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AFTER THE DIVORCE

Social Democrats and Trade Unions in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Well-known theories of party organization and behaviour suggest that the mass parties of Western Europe have evolved into new models, with more powerful and autonomous leaderships and weaker memberships and collateral organizations. However, these theories have not really been tested in in-depth case studies – particularly beyond the national level of the parties. This article examines the mass party *par excellence*, the Swedish Social Democratic Party and focuses on the party's traditionally close relationship with the blue-collar trade unions. There is evidence to support the theories of party change, but these organizational developments are patchy at the local level. Moreover, various data deployed in support of the theories may be understating the enduring influence of collateral organizations within parties.

KEY WORDS ▪ local level ▪ party change ▪ Social Democracy ▪ Sweden ▪ trade unions

Introduction

European political parties have undergone considerable organizational change since their emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Duverger (1990 [1954]) was the first to distinguish between two basic party types: the cadre party of notables and the mass party, the political arm of socio-economic groups outside the political establishment. Later, Duverger observed a 'contagion from the left', with the cadre-type parties adopting the organizational features of the mass-type, whereas others detected something resembling the opposite. Back in the 1960s, Kirchheimer (1990 [1966]) suggested that parties were looking increasingly like each other. In addition to a dilution of ideological identity in favour of programmatic flexibility and pragmatism, he also suggested that the power

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of the top leadership was growing vis-à-vis other sections of the party, particularly individual members; that appealing to a specific target group of voters was becoming less important than 'catch-all' vote-seeking throughout the electorate; and that the range of interest groups with which the party had contact was widening. Panebianco (1988: 264–7) identified the rise of the electoral-professional party, which pursued votes above all other goals, and in which the leadership was able to promote its vote-maximizing preferences through relying on a staff whose motivation was pecuniary rather than ideological. In short, the argument is that a principal–agent relationship has changed: the party is no longer the agent of other organizations, but has itself become a principal, with its own survival and prosperity as its fundamental goals. The old mass parties, with their relatively decentralized and democratic internal structures, are, it is claimed, becoming like 'post-modern cadre parties' (Bäck and Möller, 1997: 291). This article comprises a case study of the organizational changes and innovations in one European party, a mass party in the classic mould, and a highly long-lived and successful one: the Swedish Social Democrats.

There have been empirical investigations into these new conceptions of the party. The Katz and Mair (1994) project on comparative party organization lent weight, if not uniformly, to the notion that parties were becoming more elite-driven, and provided party scholars with vital data. But those data are well over a decade old. Within Scandinavia, Elvander's magisterial study of the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish labour movements (1980) devoted plenty of discussion to organizational matters, but more than 20 years have now elapsed since it appeared. More recently, other work cited in the sections below has provided a base for the narrow research question addressed here. That question is: in the light of theories of party change that suggest increasing autonomy of party leaderships, both from their own memberships and from associated or 'collateral' organizations, to what extent can the deep and long-standing ties between the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) and the country's Confederation of Trade Unions be observed to have loosened? Or, put another way: how deep do the ties between party and unions remain in Sweden? The answers to these questions may help to explain bigger ones concerning the changing nature of parties in general, and social democratic parties in particular.

Background: the Scandinavian Labour Movements

The Genesis of Party–Union Ties

The origins of SAP, like those of the Danish Social Democrats and the Norwegian Labour Party, bear ample testimony to their close ties to one particular group of collateral organizations, the trade unions. SAP's formation, in 1889, occurred nine years before that of the Trade Union

Confederation (LO). Delegates at LO's founding conference agreed that members of its constituent unions should also automatically be members of the party (Gidlund, 1992: 106), and this system of collective membership long provided 75–80 percent of the Social Democratic membership – a figure that reached a staggering 1.23 million, or around 15 percent of the Swedish population, in 1983 (Widfeldt, 1999: 112). Elite-level links between party and unions were less formal than in Denmark and Norway, but were perhaps no less significant for that. Hjalmar Branting, SAP's first leader, declared that 'the trade-union movement has been the basis for all the political work in the Social Democratic Party' (1906).

The foundations of this exceptionally close relationship were various. LO covered most of the workforce, and attained a strong internal authority. From the 1930s it managed largely to win control of organized labour's primary weapon, the strike, from its constituent unions (Bäck and Möller, 1997: 249). In the 1950s, at the employers' behest, national pay bargaining was centralized. Thus, LO came to possess both the 'encompassing' character and the internal coherence that made it a reliable negotiating partner, if by no means a pliant one, and a valuable ally for a political party. On the other hand, the Social Democrats had plenty to offer LO to keep the relationship sweet. If the unions controlled the labour supply, the party controlled almost exclusively the supply of public policy at the national level: SAP governed almost continually between 1932 and 1976, sometimes in coalition, but mostly alone, as a minority government, with the usually reliable parliamentary support of the Communists.

Towards Divorce

The picture changed markedly, however, during the 1970s and 1980s. As harsher economic times arrived, the labour movement took a radical turn to the left. LO persuaded the Social Democrats to adopt its deeply controversial proposal for creating wage-earner funds, which would have forced bigger firms to pass a proportion of their equity annually to trade-union control. The plan contributed to the Social Democrats losing the 1976 election.[1] But the foundations of the relationship were already tottering: neither wing could offer quite what it had previously. Swedish corporatism was withering (Lewin, 1994). LO was no longer able to deliver wage restraint. The expanding section of white-collar employees who worked in the public sector tended to belong to non-LO unions, and Social Democratic governments found themselves drawn into labour-market conflicts, not just as overseer, to settle disputes, but also as protagonist, in the role of employer (Åmark, 1992: 91). Simmering discord culminated in early 1990, when the government attempted to reinforce a prices-and-wages freeze by prohibiting strikes. The LO unions were appalled; the government resigned.

Even before the labour movement's internal relations reached their nadir in this 'war of the roses', however, basic change in the SAP and LO

institutional relationship had been agreed. The 1987 party conference decided to end the system of collective membership. There was a direct external stimulus for this reform: the Communist Left Party, as it was by then called, had threatened to cooperate with the bourgeois (right-of-centre) parties in building a parliamentary majority that could enforce change through legislation, something the Social Democrats were keen to pre-empt. But, in fact, although both party and unions contained their strong advocates of keeping collective membership, the leaders of each wing had come to see advantages in a looser relationship. For the LO, exclusive commitment to a single party, and an unpopular governing one at that, was seen as unhelpful in an increasingly competitive market for union members (Wörlund and Hansson, 2001: 156). For SAP, meanwhile, excessively close identification with a particular socio-economic group sat uncomfortably with its catch-all electoral strategies. Furthermore, nearly a decade previously Elvander had seen the system as entailing a certain 'psychological disadvantage' for the party. A large proportion of its collectively affiliated membership was entirely passive, and over a quarter even voted for other parties. Presciently, Elvander predicted that 'sooner or later' collective membership would have to be abandoned in Norway and Sweden (1979: 18).[2]

A 'Voter Party'?

Predictably, the abandonment of collective membership led to a collapse in SAP's membership (see Figure 1). Moreover, it became clear that this decline

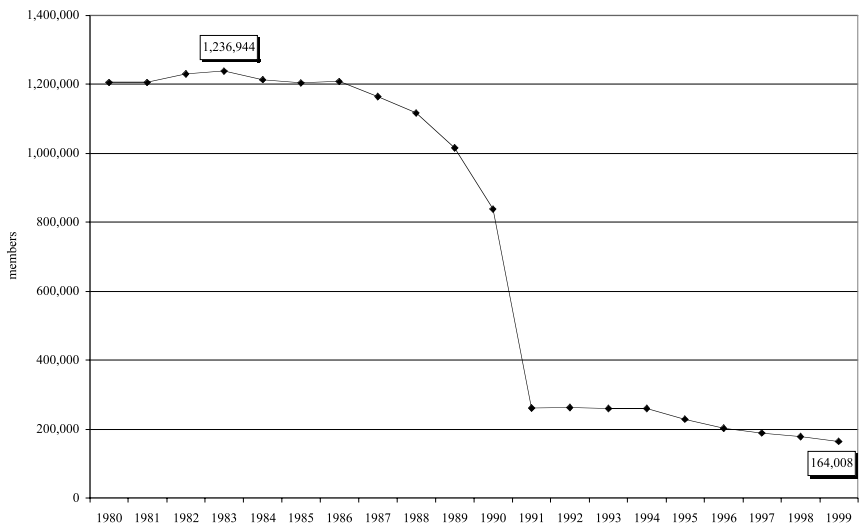

Figure 1. Total SAP membership
Source: SAP, personal communication.

was not just a one-off adjustment (see Figure 2). The silver lining for the Social Democratic leadership was that this was not crippling for the party's ability to operate, at least in regard to two of its 'faces', those in the state and in central office (Katz and Mair, 1993). The main reason for this was public subsidy for political parties' extra-parliamentary organizations, established in Sweden in 1965. This inevitably made the party less reliant on its trade-union sponsors. Although the data are tenuous, it seems that whereas in 1945 the party obtained almost nine-tenths of its income from membership dues, with most members paying automatically as members of LO-affiliated trade unions, by 1996 dues accounted for less than a twentieth. By 1998 the proportion of party income donated directly by LO had reached a similar level (Wörlund and Hansson, 2001: 154–5).[3] Nor was this financial bounty confined to the national level. The introduction of subsidies at the municipal level in 1970 had an 'almost revolutionary effect on the parties' economic situation' (Gidlund and Möller, 1999: 94), and the municipal-level subsidy that SAP received expanded more than sixfold between 1971 and 1989 (Gidlund, 1991: 41).

Thus, without the organic connection to the trade-union movement that collective membership had represented, and without even a truly mass membership, SAP seemed finally to have discarded the organizational trappings of a classic mass party. Add to that the widespread impression among its remaining members of a loss of ideological integrity during the 1990s, and something resembling a catch-all party can be observed. When levels of professionalization, financed by public money (Gidlund, 1991: 122), are

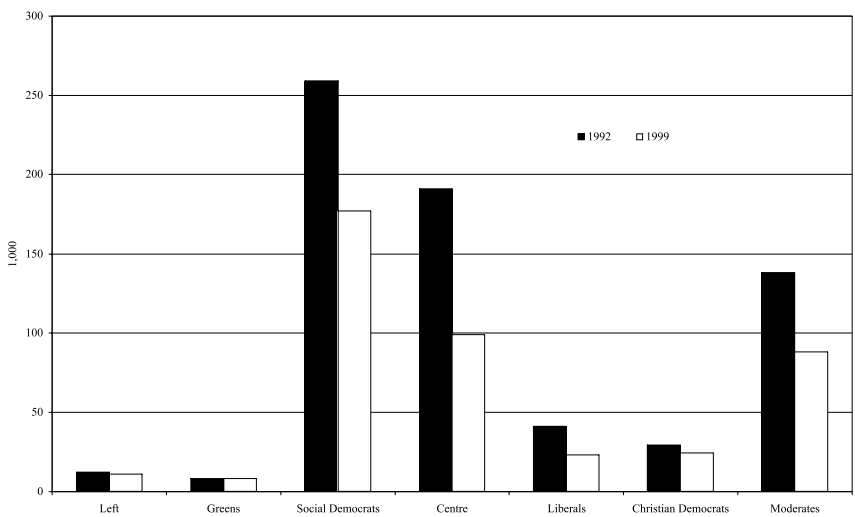

Figure 2. Membership trends in Swedish parties
Source: Gidlund and Möller (1999).

noted, SAP begins to look like an electoral-professional party – or, as two Swedish researchers have called the model, a 'voter party' (Gilljam and Möller, 1996). The interests of the leadership in having the party pursue two of its basic goals, votes and office, seem to have prevailed over the interests of other sections of the party, such as activists, members and collateral organizations, in its pursuing another fundamental goal, namely policy (cf. Müller and Strøm, 1999). Sundberg (2001: 175–9) concludes that the two wings of the Swedish labour movement have evolved from a high to a low level of integration. Thomas (2001: 281–4) goes so far as to suggest that the Social Democrats' relationship with LO has evolved from an 'Integration Model' in which party and interest group 'are virtually identical or very close organizationally', to a 'Competition/Rivalry Model', in which 'a party and a group compete with each other as vehicles of representation or in delivering political benefits'.

Yet some evidence suggests that this mass party's relationship with its collateral organizations may not be as estranged as is widely assumed. After the 1994 election, rumour had it that LO had blocked the Social Democratic leadership's inclination to strike a deal with the Liberals in parliament. In 1996, when a Social Democratic government attempted to reform labour-market regulation, LO's furious reaction – in some places, the unions organized rival May Day rallies, and a senior LO official threatened to withhold its contribution to the party's funds (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 7 September 1996) – led to the plans being ignominiously dropped. In the aftermath of this severe crisis in party–union relations, a much-discussed book written by a then Liberal parliamentarian, and who later became editor of the country's main broadsheet newspaper, accused the Social Democrats of being almost completely in thrall to LO on economic policy (Johnson, 1998).

Operationalization

It is in this context that the current study explores the contemporary relationship between SAP and LO. Panebianco (1988: 55–9) hypothesizes that as mass parties 'institutionalize' – in other words, develop from agents into principals – they will enjoy higher levels of 'systemness' (mutual interdependence of their internal actors) and autonomy from their environment (part of which is the organizations that originally spawned the party). A more institutionalized party, *inter alia*, will enjoy more diverse and reliable sources of finance; and relations with collateral organizations will be on the party's terms, or non-existent. The project led by Sundberg (2001) made these indicators more precise, and compared relations between Scandinavian mass parties and interest groups according to elite overlap, economic dependence, electoral alignment and formal institutional ties. We have already seen the conclusions that he drew.

Sundberg's inquiry addressed the national level of the relationship, which is a pretty good place to start. The attention of this article, however, is rather on the local level. This is for two main reasons (apart from the current lack of data). First, the branch (*arbetarekommun*, literally, 'workers' commune') was the level at which collective membership of the party was implemented. Unusually, this is not the basic level of organization and membership in SAP. Instead, the basic unit is an association of individuals with something in common, apart from their 'recognizing the basic, general elements of Social Democracy's programme and party statutes' (SAP, 2000: 39).[4] This commonality can be place of residence, but also, as we shall see, gender, age, ethnicity, employment or something else. During the era of collective membership, sections of LO trade unions could affiliate to the local Social Democratic branch in this way, like any other basic unit, bringing their members with them and concomitantly enjoying considerable power within that branch. Note, however, that the local union sections were under no obligation to affiliate.

The second reason for looking at the local level is the degree of formal influence that branches enjoy within the party. In SAP, the branches select delegates to the party's sovereign body, the national congress. Selecting parliamentary candidates is the responsibility of the regional level (*partidistrikt*). But it is the branches that select the delegates who comprise the regional congresses, and it is the basic units that nominate the potential delegates. The national party plays virtually no role in the process. Clearly, then, power within these branches remains important for the party's wider character and orientation.

Exploring the Local Level

In order to assess the residual presence and influence in the party of the Social Democrats' main collateral organization, the LO trade unions, primary data were gathered from three SAP branches. These data comprised interviews with local members and activists, the most important being the branch secretary (*ombudsman*), a full-time salaried organizer and campaigner who sits (without voting rights) on the branch executive committee, maintains contact with the affiliating units and manages relations with the party's local municipal councillors. Quantitative data were sometimes tricky to obtain, underlining an inherent difficulty in research into political parties, particularly the 'face' that exists 'on the ground'. Nevertheless, Swedish parties probably keep rather better records than parties in most countries, and some data derived can be deployed to interesting and illustrative effect.

Three methodological considerations determined the choice of which branches to study. First, a branch was marked out because it *covered the main town or city within a party region*. This was because data on branch membership levels are unavailable above the level of each individual branch. Regional memberships, by contrast, are collated by the party's central office.

Thus, a national comparison of membership trends was possible only by comparing regions, choosing cases from them and then selecting the main branch within each chosen region. Second, levels of *membership loss in party regions* were treated as an indicator of how the components of SAP in different parts of Sweden had been affected by the end of collective membership. All Social Democratic regions have lost members, but some have lost more than others (see Figure 3), and the proportion of membership loss varies (Figure 4). Of course, not all membership loss can be attributed to the end of collective membership. But precise figures for the proportion of the party membership that flowed in this way from affiliated unions are unavailable above the level of the branch, and are incomplete even there; hence the necessary assumption that membership loss overall is correlated to membership loss through the ending of collective membership. Selection of cases according to this criterion was influenced by the objective of targeting branches in three categories of region: one that had suffered a relatively high rate of membership loss, one with a roughly average rate and one with a relatively low rate. Third, *regional and economic characteristics* were considered. In particular, it was thought desirable to investigate a branch in northern Sweden, one in the southwest and one in the southeast; and to have one that covered a big city.

These criteria led to the selection of the Social Democratic branches in the following locations. *Umeå*, with a population of 100,000, is the main

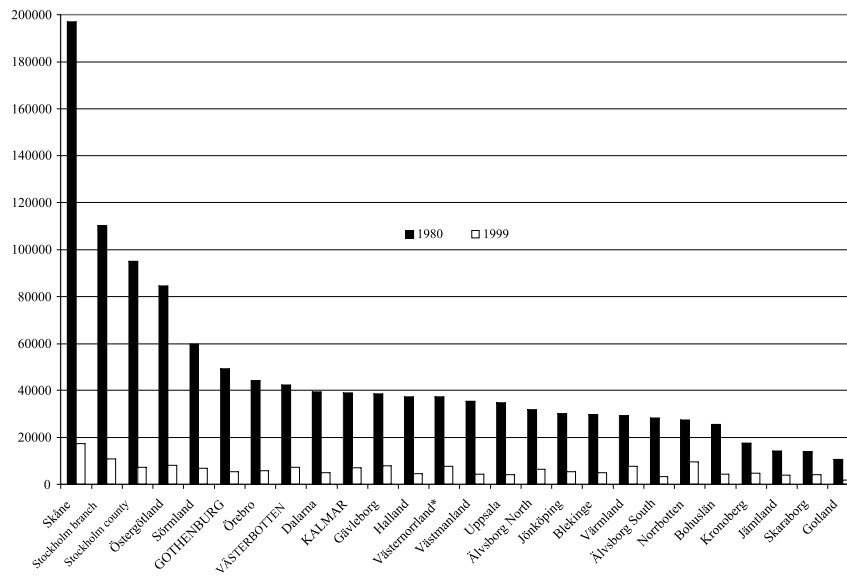

Figure 3. Membership of SAP regions

*Created by merger of Medelpad and Ångermanland in 1991. Before that date, the combined membership of these two districts is used. *Source*: SAP, personal communication.

town in Västerbotten county and party region. Although the Swedish north is the least prosperous part of the country, Umeå is an exception; its status as Sweden's fastest-growing city is derived partly from its hosting a big university and a regional hospital. In terms of maintaining its membership level over the last two decades, Västerbotten is almost the median performer of SAP's 26 regions, having 17 percent of the number it had in 1980. The historic town of *Kalmar*, with a population of 70,000, is, by contrast, somewhat stagnant economically. Kalmar county remains a fairly rural part of the country, situated on and around the eastern Baltic coast. The Kalmar region is among the better-performing party regions in maintaining membership levels, having 18 percent of its 1980 figure. The third branch was the one covering *Gothenburg*, Sweden's second city and a west-coast port around which a powerful tradition of labour activism grew. The size of the local population, about 500,000, gives the Social Democratic Party in Gothenburg a special, dual identity. For many purposes, including selection of parliamentary candidates, it possesses the status of a party region. But, although four branches do exist in the city, the basic Social Democratic units affiliate not to the branches but directly to the Gothenburg region, thus making it sufficiently branch-like to be comparable to the two other branches investigated here. The Gothenburg region has been fairly hard hit by membership loss. In 1999 it had only 11 percent of its level in 1980. (The average for all Social Democratic regions is 14 percent see Figure 4.)

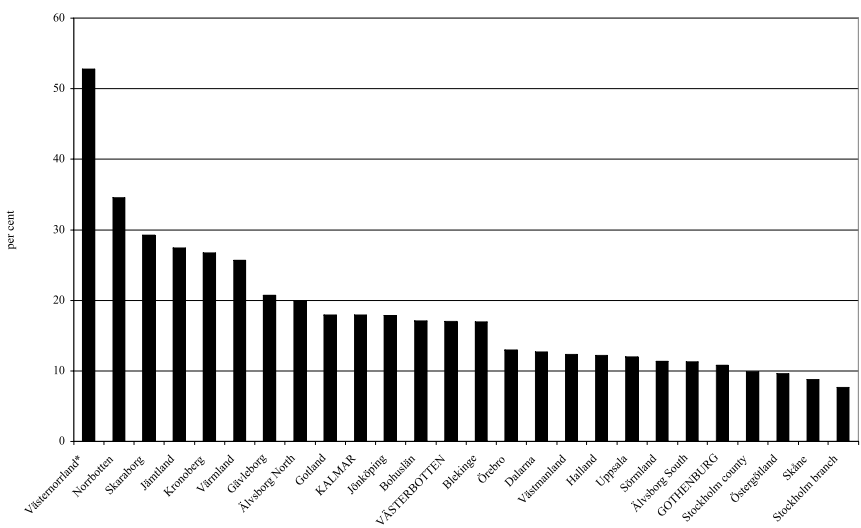

Figure 4. Rate of membership maintenance in SAP regions, 1980–99
*Created by merger of Medelpad and Ångermanland in 1991. Before that date, the combined membership of these two districts is used. *Source*: SAP, personal communication.

Empirical Investigation

Membership Collapse, Institutional Resilience

The early 1980s was the zenith of SAP as a membership organization. Thereafter, partly in anticipation of a change in the institutional relationship between the party and LO unions, local union sections began to end their members' collective membership of the party, until the practice was finally abolished at the end of 1990. As Figure 5 shows, and as we would have expected, our three branches have lost many members since the mid-1980s.

But while memberships have fallen drastically, changes in the number of basic units that affiliate to each branch have varied. Figure 6 shows that Kalmar experienced a steady decline from the mid-1980s. In Gothenburg, the fall was significant from 1987, suggesting the relative importance of the trade unions there as a source of party members. In Umeå, the number of basic units actually increased, indicating both that collective membership was of limited importance to the party there and also that the branch has managed to establish new constituencies from which basic units can recruit. Overall, we may note that, with the partial exception of Gothenburg, the number of units that affiliated to our three branches did not decline drastically, despite the end of collective membership and the subsequent erosion of the party membership throughout the 1990s. This suggests that the basic institutional infrastructure of the 'party on the ground' remains more or less

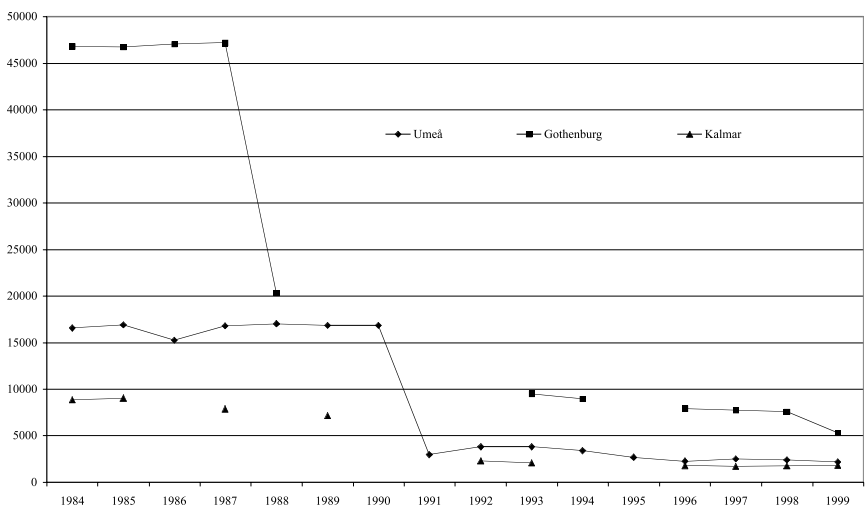

Figure 5. Membership levels in SAP branches

Source: Branch annual reports. Some data are missing, due either to missing reports or their omission of the relevant data.

intact. It also adds weight to the notion that, while party membership has declined, decline in party activity – in terms of meetings and the numbers who attend them – has been much less dramatic (Möller, 1999); or, put another way, that it has been the passive members who have left (Petersson et al., 2000: 68–9). The secretary of the Umeå branch reported that in advisory postal ballots of the whole membership, which the executive can call on certain issues, turnout is nowadays around 30 percent. In the era of collective membership it was about 1 percent.

The Enduring Presence of the Trade Unions

The demise of collective membership did not herald the end of institutional connections between the wings of the labour movement. In 1987 and afterwards the party and LO agreed that, to compensate for this loss, each side would work to keep as many members as possible in the party through other organizational forms. The closest form to the old system is that which allows a union section '*organizational affiliation*'. The section affiliates to the local party branch, but any members it brings must join SAP actively and voluntarily (SAP, 2000: 32) – that is, whereas previously the onus was on the trade-union member actively to opt *out* of joining the Social Democrats via the trade union, now he or she must actively opt *in*. Another form of organized labour's affiliation is through a Social Democratic association based on individual members of a local trade-union section, sometimes

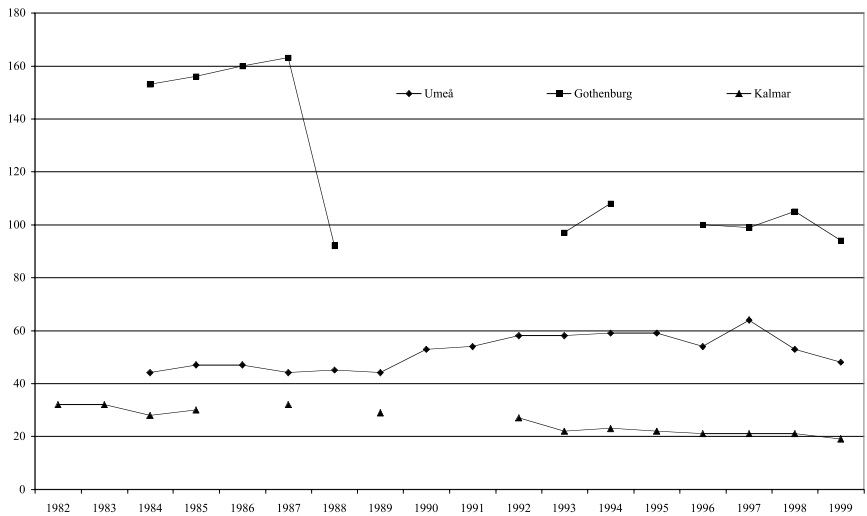

Figure 6. Number of basic units affiliating to SAP branches
Source: Branch annual reports. Some data are missing, due either to missing reports or their omission of the relevant data.

called a '*union club*'. A third form is the *workplace association*, which draws employees from a local firm who may belong to different unions. The union clubs and workplace associations existed during the era of collective membership, but were given added emphasis after it.

Did the reform of party–union relations seriously weaken the presence of the trade unions in SAP at the local level? Figures 7–9 illustrate the character of the basic units that affiliated to each branch. Units are categorized as belonging to one of four types. The first type is *area groups*, which cover a part of the locality for which the branch has responsibility, usually a residential area. Second, *common-interest groups* include associations whose members are brought together by something other than place of residence. This category includes women's groups, youth, student and Christian groups, each of which has a national structures within the party; and groups based on language, ethnicity or culture, which do not. The third and fourth types are both based on trade-union membership. One covers units that do not have a traditional LO background, but which organize on the basis of membership of *white-collar unions*, both within and outside the public sector. A growing presence of white-collar associations within branches might indicate that SAP is, as the catch-all model predicts, establishing organizational links with a wider range of interest groups, albeit, in this case, still with those based on organized labour. Finally, the fourth type of basic unit covers those that recruit *members of LO unions*, whether through union club, workplace association, organizational affiliation or – prior to 1991 – collective-membership affiliation.

The data, notwithstanding its missing parts, present a mixed picture.

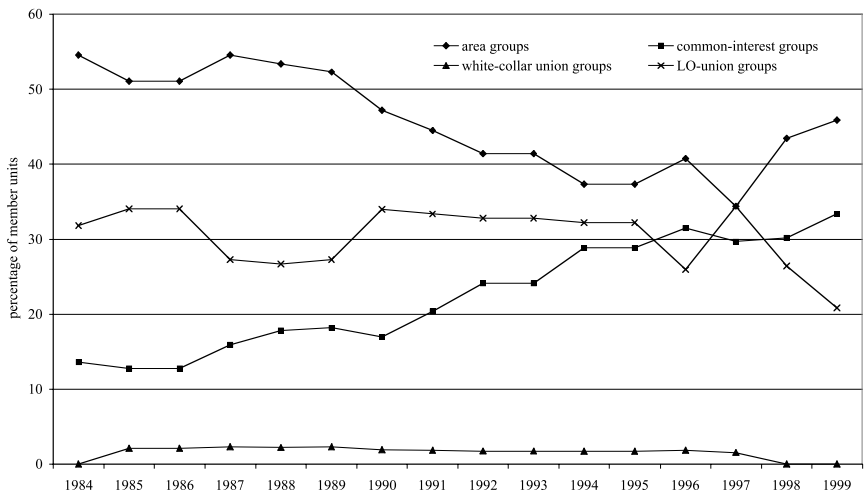

Figure 7. Types of basic unit affiliated to SAP's Umeå branch
N = 44 in 1984, 48 in 1999. *Source*: Branch annual reports.

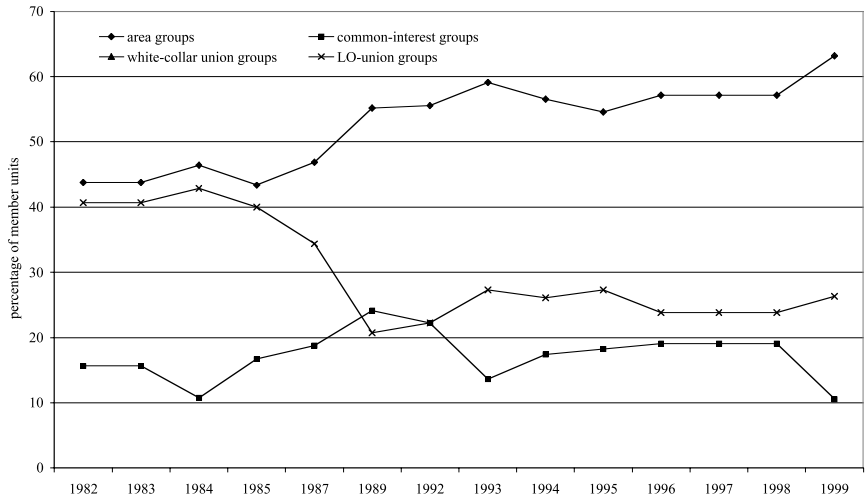

Figure 8. Types of basic unit affiliated to SAP's Kalmar branch
N = 28 in 1984, 19 in 1999. *Source*: Branch annual reports. Data for some years are missing.

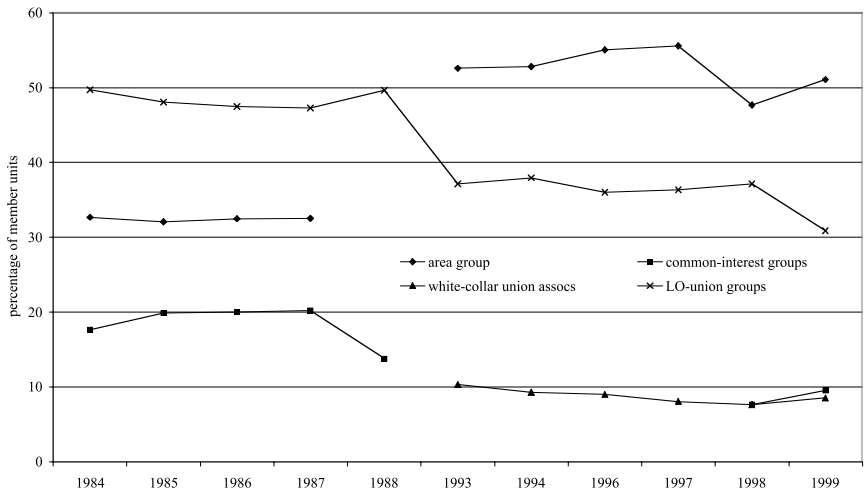

Figure 9. Types of basic unit affiliated to SAP's Gothenburg branch
N = 153 in 1984, 94 in 1999. *Source*: Branch annual reports. Data for some years are missing. In particular, the ostensible absence of any common-interest groups affiliating to the region between 1988 and 1998 is surprising and unlikely. Some of the region's annual reports were impossible to track down for that period. In others, it is likely that the relevant data were, for whatever reason, omitted.

Umeå offers a clear indication of diminishing LO-union presence, although one that only really became marked following the crisis of 1996 between the confederation and the party at the national level, after which the number of LO-union units fell by nearly a third, to 14. This explains the concomitant increase in the proportion of area groups affiliating to the branch: rather than increasing in absolute numbers (they fluctuated only between 22 and 25 after 1984), area groups simply made up a greater share of the affiliating units. Common-interest groups, though, *did* increase their numerical presence, mainly through the affiliation of more Social Democratic Youth associations (from 2 in 1991 to 10 in 1999). Kalmar's general situation is similar, but with two important differences. First, decline in the total of affiliating units was marked, from 32 at the beginning of the 1980s to just 18 in 1999. Second, there was no equivalent of Umeå's increase in common-interest groups, including Youth associations. In fact, no unit type expanded its presence in the branch, leaving area groups, whose numbers declined the least (16 in 1989, 12 a decade later) to assume the biggest share by default. Of our three branches, only Gothenburg had LO-union groups comprise a majority of the affiliating units at the beginning of the 1980s. Again, the fact that area groups, as in Umeå and Kalmar, in 1999 made up Gothenburg's biggest type of affiliating unit was not because their numbers had risen (the total hovered around 50). Rather, it was because the number of LO-union groups had fallen, from 76 in 1984 to just 29 in 1999.

Some further points, which are not visible in the figures, can be made about trade-union presence in the branches. First, although the primary sources of data (branches' annual reports) are not always entirely clear about this, it does seem that the forms of party–union link that were supposed to replace collective membership have not done so to a very impressive degree. The branch in Umeå had 14 union sections collectively affiliated to it in 1984. By 1999 it had six workplace associations and four organizationally affiliated union sections; union clubs, which numbered seven in the mid-1990s, seemed to have disappeared by 1999. In 1999 Kalmar's branch had 4 such clubs and a single workplace association, compared to 10 collectively affiliated sections in 1984. Gothenburg has a pattern that is distinct again. Its annual reports bear out the assertion made by several interviewees that collective membership *per se* was surprisingly unimportant in the city. In 1984, 10 union sections affiliated in this way, compared to 13 workplace associations and fully 53 union clubs. However, the fact that the party's preferred post-1990 structure was in place in Gothenburg some time earlier did not spare the Social Democrats there the type of losses subsequently seen elsewhere. By 1999 the number of union clubs had almost halved, to 28; workplace associations seemed to have disappeared; and organizationally affiliated sections, which numbered four in the middle of the decade, had fallen to just one (the Electricians).

What can we infer from this? First, LO-union groups do appear to have declined in SAP at the local level, both in absolute terms and as a proportion

of the basic units affiliating to its branches. The end of collective membership seems clearly to have weakened the blue-collar unions' presence in the party – although, judging by the evidence from Gothenburg, and keeping in mind the two big rows within the labour movement at the national level in 1990 and 1996, it may be that organizational reform is only part of the explanation. Perhaps unexpectedly, we may also note that white-collar unions still have only a limited presence in the branches.

The Enduring Influence of the Trade Unions

The number of LO-union groups in a party branch and their proportion of the total number of basic units are rather crude indicators of the *influence* of such groups. Influence is, of course, a famously hard variable to measure. But, in this part of our analysis, it is operationalized in two ways. The first uses further quantitative data; the second draws, necessarily briefly, on qualitative data taken from annual branch reports and interviews with activists within the three branches.

The paramount decision-making body in nearly all Social Democratic branches is the general assembly (*representantskap*).[5] Its scope for holding the branch executive committee to account is limited in practice. Its significance lies rather in its power to elect candidates (a) to positions of authority within the branch, (b) to regional congresses that decide the composition and order of lists for parliamentary elections, (c) to the branch's delegation to national party congresses, and (d) to the Social Democratic list in local municipal elections. The general assembly comprises at least one delegate from each of the affiliated units (including organizationally affiliated union sections), all of whom have the right to propose motions to the general assembly and to nominate candidates in branch elections. Beyond the basic mandate that each unit enjoys, extra mandates are given to individual units according to how many members each has. It is here that union influence can be seen to be considerably stronger than the preceding section might have suggested.

The average numbers of mandates for an area group in the Umeå, Kalmar and Gothenburg branches are 2.5, 3.5 and 3.3, respectively; the averages for an LO-union group are 3.5, 6.1 and 7.8. Clearly, then, some unions can still rally their members to join the party, and thus boost their unit's presence in the general assembly – especially in Gothenburg, where one union section does so sufficiently to warrant 57 mandates. This strength in numbers is illustrated in Figure 10, which depicts the voting power of the four different types of basic units in each of our three branches. Only in Kalmar do area groups have a majority of the delegates at the general assembly; the union groups there have less than a third. In Umeå, the LO-union groups also have a third of the vote, to the two-fifths that the area groups have and the quarter held by the common-interest groups. In Gothenburg, the area groups have less than two-fifths of the voting power, and, between them,

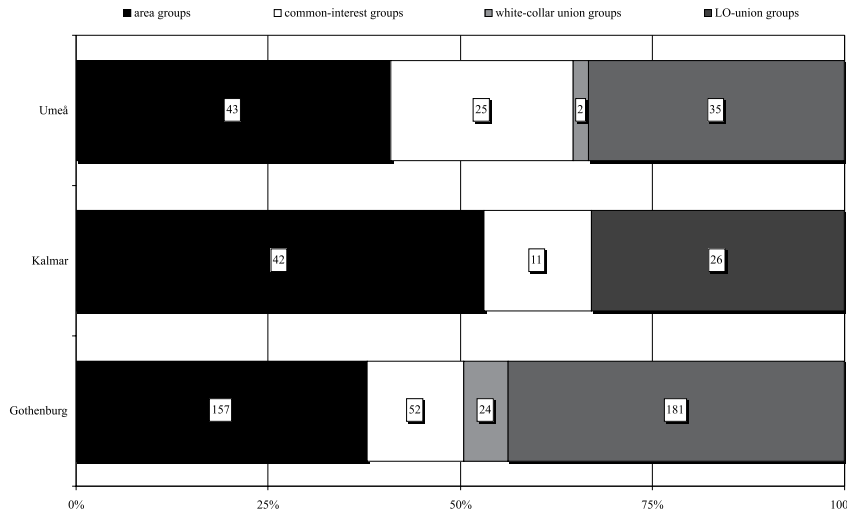

Figure 10. Types of basic unit and votes in the general assembly in three SAP branches, 2000

Source: Branch secretaries.

they and the common-interest groups have a majority of the delegates. But it is a bare majority: the combined votes of LO-union groups, whose votes amount to over two-fifths, and white-collar groups are only just in the minority. Of course, what would be useful here are longitudinal data on the general assemblies' changing composition. The Umeå branch secretary, for example, estimated that LO used to provide around two-thirds of its delegates, not far off double what it does now. Unfortunately, such data proved impossible to obtain. Yet the snapshot provided by examining the current composition does show that, in Gothenburg especially but in the other two branches as well, trade-union groups, in their different forms, have a large influence on the internal politics of the Social Democratic branches.

Exactly how that influence is exercised requires a still closer look. There are various ways in which the unions manage to shape the agenda, and then to wield significant influence when votes are taken.

According to the party's statutes, each branch and each region should have a trade-union committee (*facklig utskott*) which has the right to submit motions to the general assembly and to nominate candidates for the different internal elections. The trade-union committee existed during the collective-membership era, and has survived it. LO can expect a place when the committee is elected by the branch general assembly; representatives from other confederations and individual unions may also obtain places. Its chair is usually the trade-union officer (*facklig ledare*) on the branch's executive (*styrelse*), who will also be found on the executive committee (*verkställande*

utskott or *arbetsutskott*), which, with at least seven members, comprises about a quarter of the executive. Perhaps just as importantly, trade-union representation is also usual on the election commission (*valberredning*), a similar-sized body that fields nominations and prepares lists for internal and external elections (cf. Widfeldt, 2001: 71).[6] The LO unions cooperate informally but closely – 'in the corridor' or 'over the coffee table', as interviewees put it – in manipulating the composition of the trade-union committee. In Gothenburg, for instance, they ensure that its dozen members do not include more than one from any single union. Nor is that the only internal election for which the unions work together. It is understood that the three big LO unions in Gothenburg – the Metal-Workers, the Municipal Workers and the Retail Workers – ensure that 'their' people are represented on the party's important organs. At different levels of the party, a semi-formal quota system governs the lists chosen for external elections. Outcomes must be balanced, in that they take account of sex, age, ethnicity and geography, but also of union background. Three of the five MPs that represented each of Gothenburg and Kalmar after the 1998 election had a strong identification with LO or a particular union.

Institutional ties between party and unions in Gothenburg do seem to be especially strong, as might be expected with that city's history of labour activism. In Kalmar, by contrast, qualitative research reinforces the indication of the quantitative data, mentioned in previous sections, that party–union ties had long been relatively weak. Indeed, the branch's trade-union committee was wound up in the early 1990s, so ineffective had it become. It was replaced with 'union meetings', to which the branch's trade-union officer invited representatives of local union sections in order to discuss local and national issues; but they, too, petered out, as the unions stopped attending. Interviewees from each side acknowledged that the unions' support for the party in the 1998 election had been limited.

Nevertheless, the importance attached to maintaining – and, indeed, rebuilding and improving – relations with local LO unions was strongly inferred from interviews in all three branches, even in Kalmar. There and in Umeå, the last few years have seen the local SAP and LO branches, plus the local sections of some individual unions, move into shared offices (in Kalmar, the 'House of the Labour Movement'). The intention in such physical relocation was to improve personal, everyday contact between people in each organization, and thus to enhance a climate of cooperation and low-key, informal discussion of potential problems. In Gothenburg, the party, LO and a number of trade unions have long held offices together in the House of the People (*Folkets hus*), a labour-movement centre that most Swedish towns still have. After the 1998 election, the secretary of Kalmar's Social Democratic branch took the initiative in contacting all the union sections in the area (after first having to construct an inventory of which actually operated there), and began – unprecedentedly, as far as its officials were aware – to hold systematically joint party–LO meetings at the level of

the executive and general assembly. In most of Sweden, the legendary 's-representatives' in workplaces, whose task was to spread Social Democratic propaganda to workers (Gidlund, 1992: 119), appear to have become moribund. In Gothenburg, however, the party secretary formally abolished them and sought from the early 1990s to replace them by using LO officials in this role. They have been sent through the same training courses as ordinary party officials.

In SAP branches, institutional representation constitutes the main medium through which union grievances can be communicated to the party, but not the only one. It is quite possible for an individual member to belong to two or more basic units simultaneously. (One interviewee in Gothenburg belonged to an area group, a women's club and a union club.) Thus, union members will hold places on the general assembly by dint of their membership of other basic units, usually residential ones, and so can promote union interests through these, too.[7] Indeed, from the unit's perspective, any additional member, irrespective of whether he or she also belongs to another, will improve its chances of obtaining more delegates at the branch general assembly. It can probably be assumed that the union groups take advantage of this scope for double representation, although to what extent is unclear. Extensive survey research of the branch's membership would be one way of shedding further light on this aspect of union presence within the party.

Conclusions

In examining union group representation in branches' general assemblies and other decision-making organs, we conclude that the Social Democrats do not yet dominate the relationship with their major collateral groups in the way that, according to Panebianco (1988: 59), sister parties in France, Germany and Austria have long dominated theirs, with the external organizations utilized as 'transmission belts' – that is, simply as agents to the party's principal. The unions still have considerable scope for promoting their interests at branch level, especially through candidate- and delegate-selection.[8]

Recall that another of Panebianco's indicators of a party's autonomy from its environment concerned the sources of its finance. The limited data available suggested that the Social Democrats' support has indeed become more diverse and reliable, not least due to public subsidies, at the local as well as the national level (Sundberg, 2001: 169). Yet there is little doubt that the party still places considerable value on the money that it receives from LO unions; certainly, the opposition parties frequently complain about it (e.g. Hökmark et al., 1998). Moreover, it is arguable that this source of finance has actually become less reliable, thus making the party less autonomous from its benefactors. When collective membership was abolished, SAP and

LO agreed that the party's loss of membership fees would be offset by adopting a 'grant model', according to which LO – at branch, regional and national level – would annually donate money to Social Democratic coffers. Some of the bigger LO unions also contribute to their members' party-membership fees. It is plausible that, whereas previously the unions could conceivably have threatened the one-shot sanction of withholding funds through rescinding their local affiliation to the party, the need nowadays for the party to negotiate annually with LO and its unions about their contribution – an employee in one Social Democratic branch described it as 'begging' – might mean that lower-level, subtler, more continual pressure can be placed on the party to defend unions' interests. This, though, remains in the realm of speculation.

What cannot be claimed is that nothing has changed in the relationship between SAP and LO. Beyond the basic reform of organizational ties, interviewee after interviewee agreed that each wing's view of the other and of its own role had indeed undergone transformation. It is harder to persuade union members to take up political roles and to take responsibility for Social Democratic policy, it was said. A newer generation of party members, well educated and with white-collar employment, has changed the party's character, and made personal ties with members of the blue-collar unions less natural. The difficult economic times since the end of the 1980s have also left their scars, and estranged not just the unions, but also the party's rank-and-file members, from the leadership. The old assumption of common purpose between the political and economic wings of the labour movement can no longer be taken for granted, it seems.

But precisely because of this, activists on both sides emphasized the need to work even harder to rebuild the old ties. And there is a rational basis for such efforts: elements of the old exchange relationship remain. For the party, at both the local and national level, LO's cooperation can still be useful in successfully managing public finances and services, which should bring electoral payoffs. The unions can offer even more direct vote-maximizing services. Sweden's labour market remains the most unionized in the developed world, with around 80 percent density. Even if LO's share is less than it was, its unions still have the infrastructure to communicate, through its membership lists and its officials, with a sizeable proportion of the Swedish electorate (cf. Bäck and Möller, 1997: 154). LO's commitment to mobilizing them in support of SAP is obviously something the party must value very highly. From LO's perspective, meanwhile, the party can still offer in return a big say over the shape of public policy. This is obviously the case at the national level, but it applies also at the municipal and county levels. The management of many public services has been decentralized in recent decades, and the interests of the many workers employed within them will, in all probability, be enhanced by their union representatives enjoying close relations with the political leaders responsible for these services. Interviewees from LO stressed that, for their part, access to

political decision-makers was the main dividend from close cooperation with the Social Democrats.

In conclusion, then, I offer the following thoughts. First, the end of collective membership has been part, if only a part, of a long-term change in the nature of SAP's relationship with the organized labour covered by LO's umbrella. The party does look less like a mass-type than it used to, but this development, when examined empirically at the local level, is patchy. The influence of the trade unions within the party remains significant, and is probably understated by the data on institutional presence and voting weight presented here. SAP still looks to be some way from being a voter party.

Notes

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1 According to Elvander (1979: 28–9), 'Never before had the two branches of the labour movement appeared to be so divided in an election campaign'.
2 In 1992, the Norwegian Labour Party instigated reforms that wound up collective membership by 1997. Even in Denmark, where the Social Democrats had never had collective membership, the relationship between the party and LO was loosened further, with mutual representation on decision-making organs ending in 1996.
3 In 1996, over a quarter of the party's income at central level came from public subsidy, but the biggest portion, nearly two-fifths, came from sales of the party's lottery tickets (Wörlund and Hansson, 2001: 155).
4 There is the possibility of holding direct membership of a Social Democratic branch without belonging to an affiliated basic unit. But such members are not entitled to votes at a branch general assembly (SAP, 2000: 31).
5 'The branch's highest decision-making body is the members' meeting, as long as a general assembly, which assumes the membership meeting's authority, has not been introduced' (SAP, 2000: 34).
6 In the Gothenburg region, this function is split: *valberredningen* handles internal elections, while *valkommittén*, which includes representatives from the four city branches, handles external elections.
7 This ruled out an earlier idea for operationalizing the measurement of union influence within SAP branches. The plan was to record the success rate of LO-union group nominees to elected posts within a branch and to regional meetings. But, as several interviewees pointed out – especially in Gothenburg – this would have missed the nominees who enjoyed the confidence of the unions, but who were

nominated by other basic units. One activist identified a large proportion of elected officers in a branch as having the confidence of one union or another; but, after looking at which basic units each officer belonged to, it became clear that there was no objective means of verifying the activist's opinion.

8 Wörlund and Hansson (2001: 150) report that, by the mid-1990s, over a third of Social Democratic MPs had previously held some post within LO at a local level, although the proportion had been a half in 1985.

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