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Class and Social Movements in Scandinavia since 1945

ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Second World War, economic affluence, a neoliberal turn in world politics and economic globalisation have questioned the relevance of social class as a useful social science category. Analysing the changing configuration of labour markets, structural insecurity, labour movements and welfare states, this essay tries to revive the empirical validity of the notion of working class in a Scandinavian context. As a starting point I discuss how changing occupational patterns and state intervention transformed the basic class structure of the three Scandinavian countries Denmark, Sweden and Norway. This led to new trends in consumption, saving and the way ordinary people coped with social insecurity. These developments made heavy demands on the labour movement, which was challenged from within by renewed grassroots activity, i. e. social movement unionism, and from without by new social movements. Recently the Scandinavian countries were exposed to globalisation. The result was a further division of the working class and new organisational and political cleavage structures.

Introduction

From a Scandinavian and European perspective the middle class and the farming class came out as the great innovators of society in the 19th century, whereas the working class turned out to be the dominant social force of the 20th century. This pattern lasted until the 1960s when working-class mobilisation lost momentum, whereupon pundits and scholars began to talk about the virtual disappearance of “the distinctive social formation we term ‘working class’.”¹ Geoff Eley and Keith Nield even dedicated a special issue of the journal *International Labor and Working-Class History* to the recent study of social

1 Aristide Zolberg: Response: Working-Class Dissolution, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 47 (1995), pp. 28–38.

class, especially working-class history under the headline *Farewell to the Working Class*?² The reason for Eley and Nield's concern was that, after the Second World War, the dominant working-class collectivity went into decline, while a new social and political identity is still very much in formation: "The old has been dying, but the new has yet to be born. Class decomposition is yet to be replaced by its opposite, the recomposition of class into a new and coherently shaped form".³

No doubt, since 1945, capital accumulation, economic growth and political transformation have fundamentally changed the world, and no part of working-class life has been left unaffected;⁴ however, what is more doubtful is whether there ever has been a coherent working class. First of all we must acknowledge that, at the empirical level, classes do not exist as cohesive social collectivities, and they do not mobilise on shared common interests – either before or after 1945.⁵ Proletarians have always been engaged in extensive social and spatial networks with the purpose of utilising economic opportunities in search of social and economic security. Over time, it has produced different labour processes, social hierarchies, employment statuses, labour markets, recruitment and supply networks, conditions of living, organising capabilities and political identities. The coming of the welfare state has definitely reshuffled individual and collective strategies but has not abolished the search for social security, and the willingness and capacity to form protest groups and social movements. Hence, this essay tries to focus specifically on how traditional working-class mobilisation was challenged from within and from without by new interests and new political identities in a world of constant transformation. But before embarking on the study it will be helpful to begin with some conceptual guidelines.

2 International Labor and Working-Class History 57 (spring 2000).

3 Geoff Eley/Keith Nield: *Farewell to the Working Class?*, in: International Labor and Working-Class History 57 (2000), pp. 1–30, quotation on p. 1.

4 Beverly J. Silver: *Forces of Labor. Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870*, Cambridge 2003; Luc Boltanski/Eve Chiapello: *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London 2005.

5 For a discussion of these aspects see Ira Katznelson/Aristide R. Zolberg (eds.): *Working-Class Formation. Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, Princeton 1986; Mike Savage: *Class and Labour History*, in: Lex Heerma van Voss/Marcel van der Linden (eds.): *Class and other Identities. Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History*, New York 2002, pp. 55–72; Don Kalb: *Class (in Place) Without Capitalism (in Space)?*, in: International Labor and Working-Class History 57 (2000), pp. 31–39.

Reflections on Class, Workers, and Movements in a Scandinavian Perspective

Basically, we cannot reduce the notion of the working class to industrial-urban factory workers, who have always been a minority within the larger class of labourers. And with the situation in Scandinavia after 1945 in mind, employees in the social services and public sector must be regarded as belonging to the working class too. This becomes intelligible when focusing on organisational changes, which further raises the question of the concept of labour *movement*. First, we must point out that the trade union movement, by virtue of its organic relationship to the production, mobilised on a different infrastructure and with differing strategies compared to other social movements; and next, it would be a mistake to talk about a trade union movement in Scandinavia, at least after 1945.⁶ During the 1930s, the trade union movement had gained routine access to the state, and behaved more as a pressure group than a social movement. From time to time, however, the labour market erupted in outburst of protest, and to capture this development I introduce the notion of *social movement unionism*, tantamount to a bottom-up approach. As a consequence, I also distinguish between informal network-based organisations and formal hierarchical institutions as agencies for collective action, and how they interact under different circumstances, in particular times and places. Especially the latter warns us against adopting a too narrow national perspective. The working classes are embedded in *international economic and political junctures*, and people are constantly engaged in *transnational exchange of ideas and resources* in order to defend and advance their interests.⁷

To understand the national and international comparative position of the Scandinavian working classes, this article opens with a description of the unique organisational and political strength of the Scandinavian working class seen in a pre-war European context. Thereupon follow two sections on changing class and labour market structures, and how people coped with economic and social insecurity, in post-war Scandinavia. The bulk of this paper, however, concentrates specifically on grassroots activities within the trade union organisations, i. e. social movement unionism, and how the labour movement interacted with other so-called *new social movements* and *voluntary organisations*. Finally, I try to relate what we know about the Scandinavian working class to the present discussion of *globalisation*, *internationalisation* and *long waves* in the world system. Is it true that globalisation fundamentally has changed the economic and political infra-

6 In spite of these reservations I retain the phrases labour „movement“ and trade union „movement“ because they have become standard vocabulary among scholars and trade union representatives.

7 Michael Hanagan/Marcel van der Linden: *New Approaches to Global Labor History*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 66 (2005), pp. 1–11.

structure of western (and world) societies as some would have us believe, or is it in fact a misleading concept, and to quote Immanuel Wallerstein,⁸ “a gigantic misreading of current reality” and “a discourse that leads us to ignore the real issues before us, and to misunderstand the historical crisis within which we find ourselves”? My reading of the history of the Scandinavian working class suggests that we should look for alternative ideas and remember not to lose track of class and class formation as intellectual inspiration.⁹ Basically, social class is a variable and transformative historical phenomenon which interacts with state power and at the same time is integrated into national and international economic conjunctures and wider modes of production.

The Scandinavian Working Class in a European Context until 1945¹⁰

At the end of the 1930s, the working classes in Denmark, Sweden and Norway had consolidated their organisational, political and cultural position, and had become an integrated part of established society. It had not been a peaceful process, but was marked by major industrial and political conflicts with employers, Liberal and Conservative parties.¹¹ Compared with other European countries, the exceptionally successful mobilisation of the Scandinavian working classes was due to the following class-based features: the absence of a strong class of landowners, moderate and late industrial capitalism, weak liberal hegemony, low level of repression, surmounting of the rural-urban split, no

- 8 Immanuel Wallerstein: *Globalization or the Age of Transition?*, in: *International Sociology* 15:2 (2000), pp. 249–265, p. 250.
- 9 See special issue on „Class analysis and working-class history“ in: *Arbejderhistorie. Tidsskrift for historie, kultur og politik* 3–1 (2009–10).
- 10 Let me point out that I have reduced and even ignored some significant differences between the Scandinavian countries to present a more uniform picture.
- 11 There is a long tradition in the historiography of the Scandinavian labour movements to discuss the connection between industrialisation, working-class formation and the development of trade unions, industrial conflicts and political parties. It started with the work of Edvard Bull, senior: *Die Entwicklung der Arbeiterbewegung in den drei skandinavischen Ländern 1914–1920*, in: *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* 10 (1922), pp. 329–361, and was followed by Walter Galenson: *Scandinavia*, in: Walter Galenson (ed.): *Comparative Labor Movements*, New York 1952, pp. 104–172; William M. Lafferty: *Economic Development and the Response of Labour in Scandinavia*, Oslo 1971; Nils Elvander: *Skandinavisk arbetarrörelse*, Stockholm 1980; Gøsta Esping-Andersen: *Politics Against Markets. The Social Democratic Road to Power*, Princeton 1985; Flemming Mikkelsen: *Arbejdsconflikter i Skandinavien 1848–1980*, Odense 1992.

competing organisations, and access to the state.¹² These properties may be summarised briefly.

When in the 1890s the Scandinavian working classes entered the public sphere demanding social, organisational and political rights, they faced a weak and irresolute class of landlords who quickly disappeared from history, after the turn of the century. The Conservatives and the Liberals represented a more serious threat to working-class mobilisation, and initially, the trade unions and the embryonic socialist movement only achieved significant progress in co-operation with the Liberals. In Denmark, the labour movement managed to emancipate itself from the Liberals and to form autonomous unions and political parties earlier than their Nordic counterparts. It was clearly a result of the strong artisan sector and the location of industry and workplaces in urban areas. In Sweden and Norway, a large part of the factories were situated in rural surroundings which impeded the full political mobilisation of the working class until the 1920s, when the rural-urban gap was closed. This was not only a result of migration from the countryside to the cities and increased urbanisation, but also a consequence of expanding trade unions outside the urban sector and growing electoral support among the agrarian population.¹³

In a situation with a weak Liberal opposition, low levels of repression and no conflicting or competing religious, ethnic and linguistic affiliations, the Scandinavian working classes and labour movements were placed in an advantageous political position. Thus, during the 1920s, the Swedish and Danish Social Democrats, and later, during the 1930s, the Norwegian Labour Party, gained access to the state apparatus, from where they tried to limit the power of capital and to mitigate the social consequences of a partly free market for commodities and labour. The strong position of labour was used to hinder the onward march of Fascist and Nazi movements; to take the edge off the economic depression, and to curb the counter-mobilisation of employers during periods of high unemployment. World War II did not seriously change this pattern. The German occupation of Denmark and Norway lowered economic growth and restricted the influence of labour; but shortly after the War, the Scandinavian labour movements had regained their organisational and political power.

12 Flemming Mikkelsen: Working-Class Formation in Europe and Forms of Integration: History and Theory, in: *Labor History* 46:3 (August 2005), pp. 277–306.

13 See Mikkelsen: *Arbejdskonflikter i Skandinavien 1848–1980*.

Changing Classes and Labour Market Structures after 1945

The Second World War had left Norway and Denmark with a worn but largely intact production apparatus. They, and Sweden, which had successfully stayed out of the War, soon fixed on an expansive economic growth model that transformed the industrial landscape, occupational structure, consumption patterns and, as a consequence, class organisation. In spite of some chronological differences between the Scandinavian countries, employment in agriculture declined in favour of work places in industry and in the service sector, with most of the new jobs located in urban areas.¹⁴

Until the mid-1960s, employment in manufacturing increased concomitant with a strong growth in production volume, productivity and a concentration of jobs in larger firms; however, around 1970, this era of the Fordist system of mass production (more pronounced in Sweden compared to Norway and Denmark) was gradually superseded by what some scholars have called a post-industrial hierarchy.¹⁵ It was characterised by a service-led transformation and, perhaps notably for Scandinavia, it was the expansion of the public service sector which took the lead concurrently with a general decline among manual industrial workers.¹⁶

In other words, the state intervened decisively in the economy which changed labour market structures in three distinct ways: firstly, the number of public employees in Denmark and Sweden grew from 12 per cent of the total labour force in 1960 to about 31 per cent in 1980 (in Norway only 22 per cent); secondly, the state created an education system, and institutions for the disabled, the elderly and other welfare state clients; and, thirdly, the job structure of the public service sector was likely to be very feminine, with many women in lower status jobs.¹⁷ Together with the introduction of flat-rate national insurance systems and social security programmes, it implied, on the one hand, that a large part of the population fell outside the reach of market forces and had few economic incentives to join the labour force, but, on the other hand, it also meant that they were exposed to political-administrative control and dependent on political patronage.

14 Lennart Jörberg/Olle Krantz: *Scandinavia 1914–1970*, in: Carlo M. Cipolla (ed.): *The Fontana Economic History of Europe. Contemporary Economies (Part Two)*, Glasgow 1976, pp. 377–459.

15 Gøsta Esping-Andersen: *Post-industrial Class Structure: An Analytical Framework*, in: Gøsta Esping-Andersen (ed.): *Changing Classes. Stratification and Mobility in Post-Industrial Societies*, London 1993, pp. 7–31.

16 Lars Mjøset: *Nordic Economic Policies in the 1970s and 1980s*, in: *International Organization* 41:3 (1987), pp. 403–456.

17 See: *Scandinavian Journal of History* 26:3 (2001), special issue „The Nordic Welfare States 1900–2000“; Walter Korpi: *Velfærdsstat og social medborgerskab. Danmark i et komparativt perspektiv, 1930–1995. Magtudredningen*, Århus 2002.

A last aspect which intervened in the post-1970 labour-market structure concerns the increasing number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and from Third World countries.¹⁸ Originally migrant workers were occupied in heavy industry, but from the 1990s new groups of refugees entered the labour market, where they found jobs in low-paid service, transport and cleaning sectors. However, due to economic restructuring, with fewer jobs available overall, many immigrants were forced into casual jobs or accepting public transfer payments.

In order to discuss what these changes meant for ordinary working-class people and the labour movement, a section on the changing patterns of the standard of living, consumption and saving is interposed. This is to emphasise that the distinctive features of working-class life and identities lie not only in the labour process and the labour market, but also in the structural insecurity and opportunities faced by wage earners.¹⁹

Changing Patterns of Consumption, Savings and Insecurity after 1945

In the half-century before 1970, economic growth entailed a drastic increase in the amount and quality of consumption standards at the collective and individual level. As already noted, the Scandinavian countries were characterised by extensive collective consumption twinned with high tax-levels and income redistribution. The social democratic state was a prime actor in this political-economic strategy, but also the trade unions (particularly in Sweden) mobilised efforts to narrow wage differentials between occupations, regions, industries, and the sexes. After a stagnation of overall industrial output and real wages c. 1973–85, the increase in national income and living standards continued, with minor setbacks, until the present.²⁰ And in spite of greater efforts by Social Democratic or Liberal governments to temper public expenditure and to modernise or privatise the public sector during the 1980s and the 1990s, there is hardly a decline in the public sector or in national insurance schemes. However, what did change and had a significant

18 See: Flemming Mikkelsen (ed.): *Indvandererorganisationer i Norden*, Copenhagen 2003; Flemming Mikkelsen: *Integration und Integrationspolitik in Dänemark 1965 bis 2009*, in: Frank Baasner (ed.): *Migration und Integration in Europa*, Nomos 2010, pp. 167–185; Pieter Bevelander/Sofia Rönnqvist: *Migration und Integration in Schweden*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 187–198.

19 This approach has been suggested by Mike Savage: *Class and Labour History*, in Lex Heerma van Voss & Marcel van der Linden (eds.): *Class and other Identities. Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History*, New York 2002, pp. 55–72.

20 Angus S. Deaton: *The Structure of Demand in Europe 1920–1970*, in: Carlo M. Cipolla (ed.): *The Fontana Economic History of Europe. The Twentieth Century (Part One)*, Glasgow 1976, pp. 89–131; Lars Mjøset (ed.): *Norden dagen derpå. De nordiske økonomisk-politiske modellene og deres problemer på 70- og 80-tallet*, Oslo/Copenhagen 1986.

impact on working-class identity and solidarity concerns consumption, savings and private insurances.

With higher income the relative demand for food and clothing tended to fall, with corresponding rises in durable goods, rents and services. After 1970, this trend accelerated when married women with small children were recruited into the workforce as part-time and full-time wage earners, signifying the dominance of the double-income household.²¹ The bulk of the growing consumption and saving capacity of working-class (and middle-class) families was spent on cars, televisions and other durable goods, but it also enabled them to invest in buying homes and in private insurances.

In the Scandinavian countries housing remained almost exclusively a market commodity, but was constantly an object of political regulation and intervention.²² On the eve of World War II, the housing situation was characterised by serious shortages, overcrowding and antiquated standards. The prime effort of the state, therefore, was to maximise the construction of new dwellings with state loans and other selective programs. Since 1960, government financial regulations and subsidies were reduced, and privatisation of the housing market gained ground, followed by an increasing demand for private, single-family home ownership. This development happened earlier and more completely in Denmark. Private home ownership was rapidly growing among the middle classes, and also became widespread among working-class people, both as a source of “capital accumulation and as a focus for self-provisioning”.²³ The consequences, as noted by Nils Elvander,²⁴ might have been to strengthen embourgeoisement and politically benefit the Liberals and the Conservatives, while harming the Social Democrats in all three countries, primarily in Denmark. Growing privatisation of social security and national pension systems might have similar effects.

As argued above, the 1960s saw the breakthrough of universal social rights as tax financing and state-provided welfare reforms became more dominant. However, the oil crisis in 1973, the economic stagnation during the 1980s, and the influence of international neo-liberalism increased the pressure for a less expensive state, simultaneously more favourable to individually oriented consumers. Thus, during the 1990s, there was a current of market-based solutions and earnings-related social benefits. Today many people, including skilled and unskilled workers, have different kinds of labour-market

21 Klas Åmark: Women's Labour Force Participation in the Nordic Countries during the Twentieth Century, in: Niels Finn Christiansen/Klaus Petersen/Nils Edling/Per Haave (eds.): *The Nordic Model of Welfare*, Copenhagen 2006, pp. 299–333.

22 For a comparative overview see Elvander: *Skandinavisk arbetarrörelse*, pp. 271–277 and Esping-Andersen: *Politics Against Markets*, ch. 6.

23 Ray E. Pahl: *Divisions of Labour*, Oxford 1984, p. 321.

24 Elvander: *Skandinavisk arbetarrörelse*, p. 277.

pensions or tax-deductible pension savings which make them less dependent on public benefits.²⁵

In sum, economic growth, changing labour-market structures, and especially the redistributive capacity of the state changed the way ordinary people coped with insecurity after the War. They tried to balance between collective and individual strategies of risk reduction, which are interrelated and can alternatively undermine or reinforce one another. Having dealt with the socio-economic rationale and its contextual opportunities, the next sections focus on collective action, and the various combinations of formal and informal social organisations workers and employees utilised under shifting national and international power structures.

The Working-Class Movement after 1945: Phases of Mobilisation and Stagnation

The War put a damper on trade unions and Social Democratic political parties in Denmark and Norway, but soon after the peace the labour movements gained renewed momentum, whereas in Sweden the working-class movement maintained its power. The number of trade union members increased steadily until the mid-1980s, followed by stagnation. Union densities were highest in Sweden (1945: 60 per cent, 1985: 81 per cent, 1995: 85 per cent) with Denmark (1945: 50 per cent, 1985: 77 per cent, 1995: 76 per cent) and Norway (1946: 48 per cent, 1985: 57 per cent, 1995: 56 per cent) in second and third positions, respectively.²⁶ Until circa 1970 blue-collar workers were better organised compared to other occupational groups; but since then, white-collar employees, and new labour-market entrants have approached the union density of traditional industrial workers.

The strength of the trade unions corresponded to Social Democratic success at the polls. The Swedish and Norwegian parties managed to gain the support of about 45 per cent of the electorate and the Danish party about 37 per cent, until the end of the 1970s.²⁷ This enabled the Scandinavian Social Democrats to assume office for long periods. However, since the mid-1980s the Social Democratic parties in Sweden and Norway have lost support among the electorate, including working-class voters, and have been

25 Klaus Petersen/Klas Åmark: Old Age Pensions in the Nordic Countries, 1880–2000, in: Niels Finn Christiansen/Klaus Petersen/Nils Edling/Per Haave (eds.): *The Nordic Model of Welfare*, pp. 177–183.

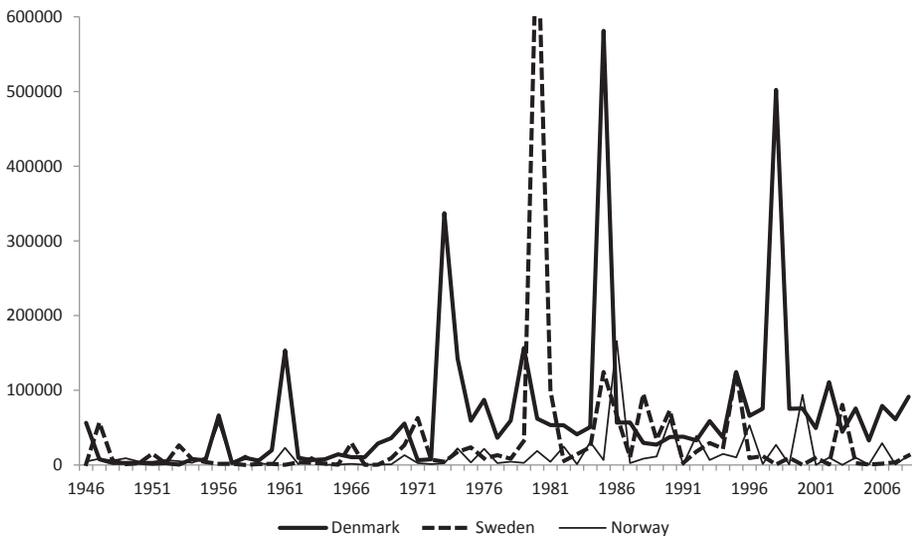
26 Anders Kjellberg: *Facklig organisering i tolv länder*, Lund 1983; Anders Kjellberg: *Fagorganisering i Norge og Sverige i et internasjonalt perspektiv*, in: *Arbeiderhistorie* (1999), pp. 57–83.

27 Karl H. Cerny (ed.): *Scandinavia at the Polls. Recent Political Trends in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden*, Washington 1977.

out of office for several terms. This trend has been most pronounced in Denmark and started already in the early 1970s.²⁸

In contrast to most other European countries, high union density amongst almost all categories of workers, and a firm hand on government (at least until 1980) placed the Scandinavian labour movements in a unique and favourable position from where they formulated a policy which Walter Korpi has called “an economic growth strategy of class conflict”, which also can be seen as a “welfare strategy”.²⁹ According to this argument, the working-class movement aimed at applying its resources to gaining control of the apparatus of the state. State capabilities allowed it to limit the power of capital and to mitigate the social consequences of a partially free market for commodities and labour, regarded as a necessity for efficiency of production. The Social Democratic government guaranteed low levels of unemployment, social security, regulation of prices and working conditions, while the central labour market organisations assured growth in production and real earnings, maintaining low levels of strike and lockout activity.

Figure 1: Industrial Conflicts in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, 1946–2008 (Number of Participants)



Sources: For the years 1946–1970, Statistics Denmark (D.S.), Statistics Sweden (S.O.S.) and Statistics Norway (N.O.S.). For the years 1971–2008, International Labour Organization (ILO).

28 Oddbjørn Knutsen: *Class Voting in Western Europe*, Oxford 2006.

29 Walter Korpi: *The Working Class in Welfare Capitalism. Work, Unions and Politics in Sweden*, London 1978, ch. 4.

These mutual obligations between (Social Democratic) governments, workers and employers worked quite well until the end of the 1960s, when international price inflation put a strain on real wages, and the employers intensified the modernisation and reorganisation of the production plant. It resulted in a moderate increase in strike activity in Norway, while the number of strikes and strikers in Denmark and Sweden rocketed.³⁰ In all three countries work-stoppages related primarily to collective bargaining at the national or sectional level, but the Swedish and, even more so, the Danish labour market also experienced an outburst of wildcat and politically motivated demonstration strikes. Although the volume of lost working days declined after the mid-1980s, strike activity did not return to the pre-1968 level but remained high, even in a European context.³¹ This is especially true in the expansive public sector. During the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s, public employees (and to a lesser extent other parts of the service sector) displayed a more independent bargaining position. They adopted the working class' preferred mode of organisation, the trade union, and learned to use the strike-weapon.

Social Movement Unionism: Grassroots Activity in the Labour Movement

In Denmark, Norway and Sweden the existing unions were tied to long-term wage contracts at the national level that strongly restricted their mobilisation capacity. Therefore, the number of legal union-sponsored strikes remained low, whereas illegal industrial actions grew during the protest cycle. These strikes were not officially supported or otherwise subsidised by the trade unions, but relied on small, local and somewhat unstructured types of organisation, also called "base organisations" or "action networks". And if these action networks over a period of time managed to challenge the employers, the established unions, and the government we may talk about "social movement unionism". It made a breakthrough in Denmark and Sweden during the years 1968–85, but never manifested itself to the same extent in Norway.³²

A detailed study of Denmark, 1976–79, shows that while the local shop committees and joint shop-steward committees within the same line of business provided for regular contacts, security, and conditions of work, they also prepared the claims, the timing,

30 For a comparative analysis see Mikkelsen: *Arbejdskonflikter i Skandinavien 1848–1980*; Torgeir Aarvaag Stokke/Christer Thörnqvist: *Strikes and Collective Bargaining in the Nordic Countries*, in: *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 7:3 (2001), pp. 245–267.

31 Steen Scheuer: *Strejker i Europa*, in: *LO-Dokumentation* 2 (2004).

32 Finn Olstad: *Arbejderklassens vekst og fall*, Oslo 1991, pp. 160–161; Torgeir Aarvaag Stokke: *Norske streiker – typer og omfang*, in: *Sosiologisk tidsskrift* 7:1 (1999), pp. 22–44

and coordination of strikes.³³ If all the units of production in the same firm or company were closed down simultaneously, the employers were prevented from transferring part of the manufacturing to other plants, and were put under severe economic pressure. Therefore, many of these strikes tended to be very short. This pattern was found where strikes were launched in fairly small groups, whereas multiple conflicts with more than twenty establishments clearly indicate the active presence of unions with shop stewards in a leading role.

Most short-lived stoppages did not need any organisational or financial backing, for which reason it was around the long and heavy conflicts that external support networks tended to develop. Often these networks were of a mere *ad hoc* character, but if one of these struggles was superseded by another, the workers' mutual solidarity would take on a more permanent form and become institutionalised. It was primarily workers at other plants who constituted the backbone of the support networks, which developed into a Communist, a federal, and a left-wing faction. One of the most successful and effective movements evolved around shop-stewards. Shop-stewards were not tied to the legal system of industrial relations, and by forming movements in close contacts with formal trade unions, they were in an advantageous position when striking workers needed support from colleagues and the public. The shop-steward movement was operative in many industries, and had its heyday towards the end of the 1970s.

The Swedish labour market was likewise characterised by an increase in the number of unofficial strikes during the 1970s. Most of these strikes were small, short and unofficial: "on the whole [...] the strikes can be characterised as demonstration stoppages, usually involving only a department or a small proportion of the workers in a larger firm".³⁴ It was wage claims which set off the bulk of stoppages, and high inflation appears to have played a crucial role. However, it is also possible to detect a negotiation cycle in the strike trend, because strike peaks often occurred shortly after the termination of central agreements in the labour market.

Strike levels have been highest in unions with long traditions, and an established, well-developed organisation in the workplace, which has brought the workers into close contact with the local wage negotiations.³⁵ The strike wave drew the attention of left-wing factions who gave support to unofficial strikes, collected money, and sometimes

33 Hans H. Nielsen/Arne J. Rolighed: Strejker og fagopposition i 1970'erne, in: Flemming Mikkelsen (ed.): *Protest og oprør. Kollektive aktioner i Danmark 1700–1985*, Århus 1986, pp. 211–231; Flemming Mikkelsen: *Cycles of Struggle and Innovations in Industrial Relations in Denmark after World War II*, in: *Scandinavian Journal of History* 22:1 (1997), pp. 31–51.

34 Walter Korpi: *Unofficial Strikes in Sweden*, in: *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 19:1 (1981), pp. 66–86, p. 68.

35 Christer Thörnqvist: *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken. Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deres bakgrund, förlopp och följder*, Göteborg 1994.

were in charge of the strike board; but, except in Denmark, it is unlikely that the militants were able to manipulate strike activity.³⁶ In Denmark, radical left-wing action networks held a stronger position, and managed to prolong strike mobilisation in the private sector, and sometimes to dominate strike activity in the public sector too. However, in most cases the action networks did not act independently, but relied heavily on the resources the trade unions, directly or indirectly, made available in the form of money, communication technologies, knowledge, political connections, strategies, and manpower such as shop stewards.³⁷

In sum, tensions within the labour movement and the existence of social movement unionism were more pronounced in Denmark compared to Sweden and, even more so, Norway. A weaker Social Democratic party, a stronger left-wing opposition, and a decentralisation of collective bargaining, including a greater willingness to accept wildcat strikes, provided the most fertile ground in Denmark, whereas centralised wage determination and legal restrictions put a damper on both legal and illegal work stoppages in Norway. Sweden took up a position in the middle, and, as with Denmark, witnessed a politicisation of industrial relations, which also raised an intense debate about nationalisation, inequality and wealth concentration.

Besides schemes for worker control in the 1950s, the Norwegian labour movement did not contemplate economic democracy, while the Social Democrats in Denmark and Sweden launched a proposal for “economic democracy” as an attempt to increase equality in the distribution of property without attacking the pattern of ownership directly. These plans, however, faced severe hostility from the employers and virtually all sections of the political spectrum, and were finally withdrawn at the end of the 1970s, after they had been diluted to traditional profit-sharing plans.³⁸ So the impact of workplace militancy and a radical public opinion on industrial democracy was ultimately limited, and when the length and seriousness of the economic recession since 1973 became clear, industrial policy and managerial investment strategies became more important.³⁹

36 Ibid. p. 104; Kjell Österberg: 1968 när allting var i rörelse, Stockholm 2002, pp. 126–131.

37 Flemming Mikkelsen: Unions and New Shopfloor Strike Strategies and Learning Processes among Public Employees, in: *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 19:3 (1998), pp. 505–538.

38 Olstad: Arbejderklassens vekst og fall; Bernt Schiller: Samarbete eller konflikt, Stockholm 1988; Niels Dalgaard: Ved demokratiets grænser. Demokratisering af arbejdslivet i Danmark 1919–1994, København 1995; Flemming Mikkelsen: Demokrati i arbejdslivet set i et historisk-sociologisk perspektiv, in: *Arbejderhistorie* 3 (2011), pp. 81–99.

39 M. Donald Hancock/John Logue/Bernt Schiller: Introduction: The Transformation of Modern Capitalism, in: M. Donald Hancock/John Logue/Bernt Schiller (eds.): *Managing Modern Capitalism. Industrial Renewal and Workplace Democracy in the United States and Western Europe*, New York/London 1991, pp. xi–xxi.

The Labour Movement and Other Movements

Social movement unionism represented an organisational, political and ideological alternative to the established trade unions, often with ramifications to other political and social movements. These movements had their heydays from 1968 until the mid-1980s, and coincided with the industrial protest cycle. They often developed as a form of opposition to the government in office and the dominant political parties. It was not a new phenomenon but instead went back to the mid-19th century. In this section, I begin with the situation just after the end of the Second World War, which was marked by growing political tensions between East and West.

Sweden chose a neutral position in the international political system, whereas the public debate in Denmark and Norway was characterised by much soul-searching about their international political and economic orientations. Both countries eventually decided on the protective shield of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, and, at the same time, indicated the liberal orientation of their economic policy when they accepted funds from the European Recovery Programme (Marshall Aid). This decision was met by violent opposition from many Norwegians and Danes, not least the Communists and former members of the resistance movement. Since then, in all three countries, international relations have been a controversial political issue. In other words, it was not the deprived, the socio-economically marginalised or the middle-class who took to the streets, it was the “political losers” who led the way, organised and articulated the opposition.⁴⁰ They opened up new political channels and introduced alternative forms of political organisation and tactics, and they learned to utilise opportunities in the international system.

The Social Democrats and the Communists had been at odds during the 1930s, and, in Denmark, during the Second World War. With the Communists strengthened after the War, new confrontations emerged. The Communists were heavily involved in the resistance against the Atlantic Pact; they organised protest marches against rearmament, established peace organisations and supported striking workers, much to the annoyance of the Social Democrats.⁴¹ They were also active in the reaction to the resumption of nuclear testing by the United States, France and the Soviet Union, 1956–64. However, the Cold War and the Soviet invasion in Hungary 1956 seriously weakened the Communists in all three countries. Soon new international tensions such as the Algerian

40 Johan P. Olsen/Harald Sætren: *Aksjoner og demokrati*, Bergen 1980; Flemming Mikkelsen: *Contention and Social Movements in an International and Transnational Perspective: Denmark, 1914–1995*, in: *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12:2 (1999), pp. 128–157.

41 On Norway see Lars Rowe: *Fredskamp og maktkamp i arbeiderorganisasjonene*, in: *Arbeiderhistorie* (2000), pp. 101–115; and on Denmark see Søren Hein Rasmussen: *Sære alliancer. Politiske bevægelser i efterkrigstidens Danmark*, Odense 1997, ch. 2.

struggle for liberation, the apartheid regime in South Africa and the fight against nuclear rearmament were able to muster new critical followers who, before long, were united in protest against the United States' bombing raids and military intervention in Vietnam.⁴² The Vietnam War radicalised thousands of young people and, basically, created the "New Left" with contacts and sympathisers among the Social Democrats and the Liberals. To start with, they ardently opposed the Social Democrats, who, in Norway and Denmark, sided with the US policy; later they half-heartedly accepted the Vietnam Movement.

The New Left was active after the "1968" cycle of protest emerged, the main actors being students, squatters and a host of protest groups, including the women's movement. They were labelled "New Social Movements", and represented a wide spectrum of social, occupational and professional groups and interests with many connections to trade unions and left-wing political parties.⁴³ In Sweden and Denmark the strike upheaval between 1968 and 1986 spread out to other sectors and caused a further radicalisation of the New Left.⁴⁴ The core of the 1968 revolt was, in Denmark, the student movement and the squatter movement, whereas in Norway the Movement against the European Economic Community, and in Sweden the Maoist movement were able to unite and coordinate political and countercultural activities. In brief, the events of 1968 had mobilised new sectors and groups, and triggered a general increase in political activism and political participation. New issues were debated in the public space, people became engaged in foreign policy, including the political and economic situation of Third World countries, and new attitudes gained ground above all among the younger generation. After some years the 68 upheaval lost vigour, but it had started a new round of political mobilisation and created a new repertoire of collective action which has put a lasting mark on political participation ever since.⁴⁵ And although the Scandinavian labour movements and the Scandinavian version of corporatism managed to integrate or to neutralise the challenge

42 Johannes Nordentoft/Søren H. Rasmussen: *Kampagnen mod Atomvåben og Vietnambevægelsen 1960–1972*, Odense 1991; Östberg: *1968 när allting var i rörelse*; James Godbolt: *AUF og Vietnam-protesten. Motsetninger og samarbeid i norsk solidaritetsarbeid*, in: *Arbetshistoria* 1–2 (2005), pp. 75–81.

43 Thomas Ekman Jørgensen: *Scandinavia*, in: Martin Klimke/Joachim Scharloth (eds.): *1968 in Europe. A History of Protest and Activism, 1956–1977*, New York 2008, pp. 239–252.

44 Östberg: *1968 när allting var i rörelse*, pp. 126–131; Flemming Mikkelsen: *Kollektive aktioner og politiske bevægelser i Danmark efter Anden Verdenskrig*, in: Flemming Mikkelsen (ed.): *Bevægelser i demokrati. Foreninger og kollektive aktioner i Danmark*, Århus 2002, pp. 45–80.

45 Janerik Gidlund: *Aktionsgrupper och lokala partier. Temporära politiska organisationer i Sverige 1965–1975*, Umeå 1978; Lise Tøgeby: *Ens og forskellig. Græsrodsdeltagelse i Norden*, Århus 1989; Mikkelsen, *Contention and Social Movements*; Kjell Erling Kjellman: *Mobilization and Protest in a Consensus Democracy. Social Movements, the State, and Political Opportunities in Norway*, Oslo 2007.

from the New Left and the opposition in the labour market, i. e. social movement unionism, the Social Democratic Party in Denmark after 1973 was exposed to stern pressure from a newly established centre party, the Centre Democrats, and a right-wing rival, the Progress Party, which together accounted for approximately 24 per cent of the voters, among them many former Social Democrats.

New social movements and political opposition from the left and the right, most notably in Denmark, represented a political and cultural challenge to the traditional labour movement; however, other forms of organisation were subject to alterations and represented a much larger share of the population under the notion of civic association. The Scandinavian countries have been regarded as the lands of voluntary associations, and we can locate the origin of modern associations to the second half of the 19th century.⁴⁶

Around the turn of the 20th century, networks of civic engagement were divided into a liberal, a rural and an urban working-class sector. This trend was reinforced in the following decades and reached its widest distribution during the 1950s. Henceforth, demographic, economic and political changes undermined class divisions, which were replaced by associations based on narrower and closer bonds of solidarity.⁴⁷ Transition to the affluent society led to an increase in the number of associations for leisure and cultural interests as well as community organisations, at the expense of religious organisations (especially in Norway, where earlier religious societies amounted to a large proportion of the total number of associations) and traditional broad humanitarian groups. This trend was first visible in Denmark, due to the earlier economic modernisation, while Norway followed suit twenty to thirty years later.⁴⁸ The new forms of associations became more subordinate to the market, they very seldom engaged in transgressive political action and when they did take part in low-profile routine politics, it was no longer as agents of class interests and class identity.

Since the mid-1960s immigrants and refugees from Southern and Eastern Europe and from countries outside Europe have entered the Scandinavian labour market and welfare system. They initially joined established trade unions or they set up small immigrant asso-

46 Henrik Stenius: Nordic Associational Life in a European and an Inter-Nordic Perspective, in: Risto Alapuro/Henrik Stenius (eds.): *Nordic Associations in a European Perspective*, Baden-Baden 2010, pp. 29–86.

47 Kurt Klaudi Klausen/Per Selle (eds.): *Frivillig organisering i Norden*, Oslo 1995; Lars Skov Henriksen/Bjarne Ibsen (eds.): *Frivillighedens udfordringer – nordisk forskning om frivilligt arbejde og frivillige organisationer*, Odense 2001; Dag Wollebæk/Per Selle: *Det nye organisasjonssamfunnet. Demokrati i omforming*, Bergen 2002.

48 Dag Wollebæk/Bjarne Ibsen/Martii Siisiäinen: *Voluntary Associations at the Local Level in Three Nordic Countries*, in: Risto Alapuro/Henrik Stenius (eds.): *Nordic Associations in a European Perspective*, Baden-Baden 2010, pp. 121–150. No comparable data on voluntary associations exist for Sweden.

ciations sponsored and controlled by the institutions of the host society. After a while they began to gather round autonomous, social, cultural, religious and political organisations; immigrant associations in Sweden adjusted to the corporatist membership model.⁴⁹

Immigrants were assimilated into the national political systems especially through their participation in local and national elections, but the presence of different ethnic groups and a new underclass also created a window of opportunity for far-right movements and political parties to exploit. Thus, the first major incident of racist protest and violence took place in Denmark in 1985, when several hundred Danes attacked a group of Iranian refugees. In Norway and Sweden racist violence started three to four years later, and reached alarming heights, especially in Sweden.⁵⁰ Right-wing political parties soon connected to xenophobic sentiments in the population and sharpened their nationalistic rhetoric, and, as was the case in Denmark, formed rather successful political parties from the early 1970s – i. e. the Progress Party and the Danish People's Party – with the outspoken aim to marginalise immigrants, who, after the turn of the millennium, have been referred to as “Muslims”. Similar nativist parties were founded in Norway and Sweden. In Norway the Progress Party became the third largest party with 15 per cent of the vote in 2001, whereas the Sweden Democrats in the 2010 general election polled 5.7 per cent and won 20 parliamentary seats.⁵¹ Overall, the latest immigration to the Scandinavian countries resulted in a further division of the working class and caused a new cleavage structure which has weakened the hegemonic position of the Social Democratic parties.

The Scandinavian Working Class between Globalisation, Internationalisation, Long Waves and State Systems

During the interwar period, the Scandinavian economies and labour markets were affected by serious recessions and very high levels of unemployment. Shops and factories were closed down and workers dismissed. The post-war era saw shortage and austerity succeeded by economic boom years, stagnation and renewed abundance, concomitant with wide-ranging restructuring of the labour market, most recently globalisation.

49 Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal: *Limits of Citizenship. Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*, Chicago 1994, ch. 5–6; Flemming Mikkelsen (ed.): *Indvandrerorganisationer i Norden*, Copenhagen 2003; Bo Bengtsson (ed.): *Föreningsliv, makt och integration*, Stockholm 2004; Flemming Mikkelsen: *Transnational identitet under förändring. Indvandrenes sociale, religiøse og politiske mobilisering i Danmark 1965–2010*, Copenhagen 2011.

50 Tore Bjørgo: *Racist and Right-Wing Violence in Scandinavia*, Oslo 1997.

51 Jens Rydgren (ed.): *Movements of Exclusion. Radical Right-Wing Populism in the Western World*, New York 2005; Jytte Klausen: *The Islamic Challenge. Politics and Religion in Western Europe*, Oxford 2005.

The debate on *globalisation* and how it is creating a new social order has sometimes coincided with the discussion of the disaggregation of the working class, resulting in predictions of the end of class conflict. The diagnosis rests on several empirical processes and presumptions: a resurgence of capitalism – an undermining of state capacity to guarantee workers' rights – a shift from collectivism towards individualism – a growing internationalisation of labour markets – a growing fragmentation and heterogeneity of the labour force – a lack of organisational solidarity and the declining political power of labour.⁵²

Before trying to untangle the problem, we should keep in mind Richard Hyman's words that "the plausibility of the disaggregation thesis depends heavily on a mythologised vision of the past: a golden age when workers were spontaneously collectivist, and labour organisations joined ranks behind a unifying class project."⁵³ As a general rule, labour is atomised and divided by competition,⁵⁴ and the past and present stratification of the working class has been marked by regionalism, skill, ethnicity, religion, culture, language and gender.⁵⁵ Besides, as I referred to above, labour and labour markets have gone through major crises and upheavals during the 20th century, which puts the present debate on globalisation into its proper perspective.

This is not to say that globalisation only represents small adjustments to the development of the economic and political world system. On the contrary, as Charles Tilly rightly points out:

Our world is becoming increasingly unequal and proletarian [...] Globalization forwards proletarianization and increasing inequality on a world scale, and may do so within the jurisdictions of individual states as well. If labor does not find ways of organizing effectively at the scale of international capital, one of our era's great achievements [...] runs the risk of trampling by capital's new oligarchies.⁵⁶

- 52 See: Marino Regini (ed.): *The Future of the Labour Movements*, London 1992, and the discussion in Anthony Ferner/Richard Hyman: *Introduction: Towards European Industrial Relations?*, in: Anthony Ferner/Richard Hyman (eds.): *Changing Industrial Relations in Europe*, Oxford 1998, pp. xvi-xlix.
- 53 Richard Hyman: *Trade Unions and the Disaggregation of the Working Class*, in: Marino Regini (ed.): *The Future of the Labour Movements*, London 1992, pp. 150–168, p. 159.
- 54 Claus Offe/Helmut Wessenthal: *Two Logics of Collective Action*, in: Claus Offe: *Disorganized Capitalism*. Cambridge 1985, p. 178.
- 55 Stefan Berger: *European Labour Movements and the European Working Class in Comparative Perspective*, in: Stefan Berger/David Broughton (eds.): *The Force of Labour. The Western European Labour Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford 1995, pp. 245–261.
- 56 Charles Tilly: *Globalization Threatens Labor's Rights*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 47 (1995), pp. 1–23, p. 22.

However, from the perspective of the Scandinavian working class and the labour movement the threats look slightly different.

Until now, only few changes in the economic infrastructure of the Scandinavian countries have been caused by what we normally associate with economic globalisation, and in those cases the effect has been marginal. More far-reaching transformations of the Scandinavian welfare states go back to the Reagan and the Thatcher era of the 1980s, and even more the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which intensified market-based solutions to social problems, and brought new strength to capitalism and liberal ideas even in Scandinavia.⁵⁷ Besides, the European Union has intensified economic competition, increased the mobility of the labour force and, in general, strengthened corporate capitalism. The recent expansion of the European Union to Eastern Europe may intensify these tendencies. So, instead of talking about globalisation as an all-encompassing master process, it will be more helpful to use the term *internationalisation* with special reference to the European Union.

The more specific charges against globalisation and economic internationalisation concern growing inequality in the distribution of income; massive structural unemployment; greater employment instability; a more negative evolution in unskilled labour conditions; a dismantling of public services and an eroding of the “provider state”.⁵⁸ The Scandinavian working class has not been immune to these trends; but has, so far, been able to counteract and neutralise the negative evolution using collective and individual strategies. In general, working-class people have become less dependent on public benefit – whereas middle-class people have become more frequent receivers of social security – and those who are affected by social contingency still receive substantial economic compensation. The guarantee for these social rights lies with part of the middle class, an alliance with the state and a shaky compromise with capital; ultimately it rests on the organisational power of the working class, including public employees.⁵⁹

This balance of power secures, on the one hand, an active labour market policy, the prerogative of managerial investment strategies and modernisation of the public bureaucracy, and, on the other, ensures basic social and economic rights of labour and an active

57 Colin Crouch: *Social Change in Western Europe*, Oxford 1999; Don Kalb: *Localizing Flows: Power, Paths, Institutions, and Networks*, in: Don Kalb/Marco van der Land/Richard Staring/Bart van Steenberg/Nico Wilterdink (eds.): *The Ends of Globalization. Bringing Society Back In*, Lanham 2000, pp. 1–29, p. 9.

58 Paul Bairoch: *The Constituent Economic Principles of Globalization in Historical Perspective. Myths and Realities*, in: *International Sociology* 15:2 (2000), pp. 197–214.

59 For a similar argument see Erik Olin Wright: *Class Compromise, Globalization, and Technological Change*, in: Don Kalb/Marco van der Land/Richard Staring/Bart van Steenberg/Nico Wilterdink (eds.): *The Ends of Globalization. Bringing Society Back In*, Lanham 2000, pp. 87–106.

participation of working-class organisations in the reform work. If the equilibrium between labour and capital is being disturbed, it does not come from within the Scandinavian societies, but is caused by changes in the international political and economic system, primarily the EU. From a theoretical point of view, it brings us closer to dependency and world-system theorists, who argue “that ‘national’ labor movements are linked to each other in a chain of causation by the world-scale division of labor and interstate system.”⁶⁰

There are so many similarities in industrial relations across countries that we with some advantage can introduce the idea of *long waves*, and subsidiary *business cycles*, for analysis of union organisation, strikes, collective bargaining and protest movements.⁶¹ However, the empirical evidence for regular long waves and changing industrial relations are still a contentious topic, whereas there seems to be stronger support for longer but nonperiodic movements induced by the business cycle.⁶² But to focus mainly on world-scale economic processes would be a mistake; the state and especially the interstate system definitely set the terms for labour. In a Scandinavian context, the state intervened decisively in the class structure, and the interstate system regulated the market and set the stage for the capital-labour nexus.

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60 Beverly J. Silver: Labor Unrest and World-Systems Analysis, in: Review XVIII:1 (1995), pp. 155–192.

61 John Kelly: Long Waves in Industrial Relations: Mobilization and Counter-Mobilization in Historical Perspective, in: Historical Studies in Industrial Relations 4 (1997), pp. 3–35.

62 Martin Paldam/Peder J. Pedersen: The Large Pattern of Industrial Conflict – A Comparative Study of 18 Countries, 1919–79, in: International Journal of Social Economics 11:5 (1984), pp. 3–28; Flemming Mikkelsen: Industrial Conflict in Scandinavia 1848–1990, in: Pauli Ket-tunen (ed.): Strike and Social Change, Turku 1993, pp. 27–52; Roberto Franzosi: The Puzzle of Strikes. Class and State Strategies in Postwar Italy, Cambridge 1995.