Going for the gold standard

Swedish trade unions play a unique role in standards development. No other EU country has so many trade unionists working in it. Step forward Sven Bergström.

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With fifty trade unionists involved in standards development, Sweden is ahead of the field in Europe. Sven Bergström played a key role in building up this network.

Image: © Linus Meyer
"If people feel better, goods will be better made."

Sven Bergström turns 62 this year. That’s a good age to retire at, he thinks. "There’s more to life than just work. There’s just no end to it when you’re dealing with working conditions. You can go back to square one tie and again. You’re under pressure. Well, I put myself under pressure". Sven has given his working life over to others’ wellbeing at work. He has strong beliefs, but his words are measured. "Growing up, my father was a house painter. He broke his back falling seven meters off a ladder. It was a new ladder, but it just fold in half. You don’t forget a thing like that". Over the past 25 years, Sven has put much of his energy into getting a bigger trade union say in standards development. While standards are still voluntary for businesses, they are attracting growing interest from producers for the ability to use the same terms whether in Stockholm, Madrid or London. For unions to have an active say in developing standards means that employers then have to focus more on the safety of the production or service employees affected. Everybody wins. So, at least, argues Sven. "It’s a way of preventing a host of work-induced diseases!"

"Like Don Quixote"

Sven is packing in just as his ideas are gaining ground in Europe. The European Commission has recently highlighted the importance of user (consumers, unions) participation in new standards development (see article p. 17). But the unions themselves often hold back from engaging with the matter, arguing that it is the employers’ job, especially given the big investment in work, time and money. It often takes at least three years to bring a new standard into being.

Nevertheless, says the European Trade Union Institute’s senior researcher Stefano Boy, his work has been agenda-setting. "Twenty years ago Sven was fighting a lone battle like Don Quixote. Now many people see Sweden as a real role model in this area". As yet, Sweden is the only EU country to have a national working group on standards setting. It has 53 members from various unions, partly thanks to government subsidies. Sven has helped fast-forward the development, but plays down his achievement. "It’s not his style", says Ulf Jarnefjord of the transport union Transportarbetarförbundet, one of LO’s 14 member federations. "Sven’s not someone to big himself up. He’s big-hearted and sharing by nature. He knows how to delegate. He’s sent a lot of co-workers off for training".

LO – Sweden’s biggest trade union confederation, and Sven’s employer – is headquartered in central Stockholm. A hundred people currently work in the building, popularly known as "Fortress LO". Its membership base is large compared to other European trade unions – around 1.5 million of the country’s total population of 9 million. The membership rate among manual workers is 70%. But recent years have seen these numbers on the slide, mirroring the trend in some other European countries. Falling membership in Sweden has been accelerated by political decisions.

Although arguably himself a testament to the famously different "Swedish model", Sven is worried. "The problem is that our good track record on employees’ working conditions is to some extent based on legacy gains". His office is simple, pleasant and tidy. Sven is clearly on top of his brief, and while talking quickly finds the documents he needs among all the folders and archival boxes that fill the shelves.

His office windows overlook a covered courtyard, four floors below, with a furnished patio. The 10 o’clock staff coffee break is a tradition. “It’s friendly. You often see familiar faces from other departments there”.

Sven joined LO in 1988 to fill its need for a researcher into the growing problem of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in industry. This is when he really started to work on standardization.

Sven brought with him fourteen years’ workface experience as a trained engineer specializing in worker protection. He was first employed in the National Labour Market Board’s (Arbetsmarknadsstyrelsen) research department, where his job was to measure the radiation exposure of identified groups of workers.

He subsequently travelled all across Sweden checking the health of power plant workers as part of a large-scale study on electromagnetic fields, for which he devised his own portable measuring instrument.

Rust and gold

In the late 1970s, he did something then uncommon for a man – he took three months’ leave to look after his eldest son. "I had a lot of things planned, like de-rusting my car, but I soon realized that I had just barely about enough time to take care of my son".

Before starting with LO, he also worked in an occupational health service which at the time was well-resourced, being run on a tripartite basis by the state, employers and unions. Sven’s job was to develop teamwork to promote overall management of the work environment. "It was a golden age. But things started going downhill towards the end".

One of his first big challenges at LO was to argue the union case in a parliamentary report on standardization. The European Union had decided to work on increasing standards development to facilitate free trade. Not yet in the EU, Sweden did not want to be sidelined. The unions wanted to participate, but for the state to foot the bill.

"Our members are a fount of valuable knowledge for improving manufacturing conditions. But the state has to foot the bill because our participation is good for society as a whole. Occupational diseases and absenteeism go down. If people feel better, goods will be better made”.

The Riksdag (Swedish parliament) finally decided to fund union participation. This helped to kick-start Swedish trade unions’ exceptional involvement in the standardization process.

Sven stepped onto the European scene in Mannheim (Germany) in 1989. The
European Commission had set up a working group to develop ergonomic principles for standardization. Sven smiles at the memory of that "weird meeting". He had prepared the topic carefully, only to find that the British contingent wanted to talk about anything but. "We also realized that we had real difficulty understanding the English terms for standards". This prompted the Swedish unions to lay on technical English courses.

At the meeting, Sven had tried to get a discussion going on musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). "I got some funny looks from foreign colleagues". He later realized that the problem now recognized everywhere had come to light earlier in Sweden than elsewhere, partly because Swedish women had entered the labour market in large numbers some years before their counterparts in other countries, many working in industry in jobs considered lighter than male work, but involving more repetitive movements.

One of Sven’s big victories in the teeth of some foreign colleagues was on women’s position in the workplace. The German unions wanted gender-differentiated standards for some machinery.

"We were not having pink and blue machines! That would have been against EU non-discrimination principles. And anyway, you get strong women and weak men. Instead, we managed to get adjustable machines".

Despite some frictions due to cultural differences, Sven is very positive towards the single market. "I'm not keen on the euro. But I'm not against it. I’m not keen on the euro. But I'm not against it.

In his 25 years with LO, Sven has done a lot to consolidate the union role in standardization work. He was, for example, involved in setting up the ASTA group of representatives of the three biggest Swedish trade union federations TCO, SACO and LO. At European level, he co-chairs with Gilles Seitz (CGT France) the European Trade Union Institute’s Network of Standardization Experts.

In his Stockholm office, Sven points to a diagram of his activities, a real spider's web of more than 25 different groups and institutions.

Yet he views the future with pessimism. A supporter of the Social Democratic Party since his youth, he believes that the right-wing coalition which has governed Sweden since 2006 is investing too little in research to improve working conditions, and overestimating the benevolent goodwill of employers.

These are good times for employment agencies, and that will inevitably result in more occupational diseases.

"Accident risks are on the rise. Simpler and more repetitive tasks that untrained employees can do are re-emerging. We have gone back to production lines". Sven is also critical of the unions for accepting "crisis agreements" and poor working conditions to save jobs. "There is more fear around. That’s not good. The unions have to speak up. A proper dialogue will give the best results all round".

He also counsels his European colleagues to fight for public funding to play into the standardization process, and to listen to their members. "They have so much knowledge. You don’t need a PhD to participate".

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