistleblower legislation have been called complex, partly because it is far too voluminous with its 10 chapters and 60 articles, compared to the former legislation that had a total of 10 articles.

For those who believe the fight for equality has reached its goal, we take a look at a group of people who are potentially discriminated against and who so far have had no protection – left-handers. In a slightly ironic way, we examine scientific studies which have looked at if there are occupations less suited for left-handed people, whether there are any wage differences and why there are so few products tailored for left-handers.

We also report on Sweden's new central agreement between trade unions and employers – perhaps the largest change since the 1938 Saltsjöbad agreement, which began a long period of consensus on the Swedish labour market and which has become a symbol of the Swedish model.

To underline this the new agreement was also signed in Grand Hotel, Saltsjöbaden,

Among other things, the new agreement gives the employees higher compensation for studies and other skills development. The Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, also obtained an improvement for temporary workers who are not offered permanent employment in the customer company.

In return, employers covered by the agreement are given greater opportunities to make exceptions to the order of rotation in the event of dismissal due to a lack of work than is the case under the Employment Protection Act.

Conflicts between unions and employers is one thing. Perhaps there should be an agreement regulating conflicts between different trade unions, or internal union conflicts? The Icelandic Trade Union Confederation leader Drífa Snædal surprised many by stepping down a few months before the end of her term, because of a conflict over just how radical the unions in Iceland ought to be.

A problem that all the Nordic countries struggle with is the access to skilled workers. We look at the situation from the view of those who live on the Norwegian island Frøya, outside Trondheim.



Dads on equal footing with mums in Denmark's new parental leave law

More gender equality in the labour market and more fathers on leave with small children. This is what Danish families can now look forward to after the government has given fathers nine extra weeks of earmarked paternity leave.

THEME

18.08.2022

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: MAHMOUD AL-TAMIR - TV2 ØST

2 August 2022 became a day to remember for Jørgen Stensgaard Madsen, head of Metal Storstrøm, the Central and South Zealand chapter of the Danish Union of Metalworkers. His daughter and son-in-law gave him a grandson, Theodor, and on the same day, a new law on parental leave came into force which will greatly benefit Metal Storstrøm members, believes Jørgen Stensgaard Madsen.

“My grandson was born a few hours after the law on earmarked paternity leave came into force, so the new law suddenly became very personal to me. Since Theodor was born after the law came into force, my daughter and son-in-law – and all other employees who have children from now on –

will agree on the distribution of parental leave in light of an extra nine weeks of leave earmarked for the father.



Simon Larsen and his girlfriend from fra Næstved are among the very first who get to figure out how to divide up their parental leave.

"I believe this is a really good development," says Jørgen Stensgaard Madsen.

The change to the law is an execution of EU rules and means that nine weeks out of the total parental leave period from now on is reserved for each of the parents. Either nine week period will be lost if it is not used before the child turns one.

Until now, Danish fathers only had two weeks of earmarked parental leave after a child is born, when both parents are at home with the baby. Quite a few parents have chosen to use only these two earmarked weeks for the father while the mother takes the rest of the parental leave.

A nudge for fathers

This pattern is now expected to change. Granting fathers nine extra weeks of earmarked leave should give a considerable boost to the amount of time that fathers take out of the total parental leave period. Today, fathers on average take five weeks off. In a fresh survey from Egmont Fonden, seven in ten men aged 18 to 40 say they believe they will take the nine weeks that are now earmarked for fathers – partly because if they do not, the earmarked weeks will be lost.

The earmarking is also an important signal to fathers that their time with their small child is important, thinks Jørgen Stensgaard Madsen

"When I had my own children, I took no leave. All I did was buy my colleagues a beer after work. I have regretted this bitterly because it meant that I never got really close to my children while they were little and they deserved to spend more time with me. But it was a different culture back then."

The Danish Union of Metalworkers organises qualified workers within manufacturing, mechanics and IT. It has many male members within trade and industry, where wages have traditionally been considered to be more important than parental leave. Jørgen Stensgaard Madsen expects that it will take a few years before all their members will make use of the earmarked weeks. But things are already changing, he believes.

"The new rule is a nudge for fathers to take time to be with their child, and as a union, we are following this up with an information campaign for our members where we make them aware that they can make use of the earmarked parental leave. I am certain that there will come a time when men take nine weeks off as a matter of fact – also among my members."

Paid parental leave

Some families have chosen not to take paternity leave for economic reasons. In quite a few families the father earns more than the mother, and in workplaces that do not pay a full

salary during parental leave, workers will get income maintenance – which is usually less than their pay package.

But some collective agreements already include provisions for full pay during parental leave, which would also cover the nine weeks that are now earmarked for fathers. Full pay is only possible when a worker has been employed for at least nine months at the time of the baby's birth.



The manufacturing corporation Emerson is part of the industrial agreement and has always followed the current agreement which has given its workers full pay during parental leave for a longer period of time. It is already a matter of course for the mainly male workers in the corporation's two Danish departments to take parental leave to spend time with their child, so Emerson does not expect the new legislation to change things all that much, explains the head of HR Peter Bøving.

"We support the new legislation and already live up to what it intends to do. As a company, we wish to make it easy for our employees to take parental leave. Parental leave equals happy colleagues who can perform even better at work because they are not disappointed not to have spent enough time with their children."

He expects the change in legislation will help more men in the labour market in general to take more parental leave and thinks the earmarking of nine weeks for the father is an important tool.

“It is a good idea to earmark the leave to make more fathers take time off. This is a fantastic opportunity to spend time with your child, while the mother can get back to work.”

Good for gender equality

Both the Danish Trade Union Confederation (FH) and the Confederation of Danish Employers (DA) support the new earmarked parental leave. FH expects the new model will help prevent women from being disadvantaged in the labour market. So far, women have taken 90 % of parental leave, and this has an impact on their pay and opportunities, believes FH’s President Lizette Risgaard.

“For decades, we have been talking about separate rights to parental leave for fathers. It benefits gender equality, fathers’ relationships with their children and the entire family,” Risgaard said earlier.

But a cultural change is needed, thinks FH’s Vice President Majbrit Belau.

“It supports a cultural change where mothers are given better chances to return quicker to work, which is also something companies want. It will become more natural for fathers to take a larger part of the total parental leave.”



“We will work towards the cultural change which is needed to secure that all children and new fathers really do get to enjoy the benefits of this agreement. If more fathers are to take a larger chunk of parental leave, it will be necessary to change the current culture surrounding parental leave. Danish workplaces, health workers, grandparents, municipal support and even public toilets are all geared towards mothers taking parental leave,” commented Majbrit Belau.

DA’s Deputy Director General Pernille Knudsen hopes the new law will help more women get back to work quicker.



Faroe Islands: Four weeks enough for father and child?

Faroese fathers use four out of the 52 weeks of their available parental leave while mothers use 48. The reason is economic, explains a father and the head of the Gender Equality Commission.

THEME

18.08.2022

TEXT: RÓLANT WAAG DAM

Parental leave is something the Faroese talk about a lot. The parental leave system. The length of parental leave. How the 52 weeks are divided between the parents. Paid parental leave. People in the Faro Islands have been talking about this for years, parents and politicians alike.

Politicians are parents too. One of them took his employer to court in 2009. Kári á Rógvi argued he had the right to two weeks of paid parental leave. We will come back to the ruling in that case. But first, we fast-forward to 11 August 2022.

Big difference between 25,000 and 45,000

The head of the Gender Equality Commission in the Faro Islands (Javnstøðunevndin) is on the radio with a rather strong message.

“The ceiling for parental leave payments should be at least 45,000 kroner (€ 6,050) a month to be sufficient,” says Mai Laksáfoss Simonsen.

The statement comes in the wake of an announcement from the Minister of Industry and Trade, Magnus Rasmussen, that

the ceiling for parental leave payments will increase from 25,000 to 27,000 kroner – which is quite a bit less than 45,000 kroner. And this is a problem, according to Laksáfoss Simonsen, because it means the parent with the lowest pay will take the majority of the parental leave. In the Faroe Islands that is usually the woman.



Mai Laksáfoss Simonsen. Photo: kvf.fo

“This is a structural problem which means that even if fathers want to take more parental leave, they don’t because the payment ceiling is so low,” says Laksáfoss Simonsen. She is not the only one to argue this point.

Rógvi Olavsson became a father in October last year. He looked into what options he and his girlfriend had when it came to parental leave. They ended up choosing the same as most other Faroese families do – the mother stayed at home with the child for most of the allotted time.

“If the system followed wage levels, I would definitely have taken a larger part of the parental leave than I ended up doing,” Olavsson told the Faroese TV news programme Dagar & Vika on 10 March, around the time when opposition party Progress (Framsókn) proposed to introduce indexation to parental leave payments.

That proposal did not get parliamentary support, but the debate has reemerged with the Minister of Industry and Trade’s announcement to increase the payment ceiling by 2,000 kroner.

Parental leave and money problems

The Faroese parental leave system stems from 2001 and was last changed in 2020 when the current government extended the period of leave from 48 to 52 weeks. Mothers can take the first 14 weeks off. The father has the right to take four weeks off. After the mother’s 14 weeks, the parents can take up to 52 weeks parental leave (or 48 weeks if the father chooses to spend his four weeks together with the mother during the initial 14 weeks).

The parents are free to choose who takes what time off during these 34 weeks. This means that Faroese fathers in principle

can have the same or longer parental leave than the mother. But this is where the problem with pay comes in.

Men in the Faroe Islands earn more than women. According to Statistics Faroe Islands, in June this year men were paid 578.8 million Danish kroner in wages while women were paid 371,1 million. In June last year, Faroese men were paid 528 million and women 339 million.

These are the numbers that make Laksáfoss Simonsen at the Gender Equality Commission describe this as a structural problem. She is supported by the head of the union for economists and lawyers in the Faroe Islands, Elisabeth F. Rasmussen.

“We want a system that makes it more likely that fathers take their share of parental leave, but we do not think 2,000 kroner will make a difference,” she told the public broadcaster Kringvarp Føroya on 12 August. This is not the first time she criticises the current parental leave system.

Back in March, she called it “a social problem. Mothers spend longer away from the labour market, they lose out on pay and pensions and it can stifle their career opportunities.”

MP vs. parliament

Let us return to that lawsuit, where an MP took parliament to court.

“The case centres on whether Kári á Rógvi is entitled to be paid wages during his parental leave from his work as an MP,” said the legal documents. He did not, ruled the Faroese Court in 2011. According to the law, male MPs did not have that right. Female MPs, however, did have the right to paid parental leave.

At the time, Kári á Rógvi referred to the gender equality law, which he argued gave him the right to paid parental leave because it is illegal to discriminate between genders. But he lost both in the Faroese Court in 2011 and in the Eastern High Court – one of Denmark’s two high courts – in 2012.

In 2014, another parental leave case caught the media’s attention.

“Anne Mette makes history,” wrote one of the Faroe Islands’ biggest news sites, in.fo, on 25 January that year. Anne Mette Greve Klemensen became the first priest in the Faroe Islands to take parental leave. The news site also announced the start and end date of her leave.

The parental leave system "ought to change"

Eight years later, many stories are still being written about the Faroese parental leave system. A common theme seems to be that it does not work as it should and it ought to change. This is what á Rógvi argued back in 2009, and it is what many believe today.

Yet there is a long way from 25,000 to 45,000 kroner – especially when you consider that the last time the ceiling was raised was in 2004. At that time, 18 years ago, the ceiling was 35,000 kroner a month – 10,000 kroner more than today.

It seems very likely that the ceiling will be raised by 2,000 kroner, as Rasmussen has proposed. He is part of the same government that extended the parental leave period by four weeks. But as opposition politician Ruth Vang from Progress pointed out:

“It is all good and well that we have extended parental leave by four weeks. But the longer the leave is, and with the pay ceiling being so low, the longer families must live with a cut to their income.”

Picture of Ulrika Hyllert

New whistleblower act challenges Sweden's unique freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is enshrined in the Swedish constitution, and no other country has more far-reaching protection for employees who want to go public with irregularities in the workplace. As a result, expectations of a new whistleblower act were high. Criticism came fast.

NEWS

18.08.2022

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: TOR JOHANSSON

Swedish freedom of expression and protection of expression is enshrined in two out of Sweden's four fundamental laws – The Freedom of the Press Act and The Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression.

Anyone about anything at all

The freedom of expression makes it possible for anyone to anonymously give information for publication about anything at all to a journalist, editorial staff or an author.

“Freedom of expression is there to secure information that individuals want to share anonymously can still get out. So it is protection that benefits society and helps oil the social machinery while throwing light on mismanagement and abuse. It is protection which helps Swedish authorities maintain a high level of trust,” Nils Funcke, an expert on Swedish freedom of expression, told the Nordic Labour Journal.



Nils Funcke, expert on the freedom of expression, at the Gothenburg Book Fair. Photo: Arild Vågen/ Wikipedia.

Criticism of the new proposed legislation

Like other Nordic countries, Sweden chose to implement the EU's so-called whistleblower directive. The new whistleblower act came into force on 17 November 2021. According to Minister for Employment Eva Nordmark, the idea was to “give all employees the right to sound the alarm about irregularities. This is important to the individual, but it is also an important part of a free and democratic society.”

Some of the comments that the Swedish government got in a consultation process to the report “Increased safety for whistleblowers” centred on how the new legislation would relate to the freedom of expression in particular.

The Swedish Media Publishers' Association (TU) with more than 100 member companies, wrote that they considered the whistleblower directive to be important, but that it is “only complementing the constitutional right to freedom of expression and protection of expression” and that the whistleblower legislation must not “be expressed or interpreted in a way that excludes the freedom of expression and information enshrined in the constitution”.

Civil Right Defenders, formerly the Swedish Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, underlined in their consultation comment that “there is a need to clarify the relationship between the regulation of publication and the constitutional right to freedom of expression and the protection of expression”.

Criticism led to revised legislation

The Swedish Union of Journalists (SJF) was not part of the consultation but chose to send in an answer in any case. The Union had been monitoring the issue and knew that the outside world would be watching, expecting that it would still

be possible to safely provide information without unveiling the source, Ulrika Hyllert, SJF's President, told the Nordic Labour Journal.

"We try to influence everything that has to do with the protection of expression, so it felt completely natural to present the Union's views on this," she says.

Legislators took onboard the collective criticism relating to the protection of expression, and the legal text now contains, as SJF proposed, a direct reference to the constitutional right.

The trade unions' main criticism of the new whistleblower legislation remains, however, since the legislation turned out to be quite different to the 2016 whistleblower act.

"It was decided to introduce something completely new rather than build on what we already had, despite the fact that it would have been possible to include the good bits from the EU directive in the existing, well-functioning legislation. The new legislation is therefore completely unproven," says Ulrika Hyllert. She had hoped for a more ambitious approach during the writing of the new whistleblower act.

Complex act

The criticism does not stop there, however. The new whistleblower act has been called complex, partly because it is far too voluminous with its 10 chapters and 60 articles, compared to the former legislation that had a total of 10 articles.

It was also criticised for containing terms like "in the public interest" without clarifying what that entailed.

- It is unclear what the criterion "public interest" means. It is difficult for someone who wants to raise the alarm to determine what it is and we will not get any clarity on it until it is tested in court. There is also a risk of confusion with what we journalists call "public interest" when it comes to what is to be published and that is something completely different. It is unfortunate that a term that is so similar has been chosen, says Ulrika Hyllert.

The Civil Rights Defenders also have views on the term "in the public interest". In their consultation comment they write:

"If a person blowing the whistle is to enjoy the protection of the law, it should not be a prerequisite that the irregularity is in the public interest, in situations where the information does not pertain to EU law. Such a prerequisite risks undermining the legislation's purpose."

There is an attempt to explain things in the Ministry of Employment's "Questions and answers about strong protection of whistleblowers". It says: "It is often in the public interest that irregularities are reported if the issues are serious."

A risk to anonymity

Another criticism of the new whistleblower act is that the protection against reprisals from employers is linked to a demand. If a person wants to talk to the media, they should first report the issue to "an external reporting channel", i.e. one of the government-appointed authorities that records, follow up and pass on the irregularity issue to the Work Environment Authority. If the person approaches the media first, they lose their protection.

"The way the act stands now, you risk creating ambiguity for the individual. It is important to make it clear that those who want to report irregularities in the workplace to the media can do this without risking their anonymity. The journalist is responsible for not revealing their source and could even be held legally responsible if they do not do everything in their power to make sure the source remains anonymous," says Ulrika Hyllert.

She does, however, see some advantages in the new whistleblower act. Like the fact that it covers more people, like contractors, trainees, voluntary workers and others. And the fact that it makes it compulsory for private companies to have a whistleblower channel and that there is reparation linked to the protection of whistleblowers.

A question of knowledge and democracy

In the end, it all comes down to improving knowledge in the workplaces about the new whistleblower act and freedom of expression, believes Ulrika Hyllert.

"When it is not clear what is what, it could become a problem for democracy. Nobody should fear reprisals when reporting irregularities, not when we know our freedom of expression is enshrined in two of our fundamental laws."



Iceland's union chief quits among infighting

There has been an increasing conflict within the labour unions in Iceland for the past few years. Now it has reached a new level as Drífa Snædal, the President of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour, resigned from her post on 10 August.

NEWS

18.08.2022

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRIÐASON

In a statement, she said that after deciding not to seek re-election at the end of her term in two months' time, she decided it would be best to quit instantly. Communication with some elected officials within the movement had been difficult, and the formation of blocs had made her unable to continue effectively.

This bloc formation has been developing for the past few years, with the election of leaders who take a more radical approach in their fight for better salaries. Snædal named two labour unions in particular.

One of them is VR, whose membership is broad and includes retail and office workers. VR's chairman, Ragnar Þór Ingólfsson, has been critical of the way Snædal has run the confederation.

The other union Drífa mentioned in her statement is Efling, which mostly represents low-skilled workers. Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir was first elected chairperson there in 2018 and has been radical in her approach. The last collective agreement Efling reached came after strikes, something that had been rare in previous years.



Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir, who heads the Efling trade union, during a Metoo-conference. Photo: BIG

She resigned last year because of conflict with the staff, ran again last April, won and straight after that laid off the entire union staff. She said it was because of organisational change in the office. Drífa Snædal strongly criticised the layoffs, which did not go down well with Jónsdóttir.

When Drífa resigned, she described in an interview with broadcaster RUV the communication she had with some labour union leaders:

“Some people are mixing up being radical and big-mouthed. This has been a kind of competition in being as big-mouthed as possible, and when you say bad things to your comrades you are the most radical one.

“The atmosphere has been one of trying to take down your comrade, scream, burst out of meetings and give tough statements in the media about certain people. This has become unbearable [...] and it’s tough to work under such conditions.”

Mixed reactions among union leaders

Snædal is most likely referring to the two union leaders mentioned above, who also reacted positively to her resignation. Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir said in a statement on her Facebook page that the resignation was overdue.

“The fact is that Drífa made the choice to lock herself in an office with the closest partner of her predecessor and the class of experts and upper-middle-class people that control the state institutions in Iceland, and also the office of the Confederation of Labour.”



Ragnar Þór Ingólfsson, head of VR. Photo: VR

Ragnar Þór Ingólfsson agreed, which is not surprising as he has been very critical of the Confederation and even accused some board members of personal attacks against him.

He told the news website mbl.is that the Confederation had not done its duties towards the member unions.

“[Drífa] is part of a bloc that is on the verge of collapsing,” he said.

“I can’t see how she could have continued doing her job against the will of the majority of the unions that form the Confederation of Labour.”

But 11 union chairpeople said in a statement that Drífa Snædal had done a great job as Confederation President, securing better living conditions for those with the lowest wages.

“We regret the situation that made her feel forced to resign,” the statement says.

Gylfi Dalmann Adalsteinsson, associate professor at the University of Iceland, has followed the labour market for 30 years. In an interview with broadcaster RUV, he said that this resignation is unique for this century.

“There have been changes of emphasis within the labour unions and with people like Ingólfsson and Jónsdóttir, a new tone has been set. But it’s difficult to say how deep this conflict cuts.”

At least the events of the last few days show that the unions are not in agreement at all – not only on whether the resignation of Snædal is good or bad but also on which route to take in the discussions on the next collective agreements. The current ones expire on 1 November.

The radical bloc is already implying that they would not hesitate to call a strike to get the salaries they demand, something which is very unusual when formal discussions have not even started.

“In my opinion, it is important that there is calm and unity within the labour unions. It is a strong and powerful force,” Adalsteinsson says.

It is also unclear who will take over as President of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour on 10 October, when its main assembly takes place.

Nobody has formally put themselves forward, but the main question will probably be from which bloc the new President will come. As things stand, it looks like the unions will not be particularly united when discussions on a new collective agreement start.



Norway's labour shortages stretch to "the furthest island"

The lack of qualified labour has become a major problem in many places in the Nordics. In the Norwegian county of Trøndelag unemployment has never been lower. This can also be felt on Frøya, an island of some 5,000 people.

NEWS

18.08.2022

TEXT: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN, PHOTO: TORE WUTTUDAL/NN/SAMFOTO

Both industry and schools on Frøya struggle to recruit qualified staff. The trend mirrors the results from a survey carried out by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration NAV in Central Norway.

The Corona pandemic saw many Eastern European workers return home. Men from Ukraine cannot leave the country because of the war. On top of this, there is a general imbalance due to a strong economy, high inflation and many people changing occupations.

The growth in marine-related businesses along the Norwegian coast and on Frøya continues. The need for more qualified

staff is now felt by nearly all types of trade. Frøya has one of Norway's largest salmon farming industries.

Need many more workers

Salmon farmers and associated industries need people. One of them is the Nutrimar AS plant, which refines raw materials for use as fish farm feed.



Remy Strømskag and Ida Andersen at the Nutrimar factory is looking for new staff. Photo: Bjørn Lønnum Andreassen.

Both operations superintendent Remy Strømskag and his HR and admin head Ida Andersen confirm that they are looking for specialists and other staff.

"We compete with many other companies and good people are being hoovered up. We are also constantly looking for chemical process engineers. We are expecting to expand to having several shifts in the day and to increase production, so the factory is being prepared for expansion. Staff here work on a rota which allows several of them to live in other places than on Frøya," says Ida Andersen.



Henriette Titlestad and Jørn Hilstad is happy with their production rota at the Nutrimar factory. Photo: Bjørn Lønnum Andreassen.

Teachers needed

While parents in the rich seafood municipality are at work, teachers are also needed for the kindergartens. One of them is department manager Marie Kristine Risvik, who recently started work at one of the municipality's education centres.

"We are struggling to fill positions. We can offer a good working environment, and we lack qualified pedagogues with a bachelor's degree in particular. More temporary staff have to step in as pedagogues here," explains Risvik.

The municipal education centre is one of many workplaces that has to use staff with lower or different types of qualifications.



Marie Kristine Risvik is a newly graduated pedagogue and a department head who sometime must hire temporary staff who are exempt from having the necessary special education. Photo: Bjørn Lønnum Andreassen.

Optimism and shortfalls

NAV in Trøndelag has surveyed the state of play in several companies this year. They found that optimism has returned to companies in Central Norway after two years of the pandemic, explains Torbjørn Aas, head of NAV Trøndelag.

"The optimism is here, as are the recruitment challenges. They are back and more numerous than ever before. Meanwhile, we have record-low unemployment. The number of advertised jobs has also risen considerably and the skills shortage is severe," says Aas.

"Figures from April this year show record-low unemployment in Trøndelag. The survey shows that every third company wants to add to their staff. This is a clear increase from last year. Companies in Trøndelag are Norway's most optimistic, alongside those in Oslo," says Aas.

"In other words, the survey shows a labour market working well for people who want to find a job. But staffing problems are mounting in many companies. They cannot find the necessary labour," he says.

Not the right skills

According to the survey, 27 % of companies say they have experienced problems with finding the right kind of skill in the past three months. Out of these, 18 % could not find anyone to hire while 9 % had hired someone with lower or other types of skillsets.



New solutions are needed to get more skilled workers into the labour market, says head of NAV Trøndelag, Torbjørn Aas. Foto: NAV

When asked why they could not recruit, nine in ten companies answered there were few or no qualified applicants, according to the NAV survey. Trøndelag is estimated to be lacking 5, 665 qualified people.

Even before the pandemic hit in 2020, there were concerns over the lack of qualified labour. In the wake of the pandemic, other conditions have amplified this shortfall. Labour immigration has fallen, and many people who were in Norway before the pandemic have found work in their home countries, writes NAV.

Nurses, logging workers and carpenters as well as healthcare workers top the lists.

Consequences and possible solutions

NAV says the labour shortage could have serious consequences. The lack of workers impacts on production and the service industry: longer waiting times, higher prices and reduced quality of goods and services.

“We are confident that today’s situation could represent a golden opportunity for more people to join the labour market,” says Aas.

“What is needed is new ideas from all stakeholders who are in a position to influence the situation, and it is urgent. NAV Trøndelag’s contribution is to work together with county councils and employers. We cooperate to tailor professional educations for trades that struggle to find skilled labour,” explains Aas.



Sweden lands new landmark main agreement

Finally, the large labour law reform which has been called a structural shift for the Swedish model is in place. LO, PTK Council for Negotiation and Cooperation and the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise have signed the new basic agreement on “security, transition and employment protection”.

NEWS

18.08.2022

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU&ARBETSRÄTT, PHOTO: JENNY FREJING

This gives employers more flexibility in redundancy situations. In exchange, employees get improved practical and economical support to transition into new jobs, as well as some other improvements.

The signing ceremony took place at Grand Hôtel Saltsjöbaden, where back in 1938 LO and the Swedish Employers’ Confederation reached the main agreement which has become a symbol of the Swedish model – The Saltsjöbad Agreement. The venue was, of course, chosen with care in order to highlight that the new basic agreement is of equal historic importance.

Part of a package

The substance of the new agreement was in place already late 2020. The reason it was not signed until 18 months later is that it is part of a package. A prerequisite for landing the agreement was that the Swedish legislators first agreed on major legal changes – changes whose content had also been negotiated between two of the parties to the basic agreement.

Not only did these organisations dictate the content of the new legislation in this manner, which is unique. The proposed legislation was supported solely by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and PTK, which represents private sector white-collar workers, plus two of LO’s affiliates. LO voted against. When certain labour market organisations get a deciding voice over what should be legally binding even for

stakeholders other than these organisations, there is a structural shift in the Swedish model.

LO changed tack

When it became clear that the government would pass the proposed legislation, LO changed tack, and in November 2021 LO too threw its support behind the proposed basic agreement with the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. The organisation's main objection had been that the legislative changes would weaken employment protection in an unacceptable way. Now, when they would become enacted in any case, it would benefit members of the LO trade unions to be covered by the upcoming basic agreement.

The new legislation came into force on 30 June. Besides changes to the law on employment protection, two entirely new laws were added. One means that people who have worked for at least eight years can get state study aid for up to two years when taking courses that strengthen their future position in the labour market. The second law established a "fundamental transition and skills support", a state complementary to the transition organisations which the social partners have had for a long time. In this way, workers who are not covered by a collective agreement can get support in the form of advice and guidance when they need to develop their skills in order to be "employable".

More money for skills

So what do the new basic agreements signed on 22 June add? Well, employees can get more compensation during studying and other skills development than they get through the new state support. LO has also managed to introduce improved conditions for agency workers who are not offered permanent contracts with the client company. In return, the agreements give employers more room for making exceptions from the order of precedence in case of redundancies, compared to what the Employment Protection Act offers.

The new agreements have jokingly been called the Saltsjöbad Agreement 2.0. But the 1938 agreement still stands – although it has been partly overshadowed because of new labour legislation over the years. The old Saltsjöbad Agreement's rules on industrial action and on how the social partners should solve disputes through negotiations are still in place.



Are left-handers discriminated against?

13 August is Left Handers Day. The day celebrates the uniqueness and differences of left-handed people and was launched 46 years ago. Yet it has still not had a major impact, and it remains a bit of a mystery why left-handed people have never organised better.

COMMENTS

11.08.2022

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: TOMAS BERTELSEN



The UK seems to be the only country with a large organisation representing left-handed people. Left-Handers Club was formed in 1990 and now has 140 000 members from around the world.

The Nordic parliaments very rarely debate left-handedness. It has also not been on the trade unions' agenda, despite the fact that left-handers risk facing more obstacles and lower pay compared to right-handed people.

“Left-handed people may be less productive in those occupations which use tools, machines, and systems that are designed for right-handers. Examples that have been noted include electric food slicers, keyboards, drill presses, band saws, and roadways,” write Kevin Denny and Vincent O’Sullivan from the Institute for the Study of Social Change in Dublin, Ireland in a study.

But there are also occupations where left-handed people seem to have an advantage.

“Some studies have found disproportionately more left-handers among university architecture students, university math students, artists and musicians,” they point out.

One of the few issues that have been raised in a Nordic parliament is whether left-handed police get enough weapons training adapted to their needs. This was debated in the Norwegian Parliament in 1998.

That same year, in the UK Parliament, Conservative MP Peter Luff challenged the Minister for Education Estelle Morris (Labour) to explain what the government was doing to prevent the discrimination of left-handed people, especially in schools.

“This is a campaign which I hoped never to have to fight, but, like the great civil rights campaigners of the past, I have

learnt the hard way how discrimination works,” said Peter Luff.

“An arrogant or unlistening majority – in this case right-handers, rather than men or whites – refuses to understand the problem or even to accept that it exists. Only when the oppressed minority – in this case, left-handers – makes its presence felt do things happen. Today, I hope that the left-handers of the nation are making their presence felt.”

As is often the case in the UK Parliament, both questions and answers were full of irony. After Luff mentioned a range of famous left-handers throughout history – from Leonardo da Vinci to Napoleon Bonaparte, Jimi Hendrix to Marilyn Monroe, Estelle Morris answered:

“The list of famous people given by the honourable Gentleman partly defeats his own argument, as he cannot for a minute say that those left-handed people have not aspired to the greatest heights or achieved at the highest levels, or have not taken their place among the good and great.”

As Peter Luff pointed out, most right-handers – and I count myself among that group – do not perceive any problem. But imagine for a moment that the world one day suddenly is inverted when you wake up. The morning paper must be read from right to left, if you want to cut out a story the scissors feel all funny. When you want to document it all and get your camera out, all the buttons are on the left rather than the right side.



In the world of right-handers, things often go wrong when you use your left hand. In this case, why has the designer not put the scale on both sides? Photo: Björn Lindahl.

You realise that the world has become more complicated than it ought to be. In the kitchen, you want to measure out some flour for a dish and discover that the marks are all on the back of the measuring jug when you hold it in your right hand.

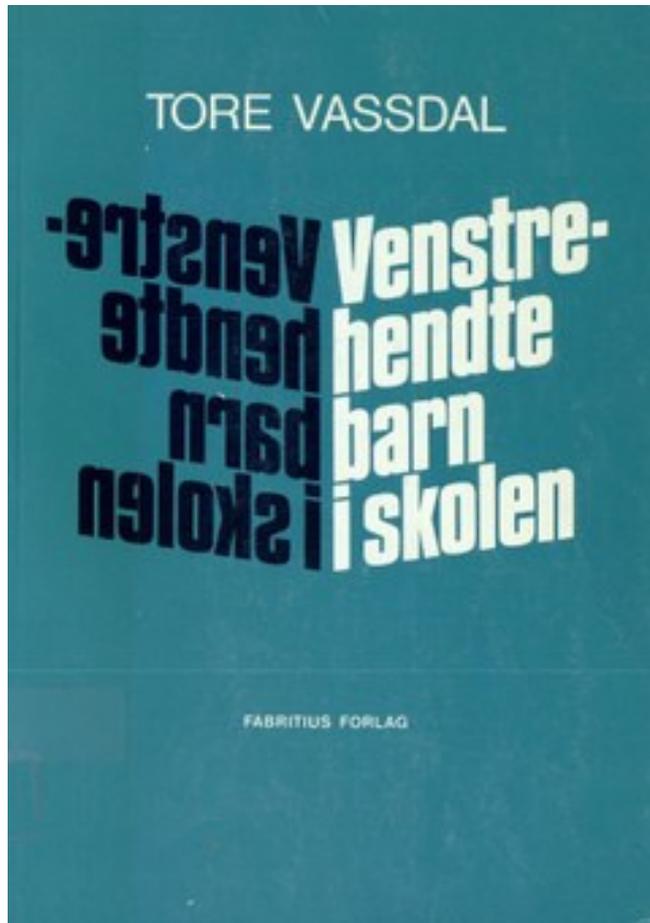
Only a bit irritating or a real problem?

Left-handers risk discrimination in three areas:

- During education
- At work
- As consumers

Many have heard stories of older generations' left-handers, who were forced to learn writing with their right hand. Aca-

demics in the 1930s lumped left-handers into the same category as psychopaths, the immature, nervous people, the badly raised, hysterics, truants and the mentally challenged, according to an article written by Inger Tinglev for the Swedish Agency for Education.



Yet this was not due to a lack of empathy for left-handers from teachers and schools. On the contrary – the thinking was that it would be better in the long term for children if they were not allowed to use their left hand.

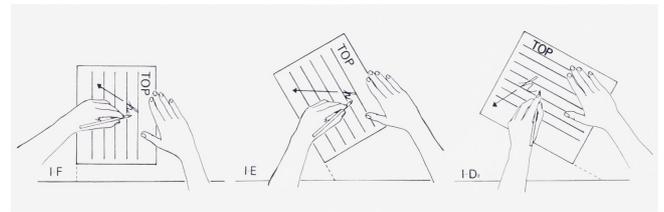
“In general terms, in the long run, parents and teachers will gain the child’s gratitude if they do what is in their power to make the child right-handed from the start,” recommended one of the most respected child development experts at the time, Cyril Burt from England.

The Nordic debate was somewhat milder and warned against any form of coercion.

“A healthy left-hander does much better than a nervous right-hander,” wrote Tore Vassdal in the second edition of “Left-handed children in school”, published in 1974.

Left-handers are often faced with just two alternatives – train up their right hand for the task that needs doing or find a way to handle the obstacles presenting themselves in a society meant for right-handers.

The idea that society should accept that the handwriting tilted the “wrong” way was not even a consideration.



In the 1970s, schools went from trying to tempt or force children to use their right hand for writing, to concentrating on how left-handers should write in a way that made the result look as if it was written with their right hand. But why did the writing have to be italic in the first place? Illustration from Left-handed Children in School by Tore Vassdal.

So what happens at dental schools today? Can students choose to stand to the left of the patient, which is the natural thing to do for a left-hander who must work with your mouth?

What happens at a hospital when the surgeon is left-handed? Is the operating theatre set up to allow in light from the correct side so that the shadow from the hand does not make it harder to see what is happening?

There are vocal minorities representing most issues, yet left-handers remain remarkably silent. Perhaps they are comforted by the thought that left-handers are considered to be more creative than right-handers, which after all is linked to which side of the brain is stimulated the most.

But this does not stop all left-handers from being discriminated against as consumers. Why exactly are so few products made for left-handers? Finnish Fiskars were pioneers with their left-handed scissors and there are a few shops with products for left-handed people. But in the age of 3D printing, would it not be possible to “invert” more tools without significant cost? Perhaps there should simply be a law demanding an alternative for both?

A problem is not considered real until it becomes visible, in the form of people joining a union or in the form of statistics. But there are no systematic gathering of data for how many people are left-handed – except for in the world of sport, where there is sometimes a disproportionate number of left-handed top athlete, especially in tennis.

The largest study so far of how many left-handers there are was carried out a few years ago by a group of researchers from universities in Greece, the UK and Germany.

They collated many different studies, allowing them to assess 2.4 million people – most of European heritage.

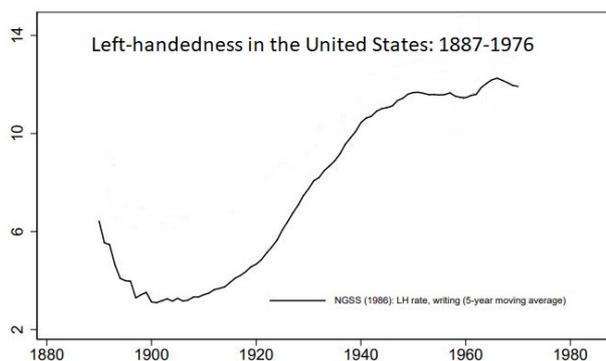
Using the strictest definition of left-handedness, the researchers concluded that 10.6 % of the population are left-handed. If you count those who are partially left-handed, that figure rises to 18.1 %.

There is no commonly accepted explanation for why some people become left-handed, but a quarter of the reason is down to genes. The number of left-handed people in a population varies over time and between countries.

The number of left-handed people in the USA fell from 6 % among those born in 1887 to less than 4 % of the population at the beginning of the 19th century, before growing to around 12 % among those born in 1976, according to the National Geographic "Smell Survey". As explained in the Institute of Labor Economics study:

"Aimed at studying the correlation between brain lateralization and olfactory ability, this survey was conducted by sending out a questionnaire accompanied by a scratch-and-sniff card. More than 1.4 million responses were collected from readers born between 1887 and 1975."

The survey also contained questions about left-handedness. The graph below illustrates how many percent in each age group considered themselves to be left-handed.



Source: *Left-Handedness and Economic Development*, IZA.

In China, the number of left-handed children stands between 0.7 % and 3.5 % depending on which study you read. Other factors, for instance how socially accepted it is to be left-handed, also play a part. 6.5 % of Asian heritage children in the USA are left-handed.

Is the increase only because it has become more culturally acceptable to be left-handed, or has the number of left-handers really increased? A group of researchers from the German Institute of Labor Economics, led by Fabio Mariani, have launched the theory that left-handers lost out so badly in the labour market because machines were built for right-handers, that they found it harder to get married.

Yet as creative occupations become more and more important, left-handers get an advantage that makes them more attractive. It might sound implausible, but the conclusion in the report mentioned at the beginning of this article – at least for male left-handers – is:

“Left-handers are paid more, other things being equal; the premium is greater for manual workers and there is no evidence of occupational sorting by laterality. This suggests that the complaints of (male) left-handers of their tribulations in life, if correct, appear to be compensated for generously and the folklore of talented left-handers may have some substance.

For left-handed women, there is, strangely, a considerable economic drawback. Yet there are fewer differences here between manual workers and others, writes Kevin Denny and Vincent O’Sullivan.

In any case – congratulations all left-handers!

What do you think? Are left-handers being discriminated against or not? Which occupations are mostly affected by being right or left-handed?

Continue the debate on our Facebook page.