Chapter 7
Swedish trade unions and the ETUC

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This chapter builds on previous literature, as well as interviews with key union actors to give an overview of Swedish unions’ work within the ETUC since 1973. Concerning this historical framework, the most fundamental study to date is the labour historian Klaus Misgeld’s 1997 book Den fackliga europavägen (The unions’ road to Europe), the definitive archival study of Swedish unions and European union cooperation in the period 1945–1991. The period after 1991 is covered in the present chapter on the basis of interviews with union officials, trade union publications and the recent literature on unions and Europeanisation and globalisation. The chapter is structured as follows. Section 1 outlines the national context, with three characteristics that, I would argue, are necessary to understand the relationship between Swedish unions and the ETUC. Section 2 discusses the developments from the start in 1973 up to the mid-1980s. Section 3 depicts the development since the mid-1980s. Sections 4 and 5 discuss the developments since the 1990s thematically: first the practical and organisational issues, then the policy issues. Section 6 concludes.

1. National context

1.1. Three confederations

There are three trade union confederations in Sweden: LO, TCO and Saco. LO organise blue-collar workers, TCO white-collar workers and Saco professionals. Historically, LO (formed in 1898) was the by far largest and most important confederation, but in the past twenty years or so its relative importance has decreased, as TCO
(formed 1944) and Saco (formed 1947) have grown and LO membership has shrunk due to economic restructuring – the increasing weight of white-collar employees and academics in the economy – as well as decreasing unionisation. The share of union members belonging to an LO union decreased from 81 per cent in 1950 to 63 per cent in 1980 and 48 per cent in 2008 (author’s calculations from statistics in Golden et al. 2009, complemented by newer statistics from the organisations’ annual reports). LO is still the largest confederation, but not so dominant as it once was.

LO and TCO are cofounding members of the ETUC, while Saco did not join until 1996. Before that its membership was blocked by the competing union TCO; TCO and Saco both organise groups of employees such as teachers (interview ÅZ). Saco instead worked within the European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI), which was formed in 1990. As long as they could not joint the ETUC, Saco figured that they could find international cooperation and influence in CESI instead. However, since joining the ETUC in 1997 – the opposition within TCO to a Saco membership had withered away – Saco have quickly integrated and now it seems a very long time ago that TCO ever blocked their membership. According to some analysts (Bieler and Lindberg 2008: 209) the Saco unions are today more positive and proactive than their counterparts – especially from the LO – when it comes to European integration. This reflects the typical class pattern in attitudes to European integration; the better educated are more supportive of the integration process (Fligstein 2008). In the LO there has traditionally been more euroscepticism than in the other unions; before the 1994 referendum only six of the then 21 unions within the LO supported Swedish EU membership; one union was against and 14 were neutral (Lundgren Rydén 2000: 242). Blue-collar workers were much more likely to vote ‘no’ than white-collar workers or professionals. Among LO members 37 per cent voted yes, 61 per cent no (Lundgren Rydén: 255–56). TCO and Saco members were and are more EU positive (Holmberg 2013).

1.2. Outsidersness and scepticism

Sweden did not join the European Union until 1995 and traditionally the Swedish labour movement was rather skeptical towards European integration. This skepticism was based on two factors in particular: the cherished neutrality policy in international relations and a focus on the national welfare state (cf. Miles 2001). The classic expression of this stance towards European integration comes from the famous speech by then Social Democratic Prime Minister Tage Erlander at the Metal Workers’ Union congress in 1961, three weeks after Great Britain had applied for membership of the EEC (Bergqvist 2009). Erlander was negative towards Swedish EEC membership because of Sweden’s neutrality policy, free trade and economic policy. Erlander’s skepticism towards European integration was famously expressed in the ‘three Socialism’: the EEC was perceived as conservative, capitalist and Catholic (cf. Lundgren Rydén 2000: 25; Miles 2001; Larsson 2008: 177). This parallels the attitudes in Nordic societies in general, which have been ‘reluctant Europeans’ (Lundgren Rydén 2000: 23). Similar opinions have been present in the British labour movement as well, as Hyman (in this volume) shows. When a Swedish trade union official (Björn Pettersson) went to Brussels in 1982 to become deputy general secretary of the ETUC, he experienced that the European colleagues were still doubtful about the Swedes’ commitment due to Erlander’s speech in 1961 (Misgeld 1997: 382, 170).
In the postwar period Swedes, not the least in the labour movement, often found their social model superior to those of other Europeans (cf. Misgeld 1997: 344; Larsson 2008: 175–76). The Swedish unions’ positions in European cooperation are clearly shaped by the unique Nordic labour market model that they take such pride in, as well as the fact that the country did not join the EU until 1995. We must also emphasise the particular interests of the Swedish unions in protecting the labour market model/industrial relations system, minimum wage setting and selective incentives for membership. As Vandaele and Glassner (2012: 7) observe, ‘the specific characteristics of European industrial relations regimes influence unionists’ interests and strategies’. This is true in the Swedish case: their high opinion about their own labour market model clearly shapes their involvement in union cooperation and policy at the European level. Misgeld’s (1997: 49) conclusion in 1997 was that ‘the [Swedish] union movement’s attitude to European issues ... has traditionally been restrained, not to say ungenerous’ (cf. Larsson 2012: 155). In the 1950s and 1960s the Swedes were mostly interested in free trade issues when it comes to international cooperation (Misgeld 1997: 29). Although the Swedes’ interest in transnational cooperation became wider and deeper in the 1970s and 1980s, they have never become friends of the idea of deep transnational integration. Instead, the Swedes often want to keep the important decision-making on a national level, and defend their own famous labour market model (Vandaele and Glassner 2012). The Nordic unionists, says one study, prefer ‘exporting their own [Nordic] approach to industrial relations rather than learning from others’ (Larsson et al. 2012: 46; cf. Vandaele and Glassner 2012: 21). Lovén (2012) in another article goes so far as to say that ‘since the ETUC was formed in 1973 the overarching goal for the Nordic trade union movement’s engagement in the organisation has, typically enough, been to safeguard the Nordic social partners and collective agreement model’ (Cf. Svensson and Jacobsson 2009: 16; Andersen 2006). The Swedish and Nordic unions are typically less interested in deeper transnational cooperation than their southern European counterparts (Vandaele and Glassner 2012; Larsson et al. 2012). This issue of the defensive or reactive character of Swedish unions’ European engagement will be a recurring theme in this chapter. It is worth noting, however, that there are sectoral variations within Sweden; typically, the metal workers – active in an international industry – are more engaged (cf. Blomqvist and Murhem 2003: 163f; Andersen 2006; Furåker and Bengtsson 2013).

Furthermore, as I discuss below, the Swedish labour market model has over the past two to three decades become more similar to European counterparts (Baccaro and Howell 2011). From 2000 to 2010 union density decreased from 81 to 71 per cent (Kjellberg 2013), and the political influence of unions decreased, albeit from a very high level (Lindvall 2012). If the position of Swedish unions is weakened at home, it is likely that their interest in European cooperation will grow (cf. Bieler and Lindberg 2008).

1.3. Nordic alliances

As discussed above, the Swedes have historically been ‘reluctant Europeans’. The relationship with the neighbouring Nordic countries is more straightforward, also with regard to trade union issues. The strength of the bonds between the Nordic unions in the ETUC go all the way back to the confederation’s foundation: before the founding conference of the ETUC in 1973, the Nordic participants had already founded the Council of Nordic Trade Unions.
The founding members of CNTU were six confederations from four countries: LO from Denmark, SAK/FFC and TOC from Finland, LO from Norway, and LO and TCO from Sweden. Today CNTU has 17 members, including confederations from the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland. Saco joined in 1996.

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During the formation of the ETUC, then LO chairman Arne Geijer, a convinced internationalist, was quite active and involved in several coalitions seeking to shape the organisation. The British TUC and the Nordic delegates were united in wanting an open ETUC, for example, not including the anti-communist code word ‘free’ in the name of the new organisation and also welcoming Christian unions as members. The Nordics also obviously had a special interest in welcoming as many unions from EFTA countries as possible into the ETUC, so that the organisation would not become exclusively focused on the EC (Misgeld 1997: 133, 152). When it came to welcoming Catholic and communist unions, the Nordic stance was probably due to a preference to have as broad an organisation as possible (cf. Dølvik, in this volume). The Nordics and the TUC also agreed on the need to focus more on central confederations within the ETUC and less on industry unions, in contrast to the Germans who wanted to put more emphasis on sectoral cooperation.

The Swedish unions’ position within the ETUC was not very strong; coming from an EFTA country, their position was weak in two ways. One, it was difficult for EFTA unions to make themselves heard within the ETUC, and two, it was difficult for the ETUC to have an influence on EFTA (Misgeld 1997: 145, 170–74). The Swedish unions were annoyed that the EFTA countries were ‘forgotten’ within the ETUC. A telling anecdote in this regard is that twice in the 1970s LO general secretary Rune Molin, an ETUC board member, protested against the lack of interpreters for Nordic languages at board meetings (Misgeld 1997: 386). There was also skepticism towards the ETUC within LO; with union officials highly skeptical regarding the ETUC’s efficiency and some considering the ETUC in the 1970s to be a ‘yellow organisation’, in the sense that it was too close to the Brussels elite (Misgeld 1997: 385). The typical Swedish attitude to the ETUC in this time was pragmatic, characterised by a reluctance to embrace grandiose goals and an emphasis on ‘realism’. As Dølvik (this volume) points out, the Swedish LO was more skeptical about European integration during this time than their Nordic colleagues. LO and TCO mostly wanted the ETUC to act as a distributor of information, assisting national unions, and not so much as an actor in its own right (Misgeld 1997: 174). Dølvik (1997: 172) makes a distinction between “Euro-pragmatists”, mainly seeing the ETUC as a means to improving transnational union coordination and counterpower, and “Euro-idealists”, mainly seeing the ETUC as an instrument in constructing a unified, supranational Europe. The Swedish unions are an archetypical case of Euro-pragmatists in this sense. Below I shall discuss four issues on which LO, by far the largest Swedish union confederation during the period, disagreed with the ETUC’s approach during the 1970s and 1980s: the European days of action, working time reduction as employment policy, European social policy and wage restraint strategies.

The first example of the Swedish unions’ coldness towards ETUC initiatives is the so-called European day of action, initiated in 1978. The European day of action is supposed to be a Europe-wide day of strikes, demonstrations and political activities by unions. However, in 1978 the Swedes were unimpressed by this idea, which did not fit their idea of being ‘constructive’, and did not take part in 1978 (Misgeld 1997: 203). The prototypical Swedish attitude on this topic is that union strength does not derive from demonstrations but from more mundane day-to-day work (Misgeld 1997: 336). This illustrates some of the cultural and methodological differences between Swedish trade unions and their European colleagues. When Swedish trade unions had a very strong position in both the labour market and politics they were reluctant to strike and demonstrate (other than on 1 May). A recent political science analysis speculates that the current weakening of the unions might make Swedish industrial relations more conflictual and increase the likelihood of political strikes.
In a sense, such a development would make Swedish unions more alike their ETUC colleagues.

The second point of disagreement was on LO’s most important issue within the ETUC at that time, employment policy. LO disagreed with the ETUC’s position that working time reduction could be an employment-enhancing reform (Misgeld 1997: 214; Svensson and Jacobsson 2009: 69–70). As with many issues in international trade union cooperation, this has been on the agenda for a long time and with the same divisions of opinion: at the ETUC congress in Brussels in 1995 the Nordic unions still voiced the same dissatisfaction with the ETUC’s pro-working time reduction policy (Dølvik 1997: 410).

The third issue on which the Swedish LO found itself disagreeing with many unions in the ETUC in the late 1970s and 1980s was the development towards a European transnational social policy, which LO did not want (Misgeld 1997: 227). Integration and harmonisation were seen as favouring a lowering of standards. LO opposed the Commission president Jacques Delors’ ambition of getting rid of the national veto in social policy decisions within the EC, even though of course Sweden was not a member at this time.

The fourth issue was wage policy, as discussed in the Val Duchesse dialogue. The first document produced by the social partners ETUC and UNICE within the Val Duchesse dialogue, initiated by Delors, contained a statement in favour of real wage increases lower than productivity increases, to create jobs (Misgeld 1997: 238–39). LO disagreed vehemently with this policy prescription. At this point the Swedish unions were themselves not involved in the Val Duchesse talks as Sweden was not a member of the EC. At the ETUC board meeting of December 1987 it was made clear that they would anyway be allowed to have a representative in the talks, more specifically in the microeconomic working group, after advancing this demand at the board meeting in June (Svensson and Jacobsson 2009: 7). Before this, LO had attempted to exert influence by writing to the ETUC and clarifying their positions. Generally, LO proposed tougher formulations on unemployment policy, economic policy, public investment, social justice, consumers’ rights and other issues. But it also stressed that issues of pay and working hours should be handled on a national level and not by the ETUC (Misgeld 1997: 244–25).

We have seen that in the 1970s and 1980s LO often found itself disagreeing with ETUC colleagues and with the ETUC’s stated policies. It is not surprising that in the debate on the wage policy recommendations from the Val Duchesse dialogue French Force Ouvrière chairman André Bergeron claimed that the EFTA unions, and especially the Scandinavians, were brakes on the process of European social dialogue (Misgeld 1997: 241). However, during the second half of the 1980s LO turned around on the issue of European cooperation and European integration. This will be discussed in the next section.

3. The Delors revival and the 1990s

During Jacques Delors’ leadership of the European Commission, European integration moved forward by leaps and bounds, especially with regard to the common market (cf. Jabko 2006). However, Delors also had strong social policy ambitions for the European Community and reached out to the trade unions. During the so-called ‘Delors revival’ of the second half of the 1980s, Swedish unions did warm to European integration and became more involved in the ETUC (interview GK). LO’s Rune Molin, responsible for European issues at the organisation, explained in a Swedish newspaper interview in 1988 that
'the EC as an organisation previously has just been a lot of talk. But now there’s a new situation with concrete issues and quick decisions' (quoted in Svensson and Jacobsson 2009: 8). This is telling with regard to LO’s attitude. The influence of the increased activity in Brussels on Swedish unions is parallel to what happened in two other Eurosceptic national union movements, the Norwegians (Dølvik, in this volume) and the British (Hyman, in this volume). That the ETUC’s sixth congress of May 1988 was held in the Swedish capital Stockholm also acted as a catalyst for the specific increase in interest among the Swedes (Misgeld 1997: 244–45). Delors was a guest at this conference and his speech, encouraging European unions to take part in the social dialogue and the integration project, succeeded in increasing enthusiasm for the European project among the Swedish unions (cf. Dølvik, in this volume).

An expression of the increasing weight attached to European issues by Swedish trade unions was the foundation of their Brussels office in 1989. The Brussels office is an important source of information and contacts with, for example, the European Parliament for the Swedish unionists working with European issues; one former Saco EU/ETUC officer claimed to have been in daily contact with the Brussels office in his years at Saco (interview ÅZ). After the Swedish unions had been included in the Val Duchesse process, they felt that due to a lack of information they were in a weak position. That was an important reason to start the Brussels office, which is an information and coordination centre rather than an agent in itself (Svensson and Jacobsson 2009: 8). The staff at the Brussels office is rather small: most of the time it has consisted of one head of office, one assistant and typically a temporarily posted union official from some Swedish union’s Stockholm office. The temporary postings typically last for six months and the idea is to give more trade unionists in Sweden insights into how the EU works. The founding of the Brussels office met with some skepticism from the ETUC secretariat, who were unhappy that the Swedes were more willing to spend money on having their own office in Brussels than on pooling resources to expand the ETUC offices (Svensson and Jacobsson 2009; Dølvik 1997: 438). However, among the Swedish unions the Brussels office is very much appreciated as a source of information from Brussels,2 as well as a coordinator.

In 1991, when Sweden got its first centre-right government in nine years, LO’s EC officer wrote a memo for its board on which recommendation to make to LO’s members before the referendum on Swedish EC membership. The memo begins: ‘The social democratic dominance of Sweden’s postwar period is over. The labour movement will continue to be the biggest political force in the country, but without being in a dominant position’ (quoted in Misgeld 1997: 318). The memo also pointed to the increasing importance of international trade and multinational companies as a challenge to the labour movement. Hence, the turnaround on European issues was motivated not only by positive factors – good experiences of European trade union cooperation – but also by negative factors in the shape of increasing weakness at home. This conforms well with the literature on trade unions and international cooperation, which says that unions become more interested in international cooperation when they are weakened at home (Ross and Martin 1999; Magnusson and Murhem 2009; Vandaele and Glassner 2012; cf. also Bailey 2005).

2. Nyberg (2011: 29f) gives an interesting example of how the Brussels office found out in 1997 that the Commission was planning a change in the implementation of the Posted Workers Directive, a change that went against the wishes of Swedish unions. Because of the early information they received the unions could mobilise (successfully) against the proposal even before it was published.
An important factor in moving Sweden towards membership of the European Community was the country’s deep economic crisis in the early 1990s, with negative GDP growth in 1991, 1992 and 1993. During the crisis the Social Democratic government turned around on the issue of EC membership and Sweden had its membership referendum in 1994. The unions were active in the negotiations on EC/EU membership, with one overriding policy aim: getting a guarantee that the ‘Swedish model’ – in which the social partners without state intervention negotiate collective agreements – would continue to function. It was especially important to guarantee that Swedish collective agreements would be applied to all foreign and posted workers in Sweden (Nyberg 2011: 19–24). Commissioner Padraig Flynn promised that this would be the case in a letter to the Swedish labour market minister. This letter was included as an appendix to the Swedish membership agreement. Lars Nyberg notes that few at the time noticed how important the last sentence in the TCO’s evaluation of the agreement and Flynn’s letter would be: ‘However, the Court may be persuaded to take a position on the issue if a concrete case is at issue.’ In hindsight, we can see that Swedish unions overestimated the reliability of the Flynn promise (Nyberg 2011). I will return to the employment and labour market policy debates of the 1990s in Section 5.

4. The contemporary situation: practical aspects

Sweden joined the EU in 1995. In 1997 Saco joined the ETUC. The scene since then has been quite different from in the 1970s and 1980s, as described above. This section discusses practical aspects of Swedish unions’ ETUC activity in the current period. Four aspects are considered: alliances with unions from other countries, the relationship between the three Swedish confederations within the ETUC, the Eurocadres cooperation and sectoral cooperation.

One might wonder whether Swedish unions, when they became more positive towards European integration and more proactive in their stance, would change their typical alliances within the ETUC. Historically, they have agreed typically with other Nordic unions and to some degree with the British TUC, in being skeptical with regard to the Continental unions’ taste for deeper European integration and stronger coordination through the ETUC. Misgeld claimed in the 1990s that LO was starting to develop better relations and cooperation with the German DGB, despite the DGB’s federalist leanings. The comments made by the actors interviewed for this chapter, however, do not support this interpretation; the interviewees claimed that it is basically the other Nordic unions with whom the Swedes have good collaboration (interview ÅZ, LD). ‘The Nordics are often the odd ones out’, says one, emphasising how Nordic unions operate from a different perspective from most continental unions. However, on a number of occasions, Swedish unions find common ground with other union confederations, for example, when LO and the DGB united on the issue of a rebate on the ETUC membership fee for larger organisations (like LO and DGB). Given that the Nordic alliance is the most important one for the Swedish unions, the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (CNTU) is still central to Nordic unions’ work within the ETUC. The CNTU arranges meetings before ETUC meetings to discuss the issues. Sven Svensson, who was the head of the Swedish unions’ Brussels office from 1989 to 2007, claims that the Swedish

unions had good cooperation with the Austrian ÖGB about the Lisbon Strategy and with the DGB on codetermination, but it is questionable how much has been achieved due to this common understanding (Svensson and Jacobsson 2009: 24). The head of LO’s international unit mentions, apart from the other Nordic unions, the German DGB, the Austrian ÖGB and the Dutch FNV as organisations with which LO has good contacts (interview L-LL). However, there is no evidence of a broader proactive agenda common to these unions, even though they have a good practical cooperation.

The Swedes typically do not advance issues within the ETUC unless all three confederations agree, or possibly the issue does not matter for one or two of the confederations, in which case the third confederation is ‘allowed’ to advance the issue (interview LD). They do not feel, as it is, that they can get leverage if they speak up against each other within the ETUC. However, if the Swedes became more successful in seeking bilateral alliances outside the Nordic countries, the need for pan-confederal Swedish agreement would decrease.

An interesting development in Swedish unions work within the ETUC was the launch of Eurocadres, an initiative of the Swedish manufacturing white-collar union SIF (affiliated to TCO) and the French CFDT. Eurocadres is an organisation for professionals’ and managers’ unions (and departments of unions) to enable them to raise such issues within the ETUC. One of the interviewees, an official at TCO, says: ‘We want them to change the ETUC’s “LO character” a little and start being active with regard to more “TCO issues”’ (interview LD; cf. Svensson and Jacobsson 2009: 103; Grensman 2013: 4). The fact that the Swedish white-collar and professionals’ unions sometimes find international trade union cooperation too blue-collar oriented, not least in rhetoric and symbolism, has also been shown in Blomqvist and Murhem’s (2003: 175) study of industry sector unions. Eurocadres is a rather weak organisation financed by voluntary fees, mostly paid by the SIF’s successor Unionen (Åke Zettermark, 28 November 2012). The Finnish professional union AKAVA has also been a driving force in Eurocadres; the union structure in Finland, as in Sweden, is stratified by education level. Swedes from TCO and Saco unions take part in Eurocadres. One example of an issue on which TCO and Saco unions might not agree with typical ETUC policy is the issue of bonuses for employees in the financial sector. TCO and Saco organise employees in that sector, where variable compensation is common not only for CEOs but also for ‘ordinary’ employees. Thus, the TCO union Finansförbundet has a different position on the issue of bonuses from the ETUC (interview LD). Other issues that Swedish unions advance through Eurocadres are professional qualifications and recognition, and education issues. TCO and Saco’s active participation is an example of how the vertical organisation of the Swedish union movement shapes their participation in European cooperation.

Even though our focus in this chapter is on the confederal level and the ETUC, our view of the Swedish unions’ European collaboration would be incomplete without considering the sectoral level. Especially metal workers are quite active in sectoral European cooperation, in their case in the European Metal Workers’ Federation (EMF) (Blomqvist and Murhem 2003).

5. Central policy issues since the 1990s

Overall in the early twenty-first century, however, the most important issue for Swedish unions within the ETUC and the EU has been protecting their collective bargaining model against social dumping. As we have seen, this was already a key issue for the unions when
negotiating Sweden’s membership agreement, and Sweden obtained a guarantee in Commissioner Flynn’s letter that the Swedish collective bargaining model would not be affected by EU membership. However, in the 2000s this assumed consensus was shaken. Two (in) famous legal developments were especially important: the so-called Bolkestein directive on the common European market in services, and the Laval case in the European Court of Justice. The Swedish unions were very active in 2004–2006 in lobbying around the Bolkestein directive in an effort to make it less neoliberal and more compatible with the Nordic model, with wages and working conditions regulated in collective agreements, not by law. The service directive that was adopted in the end was, from a Swedish union perspective, much better than the original Bolkestein proposal; according to Dølvik and Ødegård (2012) the unions and the ETUC did play a significant role. This was indeed a victory for the unions, including the Swedish unions. But it is telling that this, one of the major victories of Swedish unions in the EU was in essence reactive: harm reduction, rather than advancing their own proposals.4

The Laval case was a conflict between Swedish unions and the Latvian construction company Laval un Partneri, which in 2004 rebuilt a school in Vaxholm, close to Stockholm. The unions wanted Laval to sign a Swedish collective agreement but the company refused, which caused the unions to picket Laval’s worksite. The company sought a ruling in the Swedish Labour Court that the unions were violating its freedom to provide services in Sweden, another EU member state. The Labour Court referred the difficult case to the European Court of Justice and when the ECJ ruled that the unions’ actions had been ‘disproportionate’ given the goals that they wanted to achieve – Swedish wages – the unions were shocked (Woolfson et al. 2010; Nyberg 2011; Blauberger 2012). The Laval case increased the salience of European issues for Swedish unions. It has become notorious, but it is important to note that in terms of conflicts between Swedish trade unions and companies on the issue of social dumping it is the ‘tip of an iceberg’ (Bengtsson 2016). The latest union estimate of the inflows is that in 2013 19 per cent of the workforce in construction were EU migrant workers, in forestry about 11 per cent and a lower number in other sectors (Jonsson and Larsson 2013). The latest economic study of wage effects shows slightly negative effects of the EU enlargement-related labour inflows on wages in manufacturing and other sectors (Åslund and Engdahl 2013). The social dumping debate has brought the EU to the fore in the Swedish union movement. Another aspect of this contemporary debate is the increased importance of the law for trade unions. The head of LO’s international unit explained that the next post that the unit will fill is that of lawyer, because legal competence is so important for unions in the EU these days (interview L-L L).

Social dumping is not only an issue in Sweden of course. In fact, Nordic unions in the past couple of years have been very active against social dumping in Greenland, where the government wants Chinese workers to develop the mining industry, while working for Chinese wages (interview LB). The Council of Nordic Trade Unions has produced a report that compiles the different possible policy measures that can be taken against social dumping, but the Nordic unions are not united on these issues. In Norway and Finland today there are laws that facilitate the extension of collective agreements (cf. Eldring and Alsos 2012), but the Danish and Swedish LO still oppose this measure as they believe that it would reduce the incentives for workers to join unions, and thus aggravate a ‘free rider’ problem.

for the unions (interviews LB, MKN). The traditional ‘Swedish model’ entails little explicit political involvement in the labour market, leaving its regulation to the social partners (Kjellberg 1999), and regulations such as legal extension of collective agreements are still very controversial in the Swedish labour movement. However, we do see within LO that some member unions, notably the transport workers, have spoken out for legal extension of collective agreements in sectors afflicted by social dumping. Again, we see a possible partial ‘convergence’ of the Swedish model with other European counterparts (cf. Lindvall 2012). Such changes would decrease the institutional differences between the Swedish model and the other European labour markets, possibly also affecting the preferences of Swedish unions and making them more similar to their ETUC colleagues.

On the key issues of wage bargaining and labour market models I would argue that the Swedish unions’ policy at the European level is still more reactive than proactive. But on other issues the Swedes do stand out as ‘good Europeans’, with a high level of activity.

One issue on which Swedish unions have indeed played a proactive role is the integration of unions from post-communist countries into the ETUC. This is in parallel with the Swedish government’s position that the EU should be expanded to central and eastern Europe in a ‘big bang’, instead of gradually (cf. SACO 2004: 7–8). The Swedish unions have been especially active with regard to the Baltic countries, with which Sweden has historical connections and of course geographical proximity. Previously, Swedish unions ran many aid projects for unions in the Baltic countries, but today the cooperation is on a more equal footing (interview MD). An important venue for trade union cooperation across the Baltic is the Baltic Sea Trade Union Network (BASTUN) which was established in 1999 and is seated in Stockholm. It is a loose network rather than a formal organisation and without any employees; its main contact is one of the advisors from the Council of Nordic Trade Unions. BASTUN has 22 member unions in 10 different countries, including the Baltics, Poland, Germany and Russia. Its member organisations run the Baltic Organising Academy which is an organisation aimed at improving union organising and strengthening unions in the Baltic countries. It currently involves the manufacturing, transport, service and construction sectors.

6. Conclusions

The main question regarding Swedish unions and the ETUC is, will the former become more proactive than they have been in the past? It can be argued that at certain times Swedish unions have shown an enthusiasm for European cooperation (especially the late 1980s and 1990s), but traditionally the Swedes have been rather sceptical towards deeper European integration. On several European union issues – working time reduction as employment policy, European collective bargaining, statutory minimum wages – the Swedish unions still have the same dismissive attitude to Europeanising policy proposals as they had in the 1970s or 1980s. Not because they want to be negative, of course, but because they are rooted in the Nordic labour market model, which is still perceived as functional.

Skedinger (2008: 29) similarly sees it as unlikely that an extension law will be created, due to (a) free rider problems for unions and (b) the fact that union coverage is falling in the service sector where an extension law would hypothetically be used.
Today, however, this situation may be changing in at least two related ways. First, as Sweden has become more integrated in the European project, the salience of European issues has increased and unionists today agree that the traditional Euroscepticism is a thing of yesteryear. The salience of European issues increased steeply with EU membership in 1995, and became perhaps even more important with the social dumping debate, which has been very lively since 2004. Second, as the Swedish unions have been weakened on their home turf and the Swedish labour market model has to some degree become more similar to other European labour markets (Lindvall 2012; Baccaro and Howell 2011), the preferences of Swedish unions might to some degree be converging with those of other European unions. As I have shown, the Swedish/Nordic model is still fairly unique and the unions’ position special and the Nordic unions are natural allies within the ETUC for Swedes.

To get back to the question of being proactive, I believe that the discussion above shows that even though the Swedish unions have become more positive towards European integration and cooperation and the European issues more salient for them since the 1990s, the unions have not yet found a positive, proactive programme for their European activity. Much of the 2000s were spent actively, but damage-minimizing, working against the Bolkestein directive’s neoliberal tendencies and social dumping and the liberalising tendencies of the Laval judgment (cf. Lovén 2012). The current situation can be summarized then as follows: a positive outlook, active cooperation, but on the policy level still unclear.

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