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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

## ITUC Online

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### Spotlight on Sandra Viktor (LO-Sweden)

<sup>3</sup>Being a trade unionist is the best job in the world!<sup>2</sup>

Brussels, 12 October 2007 (ITUC OnLine): Sandra Viktor, 26 years old, heads LO-Sweden's youth work in the South-East of the country (1). She explains the dynamic campaigns organised by LO to attract young workers and how international solidarity is helping young Swedes get interested in the union movement.

Why were you put in charge of organising youth for LO?

LO contacted me whilst I was studying workers' rights at the University of Malmö. The unions asked me to run a campaign in higher education establishments to educate young people about their rights as workers: many young people start working while they are students at the age of 15 or 16, but they know nothing about their rights as young workers. My job is to go into classes and talk to the students for about an hour. This was my first full-time job as a trade unionist. Previously, I had been elected union rep in the clothes shop where I was working.

How do 15 and 16-year olds react when you talk to them about workers' rights and trade unionism?

To begin with they are not very open but when they realise that many of their friends have already worked and encountered some of these problems, they can see that it's important. Then they get very interested and we have some very open discussions. We tell them about collective agreements, for instance. That's important as Sweden does not have a legal minimum wage, so the rates are set in collective agreements. 80% of Swedish companies have a collective agreement, and these cover all the employees including students.

What direct benefits can young people get from joining a union?

If they have problems in a job they can ask an ombudsman to negotiate on their behalf. The union will also check that they are insured against accidents or injuries at work. On a lighter note, we are planning a musical evening before the summer holidays, which will also be an opportunity for passing on information about their rights. When school re-starts we will bring them together again to discuss their student job experience, and they can ask us questions if something went badly, for instance. The aim is to build a closer relationship between the union and young workers. There is also a union magazine for young people. 30% of LO members are under 35.

We have also opened a phone line that can be used by all workers, though particularly young ones, for asking questions about their work and their rights as workers. It's been a great success, with around 6,000 phoning the number last summer alone. Most ring about wage issues, but there are also questions on the working environment that in turn lead to other matters such as industrial relations and the labour market.

How strong are the unions in Sweden?

80% of the workforce is unionised. That's a large figure, however the number of members is dropping as young workers can't see the point of joining. That is why we have been running these campaigns in schools for around two years now. I try to convince people to join the union while they are students, as there are lower fees. It is important to get people to join before they get their first job, because if you are used to not being a union member you will generally never become one, partly since the fee is quite high. And collective bargaining is undermined by the decreasing numbers of union members.

What are the main barriers to organising young people, apart from the union fee?

Young people see the unions as organisations for older people. They can't identify with them as they don't see many young members.

Is that a fair perception?

Yes, I very often find myself as the only young person working with men over 40. It is a problem: we have a lot of union members in Sweden but not many young workers are activists.

Owing to their image as organisations for <sup>3</sup>older<sup>2</sup> people?

Yes, but also because we are not fighting as hard as we used to. The union movement is getting a bit tired. There aren't enough new issues, aims or visions. That changes when you get young members but we don't yet have decision-making powers in the unions.

Is that partly because of the high standard of living in Sweden?

Yes, but we now have a new conservative government and people are beginning to react, particularly young workers. This government is bad for the country and the social model that the unions want: it is cutting unemployment funds and workers' rights. More people now want to fight for a better Sweden. Maybe that will help us increase our membership.

Do you also approach young people at their workplaces?

Yes, and we are particularly focusing on young students working in restaurants, shops and cafés, etc. It's important that the unions run campaigns that are attractive to young workers and that they make sure that young trade unionists are meeting young workers, which improves contacts. This campaign is running in June, July and August and is aimed at students on summer jobs, who are very vulnerable on the labour market.

Do you get any negative reactions from employers ?

Sometimes, yes, but generally the reaction is positive, both from workers and employers, since many employers do not really know their employees' rights and so can learn something from the unions. There is some good cooperation.

Are young workers aware of all the work LO-Sweden is doing on international worker solidarity?

I tell them about this in the schools, of course, partly because

international matters affect us all. Swedish multinationals are relocating to other countries, especially China, and young people ask me why. I find it interesting explaining the reasons to them and discussing the working conditions of Chinese workers. Generally, young people are members of NGOs rather than trade unions. When you explain these global workers' rights problems to them you see that they really care and can see why the unions are doing this or that. They realise that they should join unions themselves and not just be activists in little NGOs that have no real power. So explaining our international programme to young people is a good way of getting them to join Swedish trade unions.

What motivates you in your union work?

If we explain to people why they should join unions, we are building a strong global union movement that will help us cooperate better. Everyone is talking about globalisation and it is very important but you have to be educated to understand its ins and outs. For me this work is also a social experience and it enables me to meet workers every day from all over Sweden and, sometimes, from all over the world. For me, it's the most fantastic job in the world: I am becoming a stronger person and hope to become a source of inspiration to others, so that they also get involved in the struggle for decent work, particularly for young workers, as we are the most vulnerable group in society.

Have you also had bad experiences in this union work?

I like it when people get annoyed, or else are happy with what I say. The worst thing for me is when they don't think or care about anything. That attitude discourages me as you can't change such people. If someone opposes your views, you can talk to him and try to convince him but when they are not really interested in anything it's really hard. Young Swedish people are not bothered enough to change things, they are passive and that attitude sometimes depresses me. I am also very irritated by some older trade unionists who don't allow young workers to grow within the movement and tell them that their time will come, who hang on to their jobs and don't want to change anything.

As a trade unionist in a relatively wealthy country, employed by a union that contributes more towards international solidarity than it receives, what do you want from the ITUC?

To pass on the international solidarity message worldwide. Young Swedes would be impressed by seeing campaigns on decent work on TV or on big posters. They often know a lot about workers' situations around the world but don't know how to improve them. If the ITUC can run some big global campaigns it can have a positive impact and attract more young people to the unions, including in Sweden. We need the world to light up the flame in young workers' hearts. They are very interested in talking about international solidarity but don't always realise that unions are at the core of it. The ITUC can do something to change that.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Since this interview, which took place in June 2007, Sandra Viktor has remained very active in the union movement but is now working as the

<sup>3</sup>Ombudsman<sup>2</sup> of the Swedish Hotel and Restaurant Workers<sup>1</sup> Union.

Founded on 1 November 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates.

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