

TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Country Study Sweden

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JUST A MATTER OF TIME? THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS AND THE SWEDISH TRADE UNIONS

This is just a matter of time. The more we are, the more workplaces we can take over and vote for delegates who share our values, and appoint new boards.

Jörgen Fogelklou, SD

In the Swedish national elections in 2022 a right-wing extremist party, founded by neo-Nazis, became Sweden's second largest party (20.54 per cent). The *Sverigedemokraterna* (SD; Sweden Democrats) did not only pass the traditional leading conservative party *Moderata samlingspartiet* (M; Moderate Party) (19.1 per cent) when it came to popular support, they also became an important part of the parliamentary majority behind the new conservative government.

On December 8th, 2022, the *Svea Hovrätt* (Svea Court of Appeal) published a judgement between the the *Svenska Transportarbetareförbundet* (Transport; Swedish Transport Workers' Union) and one of their members. The court reconfirmed earlier rulings that made it illegal for the trade union to exclude the member in question for being a member of the SD. Two opposing principles were presented in the court: The trade union as an independent non-governmental organisation and its right to establish rules for who can be a member, and the members' right to uphold membership in an organisation of economic and practical relevance. The judgement was controversial and might

very well be tried in the highest instance. Moreover, it highlights the tensions that arise in the heart of the labour movement with the rise of the SD.

It is not right to say that the SD is a working-class party. They have support in all social groups. But it is true that they have been able to mobilise working class voters in a way that the traditional conservative parties have not.

This puts a substantial tension in Swedish politics and Swedish trade union organising. While the trade unions in the LO federation (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige*, Swedish Trade Union Confederation), that organises a large majority of the blue collar workers, have strong, historical, and ideological bounds to the Social Democratic Party, a larger and larger part of the working-class electorate, especially the males, has turned to the Sweden Democrats' extreme right populism.¹

¹ This country study is an updated, revised, and English language version of a previously published paper by the author; Sjölander, Johan (2022): "Populisme de droite et syndicats en Suède : quelle est la position des Démocrates de Suède vis-à-vis du dialogue social et de l'électorat ouvrier?" in: Greef, Samuel et al. (Eds.) (2022): *L'extrême droite européenne contre les travailleurs*, Éditions Fondation Jean-Jaurès, pp. 17–21, <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/lextreme-droite-europeenne-contre-les-travailleurs-un-dialogue-social-menace/>.

PROFILE OF THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS

It's worth underlining that the SD is not a normal right leaning populist party like the *Fremskrittspartiet* (FrP; Progress Party) in Norway or the *Dansk Folkeparti* (DF; Danish People's Party) in Denmark. The SD was formed by neo-Nazis and when the present party leader Jimmie Åkesson joined, the party still consisted of skinheads hailing during party meetings and shouting openly racist rhetoric. Today, the SD continues to struggle with scandals regarding leading officials stepping way out of line.

The SD party leadership has tried very hard to wash off the stench from history. They claim the party has changed and that they should now be seen as a "conservative" party. In a way, this seems to have worked. The SD is Sweden's second largest party, they are negotiating the budget with the conservative government, and even though they are not formally a part of said government, they have party officials working in the government administration. Party leader Jimmie Åkesson has himself stated that SD is a part of the government in all but name. The relationship with the traditional conservative and liberal parties has also changed quite quickly, from total condemnation a couple of years ago to today regarding the SD as a legitimate party. *Kristdemokraterna* (KD; Christian Democrats) party leader Ebba Bush has, for example, stated that she is sure that the SD will one day be part of the government (albeit not right now) and *Liberalerna* (L; Liberals) party leader Johan Pehrson struggles between ensuring his European party colleagues in Brussels that his party is still the number one opposition to Swedish Democratic right wing-populism and telling Swedish media that he is not sure of SDs extremist roots because "he was not there at the time".

On an ideological level, the party traditionally placed itself on a "neither left nor right" position, saying no to class struggle but yes to social rights, especially for Swedish born workers and pensioners. During the last years, they have developed quite good relations with organised business, which has led to position changes on issues like privatisation. They have also associated themselves clearly with the main-stream conservative parties in Swedish politics and are, after the 2022 elections, a part of the parliamentary majority behind Ulf Kristersson's conservative-liberal government. The term the party uses to position itself is "social conservative" and they usually describe themselves as a part of the conservative, i.e., non-social democratic, right but with a social consciousness.

Many scholars have instead pointed out that the core of the Sweden Democratic political project is better

described as "ethno-nationalistic". This is probably a more accurate description, and the idea that there is some sort of essential "swedishness" that is under threat and that not all people living in Sweden are de facto part of this "nation" is an accurate way of understanding the core of the Sweden Democratic ideology. Another quite apt way to describe the SD is as a one-issue-party about migration and immigrants. For most of the Swedish public, that is what they have been hearing and that is what they associate SD with.

THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS' VIEW ON THE SOCIAL PARTNERS

Formally, SD is very supportive of "the Swedish model", wherein independent partners sign collective agreements in the labour market with minimal state involvement. From that point of view, they criticised the *Socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiet* (S/SAP; Social Democratic Party) government, which was in office until October 2022, for being soft on EU-legislation in the social sector, with the issue of minimum wages as one prominent target of criticism. Former Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (2014–2021) has doubts about what bureaucrats in Brussels can and do know about the conditions of Swedish workers. "The shift in power that the Social Democratic Party is willing to stand for, will provide reduced opportunities to protect the Swedish model. ... It is obvious that the overall plan is to give the EU total power over labour law. These measures lead to increased supranationalism, more power to Brussels and are a slap in the face to Swedish workers", wrote SD-party leader Jimmie Åkesson in *Aftonbladet* in 2019 under the headline "SD is the last hope for the Swedish model".²

Even though the SD, in theory, advocates for the presence of independent partners on the labour market and "the Swedish model", they are, in practice, also opponents of the largely social democratic LO. Together with the mainstream conservative parties, they have, for example, voted for abolishing the possibility for a tax deduction for trade union fees, and other such measures.

THE SWEDISH TRADE UNION MOVEMENT, WITH A FOCUS ON LO

There are three large confederations of Swedish trade unions. The *Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation* (TCO; Confederation of Professional Employees) is the um-

² Åkesson, Jimmie (2019): "SD är den svenska modellens sista hopp", in: *Aftonbladet* (online), 30.4.2019. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/g7dMna/sd-ar-den-svenska-modellens-sista-hopp>

brella organisation for 13 trade unions that represent and organise white collar workers in the private and public sectors. The *Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation* (Saco; Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations) is comprised of 23 affiliated unions for professions that require an academic education. The LO is the central organisation for 14 affiliates who organise blue collar workers within both the public and private sectors.

Looking at the relationship between the TCO and Saco unions and the extreme right would of course be interesting. There are indeed things happening. TCO recently decided to rethink their policy towards SD that had been in place for the last twelve years.³ They no longer mention SD explicitly but rather focus on that TCO distances itself from “nationalism, anti-democratic movements, xenophobia and racism.”⁴

In this paper, I will focus on the confederation of blue collar workers, LO. The reasons for this are twofold. One is, that I think there is a special interest in better understanding the relationship between the extreme right and the working class. The second is that the LO maintains close and explicit links to the *Socialdemokraterna* (S/SAP; Social Democratic Party), which sets the LO-unions apart from the formally nonpartisan and unaffiliated TCO and Saco confederations.

LO is an explicitly social democrat confederation for historical and organisational reasons. The party’s full, formal name is the *Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti* (SAP; Swedish Social Democratic Workers’ Party) but it is usually referred to as *Socialdemokraterna* (S/SAP; The Social Democrats). It was founded by trade unions in 1889 and the LO was formed nine years later, in 1898, with very close ties to the SAP. A commonly used expression, that the LO and the SAP are “two branches on the same tree”, is indeed a good way of describing their relation. For example, the president of the LO has a given place in the SAP Executive Committee.

LO-unions are completely dominant in organising blue collar workers. There is some competition from, for example, the syndicalist federation *Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation* (SAC; Central Organisation of the Workers of Sweden), but the numbers are overwhelming: About 3,000 people are organised in the SAC compared to around 1.4 million in the LO unions. For most ordinary Swedes, the Social Democratic LO-unions represent “the Union”.

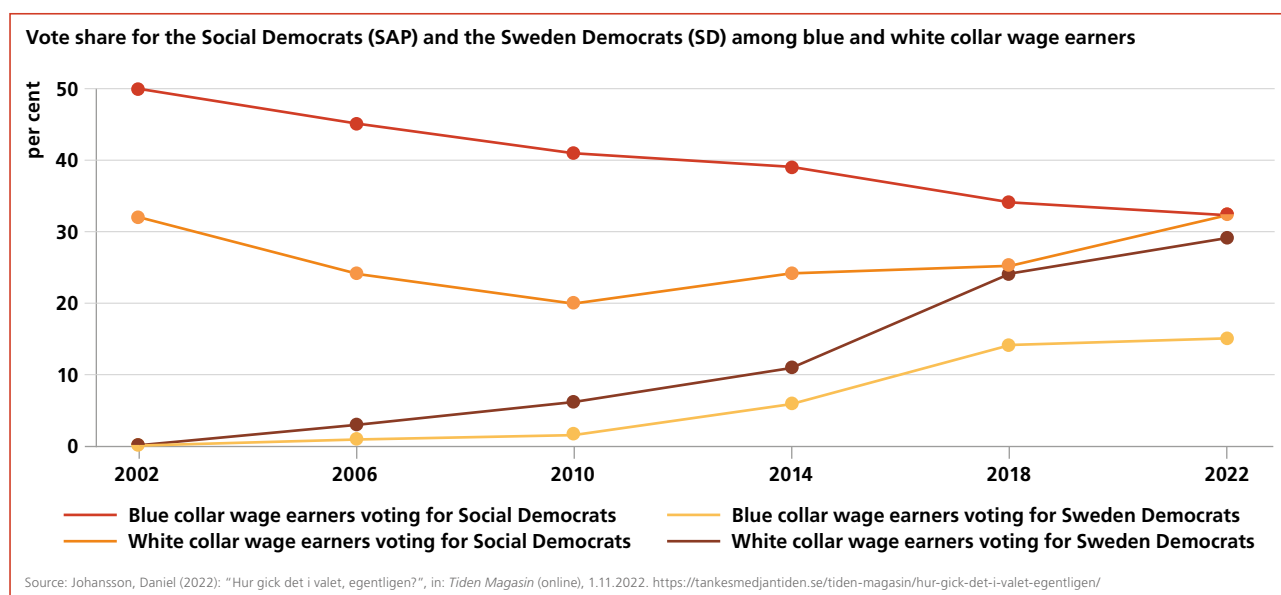
The working class is not a homogeneous entity, and neither are the 14 trade unions that form the LO. There are differences between the industry and the welfare workers, between male and female dominated unions, between unions organising mainly private and public sectors, and so on.

3 Crona, Malin (2022): “TCO öppnar för Sverigedemokraterna”, in: *Arbets Världen* (online), 10.10.2022. <https://www.arbetsvarlden.se/tco-oppnar-for-sverigedemokraterna/>

4 Wingborg, Mats (2022): “TCO:s nya partipolicy nämner inte SD”, in: *Arbets Världen* (online), 16.11.2022. <https://www.arbetsvarlden.se/tcos-nya-partipolicy-namner-inte-sd/>

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SWEDEN DEMOCRATS AND THE WORKING-CLASS ELECTORATE

SD has, over time, gained support all over the Swedish electoral map and is now the second largest party.



It's worth noting that, while SD has gained popular support during the last twenty years, they are still a controversial party. There is resistance from the public, not only increasing support. But, nevertheless, the development over time is pointing in a clear direction. In fact, the SD have gained popularity in each election since they formed.

Of special interest here is of course the support among blue collar workers and especially those organised in the LO-unions. When it comes to organised workers, the 2022 elections were, in a way trend breaking. The support for SD went down to 27.2 per cent. This means quite a distance to the SAP with 42.4 per cent. Still, if we look at it over time, the picture is not that bright. In 2012, the support for the SAP was over 50 per cent and the SD loomed at around five to ten per cent. Thus, even though the steady increase in support for SD faltered in 2022, the overall picture stays the same.

The broad takeaway is even clearer if, instead of looking at organised workers, we shift the focus to all voters who consider themselves “working class”. Among this section of the electorate, there is a continuation in the 2022 election results, where the SAP and the SD are nearing one another in terms of popular support.

How can we better understand this trend over time? According to internal polls made by the LO, there was a clear shift in 2015. While prior to 2015, there was increasing support for SD observable among young men, what happened in 2015 was a quite radical turn — the demographics of the LO-supporters shifted towards the middle-aged. If the SD-supporter pre-2015 was the typical angry young man, the SD supporter after 2015 was the working family father. SD support remained still very much gendered, among the LO-members as well as in the broader public. Men turn to the populist right, women do not.

The stark shift in 2015 coincided, of course, with the immigration crisis in Sweden as well as in other countries. The development in Sweden was extremely dramatic (although not as dramatic as in the countries people had to flee from). Over the course of the year, 162,788 people took refuge in Sweden, and during several weeks during the fall over 10,000 people arrived in the country.

It is therefore very hard to avoid the conclusion that the shift in LO-member sympathies is to a large extent immigration-driven. The roots of support for extreme right populism are complicated and very much debated among scholars and political analysts. In the very interesting book *Det svenska missnöjet* (The Swed-

ish Discontent), authors Lisa Pelling and Johanna Lindell⁵ paint a very clear picture of how even though people are troubled by questions related to work life, lack of welfare, and housing, they still name migration as the number one problem to solve.

The question of immigration is in itself, and from a quite materialistic perspective, complicated for the trade unions. On the one hand, the unions are ideologically anti-racist, have solidarity as an intrinsic value, and have many members with an immigrant background. On the other hand, the working-class labour market is exposed to the risk of wage dumping and unsound competition from new immigrant groups.

This dilemma is expressed quite clearly in what interestingly is the most recent LO programme on immigration and immigrants from 1979⁶ (over 40 years ago!). The program focuses heavily on what the trade unions could do to better reach out to workers with immigrant background. However, it also raises a clear warning about what could happen with the popular support for immigration if it is not “well controlled and organised” and “regulated according to our capacity to offer new immigrants work, housing, social services, schools, health care etc” (LO 1979: 10, authors’ translation).

Since the LO programme was published, the problems the authors pointed to have escalated in the Swedish society. The reasons for this are certainly not only because of refugees. The conservative government in the mid-2010s liberalised labour force immigration, the EU membership has had its impact, and policy changes that have nothing to do with immigration (such as lowering taxes and the privatisation of welfare) combined with the effects of globalisation itself are other factors to consider.

Nevertheless, the impacts the LO warned about in 1979 have now occurred, and popular support for liberal immigration policies has plunged. Combined with the tendency of the SD to frame themselves (and be framed as) a one issue party against immigration, this should without doubt be seen as the driving force behind the increased support for SD among working class voters.

⁵ Lindell, Joanna / Pelling, Lisa (2022): “Swedish Discontent”, book review, Labour and Social Justice, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/stockholm/18834-20220126.pdf>.

⁶ Invandrarna och fackföreningsrörelsen – Los invandringpolitiska handlingsprogram för samhälle och arbetsliv, LO 80.01, TunaTryc AB Eskilstuna.

SWEDEN DEMOCRATS AND THEIR RELATION WITH LO TRADE UNIONS

There have been attempts from the SD to overcome the heavy Social Democratic dominance in the LO trade unions by either working within the Swedish trade unions or by creating their own parallel structure. None of these strategies have worked so far. As mentioned, there have been attempts to expel members from existing unions for being members of the SD.⁷ An attempt to form a new alternative trade union by the SD (*Löntagarna*, “The Employees”) brutally failed after only being able to recruit around 200 members.⁸

The trade unions within the LO are independent non-governmental organisations. They are, in that sense, nothing more than their members, and their members have every right to decide what their organisation should be, who should represent them and, indeed, who can be member.

As mentioned earlier in this report, a recent court judgement in Sweden questioned the right of unions to exclude individuals based on political party membership. The issue has not yet been resolved by the highest instance, but the court judged it wrong for *Transport* (the transportation workers’ union) to exclude a member who was openly a Sweden Democrat. The court’s decision was based on the fact that union membership was of economic and personal importance to the member in question.

This is an example of the tensions within the Swedish labour movement that come with the rise in SD support within the working class. Still it is important to underline that the *Transport* has taken a quite hard stance in the question of SD-leaning membership, even within the LO family. For example, *IF Metal* (the metal workers’ union in Sweden) recently changed their statutes so that it wouldn’t be possible to be elected as a trustee for the union if you don’t share its core values, but you can indeed be a member. Several of other LO unions have taken a similar stance. The argument for this being that you cannot represent an organisation if you do not share its values and, which is of course of special importance when it comes to the SD; it is hard to represent other members that are

of immigrant background when you yourself have a right-wing extremist political view.

The trade union stance on active Sweden Democrats being members or being possible to elect as trustees is a question of principle. Trade unions are independent non-governmental organisations. No one is forced to become a member. It is, as the example of *Löntagarna* shows, possible to create your own union if you don’t like the ones available. If the members decide that their interests are best represented by an organisation that is openly Social Democratic and that the Sweden Democrats are, in fact, a threat to these interests, that is their right. Even though this argument is solid, it is hard to totally disregard the question of numbers. The argument from the LO unions in practice depends on the fact that members and would-be-members generally share the view that social democracy does represent their interests on a political level, and that the Sweden Democrats do not.

To sum up, this does not mean that the LO organisations are in some way totally detached from the SD-leaning opinions among the members, but rather that there is an organisational thickness or resistance within the trade unions themselves, based on ideological affinity. The question of SD influence within the trade unions is still very much on the agenda, as the recent court ruling and the active strategies from, for example, *IF Metal* show.

This also means that the important question in the long run is not how the organisational structures of the LO unions handle the Sweden Democrats, but rather how the question of right-wing extremism and populism among the working classes are met.

VIEW OF LO TRADE UNIONS ON THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS

As mentioned before, the LO has a tight organisational and ideological relationship with the SAP. SAP was formed by trade unions, and ever since the party has always been paramount in the formation of the LO. The president of LO is always a member of the SAP’s executive board and there is deep coordination on the national, regional, and local level.

The historic link between the LO and the SAP is only one part of their close relationship. Using this connection only is too narrow a frame to understand the resistance in the LO towards the SD as just a question of loyalty with the SAP. There are strong ideological reasons for any blue collar trade unions to resist the extreme right, xenophobia, and the neo-fascism the

⁷ See Frisk, Martina / Flood, Linda (2019): “LO-fack vill stoppa SD från fackligt inflytande”, in: *Fastighetsfolket* (online), 27.11.2019. <https://fastighetsfolket.se/2019/11/27/lo-fack-vill-stoppa-sd-franfackligt-inflytande/>.

⁸ See Andersson, Linnea (2014): “SD-fack läggs ned”, in: *Kollega* (online), 20.10.2014. <https://www.kollega.se/sd-fack-laggs-ned> or Andersson, Linnea (2013): “SD startar fackförbund”, in: *Kollega* (online), 17.12.2013. <https://www.kollega.se/sd-startar-fackforbund>.

SD represents. It's important to underline that the LO trade unions are independent non-governmental organisations, which have every right to formulate what ideas and what values they stand for themselves.

Without going into too much detail, there are two lines of argument from the LO unions regarding SD. The first is to underline that the Sweden Democrats are, to quote from a LO report on the party, "hostile to workers and anti-union". The other is that SD is, at its core, a party that wants to make a difference between workers depending on their ethnic background, and that that is incompatible with the trade union values. For example, it has been argued from leading officials within the trade unions that it is a strong argument for removing union members who are openly Sweden Democrats from positions within the unions, that they cannot represent all of the members, since a large percentage of trade union members today have some sort of immigrant background.

The trade unions have made many attempts to lower the degree of support for the Sweden Democrats among trade union members. To this end, the LO has tried several different strategies. They have focused on values and anti-racism, tried to remind workers about the neo-Nazi roots of the party, attempted to take on the SD on traditional left-right issues, and pointed out when SD takes on anti-union stances on various issues. As a leading official said in an interview for this report stated: "We have tried everything".

These attempts have had a varied degree of success. There is some evidence that individual campaigns had positive outcomes, but overall, these have not been able to turn the tide. Over time, the Sweden Democrat support among the working class has risen. As one could see from the latest national elections, the support for the Sweden Democrats among the members of the LO unions went down in 2022, although one cannot say for sure whether this could be explained by the LO union's campaigns.

Even if more structural results cannot be seen, it is not fair to say that these efforts have been pointless. It is very hard to say how the situation would have been had the LO unions not taken such a strong position. Taking a firm stance on anti-racism is, of course, important, not least to the many members of immigrant background, even though it is not successful in reducing SD support. Some of the campaigns, especially when confronting SD with traditional right-wing positions, have been partially successful in winning

back former SAP supporters. At the end of the day, it is clear that the LO's relationship with the SD is, at its core, political.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

When looking at the relationship between the LO and SD, it is easy to forget the third part of the drama, the SAP.

The overall strategy from the party to strengthen the bonds between the SAP and the LO has as a main target the goal of increasing the share of LO members who vote for the SAP. One of the major strategies is to increase the number of staff and elected officials in the SAP itself with a background in the trade unions. In their mid-term strategy, which was adopted by the SAP board in 2019, winning the votes of LO union members was also declared number one priority.

The former party leader Stefan Löfven was personally able to mediate some of the tensions, being himself a trade unionist rather than a politician. His successor, former minister of finance Magdalena Andersson, has quite a different background. She is a Harvard educated academic with long background in party politics, including working closely with former prime minister Göran Persson during the 90s. It is, therefore, quite interesting to see how she handles the situation in her new role as party leader.

On an organisational level, it is worth noting that the new party secretary-general, elected with Magdalena Andersson, was recruited from a trade union. Tobias Baudin came directly from being president of *Kommunal* (the Swedish Municipal Workers Union). This is in line with the strategic target to increase the number of staff and officials with trade union background.

Moreover, it is interesting to see how the political priorities and rhetoric from the newly elected party leader has been in line with an ambition to win back blue collar voters. The political priorities of Magdalena Andersson include being hard on crime and using every available tool (to "turn every stone") to break segregation and increase integration, taking a tough stance against the privatisation of welfare and having a job-creation and industrialisation approach to climate change. In her inaugural speech at the party congress in 2021, she explicitly approached trade union leaders by mentioning them by name and explaining how their members would be involved in a concrete manner in her new Social Democratic project.

As we could see in the 2022 elections, more of the LO-organised blue collar workers voted once again for the SAP. The current Social Democratic strategy of being clear on traditional left-right issues like privatisation of the welfare systems while, at the same time, being hard on crime and not returning to the former more liberal stances on migration is working. At the same time, we can see that, when we look at all of the voters who define themselves as working class, the trend was rather consistent with previous elections. The reason the SAP gained two points in the election was not because workers returned to the party but because of votes from the middle class.

In conclusion, it can be argued that organisational strength and ideological awareness within the Swedish trade unions have prevented the SD from gaining more influence over the unions on an organisational level, but that this hasn't prevented the party from gaining support among individual members of the working class that the unions organise. It is fairly obvious that this political movement is driven by different views on immigration policies. The SD message that Sweden has a much too liberal migration policy has resonated with blue collar workers. However, that is only one piece of the puzzle. The message on immigration would not sound as clear if it wasn't heard against a background of increased inequality and insecurity, especially for the working class. The key to turning the tide is in the understanding of this complex context.

Since the 2022 election, there have been some further dramatic shifts in the public opinion. The fact that the extreme right SD party is in a position of power combined with the economic crisis has changed the political scenery. It is still far too soon to say how this will end; the battle over the Swedish working class is not at all over.

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