

Portrait

Hadia Tajik, a trade union-supporting labour minister

Editorial

Do we choose new or old?

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Nordics agree to protect culture as well as the climate

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The Nordics come together to prepare for future crises

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Do we choose new or old?

Good cooperation can be about new initiatives as well as protecting things that actually work. What drives developments can be people, new organisations or pressing new circumstances. This issue of the Nordic Labour Journal is a mix of all three components.

EDITORIAL

16.11.2021

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As this is written, we still do not know for sure whether Sweden's next prime minister will be a woman. But if the parliament recognises Magdalena Andersson, the last big symbolic position of power in the Nordics will have finally been conquered by a woman.

The Nordic Labour Journal has been following this process with particular interest because since 2011 we have published our own gender equality barometer, which looks at whether 24 different positions of power are held by a woman or a man on 8 March each year. The only government minister post still not yet held by a woman in Sweden was prime minister.

Apart from no female Icelandic fisheries and agriculture minister, there have been female ministers at one point or other in all policy areas of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Defence ministers are not part of that cooperation, due to Finland and Sweden's neutrality stance.

Yet defence policies are now debated during the Nordic Council's sessions. During the 73rd session in Copenhagen from 1 to 4 November, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg spoke for the first time. He has of course participated many times before as a representative from the Norwegian government – enough times to be able to joke about the fact that participating Nordic politicians do not always feel their governments follow their advice.

This year was special, because the Nordic Council of Ministers launched a new vision for the years until 2030, focusing cooperation on making the countries greener. That had threatened support for cooperation in other areas, notably culture. The Nordic Council protested, along with the Norden Association in the different countries. A compromise was reached in the end, and the cooperation ministers added money saved from expenditures that had stopped during the Corona pandemic.

“They have saved considerable amounts of money from travel and accommodation, which compensates for planned cuts in

the 2022 budget to culture and education,” explains Marie Preisler who covered the session.

A long-term solution still has to be found, however. But there is a great desire for cooperation in the Nordic region now. Everyone agrees the next crisis should be handled better than the Corona pandemic, especially for those who live in the border regions.

One battle that remains unsolved is the EU Commission's proposed statutory minimum wages for all of the Union member states. The Nordics have come together to defend the collective bargaining model.

During a conference on wage formation in Helsinki, hosted by the Finnish Minister of Employment, the Nordic labour market model was presented – but also what is known as the extension of collective agreements. Perhaps that is a more flexible solution than having governments dictate wages? Norway introduced this model 20 years ago, and both trade unions and employers are happy.

“We cannot take away something that works,” says Ann-Solveig Sørensen from the Norwegian Food and Allied Workers Union (NNN), whose members include fisheries workers, an industry that used to have a problem with underpaid foreign labour.

Hadia Tajik, Norway's new Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion since 14 October, has a long list of measures ready to be introduced to fight work-related crime. She is portrayed in this issue.

Iceland has a very high trade union and employers' union membership rate. But there is always space for one more organisation, say the founders of Atvinnufjélagið (the job association), who target smaller businesses and independent employers. One of their demands is simpler wage agreements that do not run to hundreds of pages, causing disagreements over wordings.

DO WE CHOOSE NEW OR OLD?

We can all feel inadequate sometimes. When everyone can reach us at any time, there is so much to fit in that we end up with a new kind of workplace problem.

“There’s a limit for how much information we can process, and how fast. If you are asked to process too much information simultaneously, your main memory becomes a bottleneck,” says Gisela Bäcklander, a researcher at the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm.

That is why cognitive health has become part of the Swedish government’s new work environment strategy.



The Nordics come together to prepare for future crises

When new crises shake the Nordic region, the countries will cooperate on crisis preparedness and keep a close dialogue before introducing closed borders and other restrictions which impact on Nordic neighbours. There is broad agreement for this between the Nordic governments and parliamentarians.

NEWS

16.11.2021

TEXT MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: MAGNUS FRÖDERBERG/NORDEN.ORG

The Corona pandemic, natural catastrophes, climate change, cyber threats and refugees. The Nordic countries have faced a string of crises and new ones are sure to follow. That is why there is a need for strengthened cooperation on preparedness.

That was the conclusion from both Nordic governments and parliamentarians during the Nordic Council Session in Copenhagen from 1 to 4 November 2021, where the lessons from the Corona pandemic were high on the agenda.

The Nordic prime ministers agreed to intensify Nordic cooperation on supply readiness and other emergency prepared-

ness, to make the Nordic region ready for future emergencies and crises. The prime ministers also confirmed their ambition to make the Nordics the world's most sustainable region by 2030. There was also broad agreement that the Nordics need to improve their cooperation post-pandemic.

New, unknown crises

The Corona pandemic became a nightmare for Nordic cooperation, as each country closed their borders and introduced their own restrictions without consulting each other. The result was big economic, practical and human consequences for

people studying or working in another country, and for those with family across the border.

This must not happen again when new crises hit – and new crises will come, concluded one Nordic prime minister after another as they addressed the Nordic Council, assembled in the Danish parliament.



Nordic prime ministers meeting with the Nordic Council. Photo: Magnus Frödenberg/norden.org

One of the main events during the session was a “summit” between the Nordic prime ministers, the ministers for Nordic cooperation and the MPs who sit on the Nordic Council, in the Nordic cooperation’s parliamentarian assembly.

“We will learn a lot from Covid-19. The most important lesson is probably the fact that there will be new crises and we don’t know what these will be. But we do know that we will be better prepared, individually and as a group,” Denmark’s Social Democrat prime minister Mette Fredriksen told the summit.

Fredriksen is in no doubt that the future geopolitical security situation is more sombre and complicated, and that it will present many challenges to the Nordic region too. It will be valuable to “have each other’s back”, in light of the countries’ shared heritage, history and other common traits.

Get on the phone

The Danish prime minister agreed with her Icelandic counterpart Katrín Jakobsdóttir from the Left-Green Movement, who has said that one of the best things about the Nordic cooperation is the fact that the prime ministers can just get on the phone and call each other. We will continue to do that, said Mette Fredriksen.

Yet communication between the countries was one of the first things that went overboard as the Corona pandemic hit the Nordics. Parliamentarians from many of the Nordic border regions told the session about the impact that a lack of communication and coordination between the countries had had on their citizens.

“When the pandemic hit, we were sat in our separate chambers and prepared our own tools for handling the crisis while constructing something resembling a Berlin wall in an area that has enjoyed a passport union since the end of WWII. Prudence and national sovereignty is good. A lack of communication is not,” said Aron Emilsson, an MP from the Swedish Democrats and head of the Nordic Freedom group at the Nordic Council.

Praise to cooperation ministers

Linda Modig, a Swedish MP from the Centre Party and chair of the Centre Group at the Nordic Council, spoke of Nordic citizens being left with a “bitter taste” as a result of the countries’ lack of cooperation during the Corona pandemic. This was particularly true for people like herself, she said, who live and work in a Nordic border region.



Linda Modig, chair of the Centre Group at the Nordic Council. Photo: Johannes Jansson/norden.org.

Modig also praised the Nordic cooperation ministers for having played a crucial role during the pandemic by being “present” and “attentive” to the opinions of citizens and Nordic parliamentarians.

“They have been active, proactive and result-oriented, always trying to solve any problems that arose,” said Linda Modig.

This supports the argument for granting Nordic citizens what they want – a deeper Nordic cooperation which includes giving the cooperation ministers considerable responsibility for political governance as well as creating a joint Nordic crisis readiness ability, she argued.

Norwegian-Swedish reconciliation

Both the Danish and the Nordic prime ministers rejected the claim that governments had failed the Nordic cooperation by taking unilateral action without first talking to the other Nordic countries when the pandemic broke out.

“This was a global crisis that had to be addressed, and there was no time to talk to Nordic neighbours first,” pointed out Mette Fredriksen.

Norway's new prime minister Jonas Gahr Støre agreed. He defended his predecessor who had been criticised by many for Norway's Corona restrictions which were changed 48 times in one year. They hit Swedish workers in Norwegian companies so hard that Norway has now paid compensation to many Swedish border commuters.

"This will not happen on my government's watch, but any government facing a crisis must prioritise protecting its citizens."

Gahr Støre did promise that as prime minister he would prioritise getting Nordic workers back into Norwegian companies, as this is a priority for parts of the country's economy. Citizens in Nordic border regions will also be able to travel freely for holidays and to visit family members across the border, he pointed out and thanked the Swedish government for stepping up and giving vaccines to Norway during the pandemic.

"There are many examples of Nordic countries helping each other during the pandemic," he said and announced his first foreign trip would be to Sweden with the aim of getting Norwegian-Swedish relations back to a "good, normal state".

New threats to solidarity

The Nordic region must be prepared for new crises, however. Perhaps another pandemic, perhaps cyber attacks, perhaps something else. It will in any case again challenge the Nordic cooperation, and that is why it is important to work even closer together going forward, argued the Norwegian prime minister.

"We can cooperate even better in the Nordic region by preparing for the next crisis and challenge to solidarity, whose shape we cannot predict," said Jonas Gahr Støre.



Jens Stolteberg, NATO Secretary-General: Photo: Nato

He wants the Nordics to discuss how Nordic solidarity can help prepare the region to face the international security threats outlined by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in a speech during the Nordic Council session.

"Modern security threats are of a completely new character. Cyber. Hybrid conflicts that are hard to define. When is a conflict an attack and a security challenge, and how do we assess it? No other countries are better at assessing this than the Nordics," said the Norwegian prime minister.

Sweden's cooperation minister Anna Hallberg from the Social Democrats addressed the Nordic summit on behalf of Stefan Löfven, the Swedish prime minister from the same party. She admitted that the Nordic Council's vision of becoming the world's most integrated region has felt very remote during the past two years, especially for citizens who have chosen cross-border living and work.

The Nordic cooperation has been put "dramatically to the test in many ways that we have not experienced for a very, very long time," she said. Faster and better coordinated public information about the Nordic countries' national decisions should be something the Nordics could and should cooperate on in coming crises, Hallberg pointed out.

Cooperating on preparedness

She agreed with the prime ministers that communication on top government levels had worked well and even got better during the pandemic.

"The crisis highlighted the close relationships between our countries. This was evident through the regular and close conversations between our governments during the crisis," said Anna Hallberg.



Annette Lind, the Nordic Council Vice President. Photo: Magnus Frödenberg/norden.org

During the session, the Nordic Council recommended that the Nordic governments commit to warning each other in good time, and as far as possible negotiate and give reasons for border restrictions before they are being put in place.

The Nordic Council also recommended the Nordic governments to explore the possibilities for further cooperation on preparedness, including on PPE, medicines and medical equipment, vaccines, antibiotic resistance and hospital ca-

capacity. This preparedness cooperation should include events like natural catastrophes like floods and forest fires as well as cyber threats to crucial social functions.

The Vice President of the Nordic Council, Annette Lind, a Danish Social Democrat MP, interpreted the political signals during the session as signs of a broad agreement that the Nordic governments should and will improve their cooperation going forward.

“I really think the Nordic prime ministers more than ever want a broader cooperation. We are well under way to get even closer cooperation in the Nordic region,” said Annette Lind.



Nordics agree to protect culture as well as the climate

Climate and sustainability get more from the 2022 Nordic cooperation budget, while culture and education avoid planned cuts.

NEWS

16.11.2021

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: JOHANNES JANSSON/NORDEN.ORG

Green change in the Nordics will get a larger share of the funds that the Nordic countries allocate to Nordic cooperation. In the long run, this could mean less money for Nordic culture and education, but for now, there is money for both.

On 2 November, Nordic cooperation ministers approved the 2022 budget for Nordic cooperation, during the Nordic Council session in Copenhagen. It includes a considerable increase in the amounts set aside for realising the Nordic prime ministers' vision of making the Nordics the world's most sustainable region by 2030.

In order to finance the gradual increase of pan-Nordic climate measures, the Nordic Council of Ministers had prepared to cut budgets for Nordic culture and education cooperation. But after long-running negotiations between the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council, the cuts were put on ice.

The pandemic led to a sharp drop in travel for Nordic cooperation work, as meetings were primarily held online. This has led to considerable cost savings for travel and accommo-

ation, which compensates for the abandoned cuts to culture and education support in the 2022 budget.

Good cooperation

This solution was welcomed by everyone during the Nordic Council session in Copenhagen. After chairing the cooperation ministers' budget meeting, the Finnish Minister of Nordic Cooperation Thomas Blomqvist said he was happy that money had been found to strengthen both the climate work and a range of specific culture and education measures in 2022.

“The pandemic highlighted how important Nordic art, culture and togetherness is to Nordic citizens. So I am very happy that we have been able to spend unused funds from previous years in order to secure a special one-year investment in culture and education,” Blomqvist said.



Thomas Blomqvist, Finland's cooperation minister.

He thanked the Nordic cooperation ministers on behalf of the Nordic Council for actively and constructively having engaged in budget negotiations, and said he and the coming Nordic Council of Ministers Presidency would work for early and close dialogue with the Nordic Council Presidency on future years' budget plans.

“We have agreed on a budget where both the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers have a strong desire to cooperate and improve our dialogue,” said Thomas Blomqvist.

New negotiations

Bertel Haarder, the Nordic Council President, said the 2023 budget dialogue will start shortly. Although the culture support is not being cut in 2022, a solution must be found for the coming years. He also said negotiations would start soon between the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers on making transport a special policy area of Nordic cooperation, by establishing a special Nordic council of ministers for transport.

“A council of ministers for transport is an obvious idea which the Nordic Council is fully behind,” said Bertel Haarder.

The budget strengthens the financing of several support programmes for culture and Nordic cultural institutions, the language cooperation, Norden i Skolen and Nordjobb as well as the Nordic Literature Week.

The next budget debate starts in December when representatives for the current and future Presidencies of the Nordic Council of Ministers will meet the current and future Presidencies of the Nordic Council for a first run-through.

The Nordic ministers for culture presented a joint declaration at a meeting during the Nordic Council session in Copenhagen, stating that art and culture help tackle global challenges like climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. The ministers highlighted inclusive art and cultural life, digitalisation and education, indigenous people's important knowledge and freedom of expression as important elements for sustainable development in the Nordic region.

The Queen: a great effort

Denmark's Queen Margrethe held a reception in honour of the Nordic Council session, and in a speech, she mentioned culture as part of the effort to make the Nordics the most sustainable region by 2030.

“This is a very ambitious aim and it will mean much effort on behalf of all of the member countries' across a range of areas, including children and youths, education, working life – and not least when it comes to the environment, climate and sustainability. Popular support for the Nordic cooperation is alive and strong, and Nordic parliamentarians face high expectations. Whether we will reach the aim only time will tell, but it is crucial to remember that we can achieve more together than alone.”

Cognitive health part of new Swedish work environment strategy

Do you juggle all the balls at once rather than focus on what you should be doing? Or do you prioritise and concentrate on what is the most pressing task? Today's labour market is really testing our cognitive capacity. More and more of us come down with cognitive ill health.

NEWS

16.11.2021

TEXT: FAYME ALM

“There's a limit for how much information we can process, and how fast. If you are asked to process too much information simultaneously, your main memory becomes a bottleneck,” says Gisela Bäcklander, a researcher at the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm and expert on sustainable working, cognitive health and productivity.

Cognition and its challenges

The Nordic Labour Journal meets Gisela Bäcklander to talk about our cognitive abilities and what influences them. But first a definition of this intellectual resource, from the Swedish Work Environment Authority:

“Cognition is how our brains acquire, process, store and retrieve information. Our cognitive abilities allow us to plan and organise our work in the short and long term, assess results, solve problems and make decisions. All this is possible thanks to the many processes happening in our brains, creating thoughts, feelings, memories and activities.”

“It is when we try to do more things at the same time that we risk getting overloaded and develop concentration and memory problems. This is when we increase the risk of making mistakes,” says Gisela Bäcklander.

A new work environment strategy

Working life has changed over the past decades. People work with information not only in white-collar jobs but in sectors like healthcare, industry and handicraft. At the same time, many working tasks have become more complicated. The Swedish government points to this fact in their new work environment strategy, saying the cognitive work environment plays an increasingly central role in working life.

“Many of our work environments are not optimised for cognitive health and function, even in the exact types of jobs where we expect this to be the case,” says Gisela Bäcklander.

This is something the government is also addressing in its strategy. It says the issue of increased demands in the workplace is topical because it is a fact “that many, at some stage in life, are facing temporary or permanent cognitive problems.”

Gisela Bäcklander sums up some problems that might be indicators of cognitive stress

- Concentration problems
- Memory problems
- Racing thoughts
- Difficulty relaxing, tuning out

Others include:

- Being irritable
- Getting very tired after a working day

Such signs can be classified as cognitive ill health, but this does not necessarily mean it is a state of sickness, explains Gisela Bäcklander.

“There are, of course, problems with memory and executive functions that are related to biological health issues like Alzheimer's, strokes or burn-out which impact on our cognitive function. I have mainly been studying healthy people who are in work, not people on sick leave, and I see that their issues are related to physical, social and organisational factors.”

These three factors are the employer's responsibility, and they interact with each other while also having an impact on the cognitive environment.

Gisela Bäcklander has paid a lot of attention to the organisational factor, which is related to people at work.

“In my previous career, I was a human resources expert and worked as an IT consultant for HR departments. I saw that the hardest problems were not technical projects. Organisa-

tional challenges were the most interesting, but we tried to solve them through the use of technology – even when that was not a sufficient solution.”

Some advice

So what would Gisela Bäcklander recommend for those of us who juggle too many balls instead of doing what we *really* should be doing? Here are her tips:

- Clarify tasks, demands and available resources
- Clear your head
- Create good routines
- Don't try to do everything every day – create theme days
- Have meeting-free days
- Take turns being accessible
- Avoid jam-packed schedules, they leave no room for manoeuvre
- Schedule your own time, not only meetings
- Use your energy wisely – which tasks demand the most cognitive capacity?
- Recharge batteries both “on” the day and “between” days

So what is cognitive health?

“Cognitive health is when you feel you can control your own attention, to manage to follow one thought through to its conclusion,” says Gisela Bäcklander.

Can you manage that?

New Icelandic employers' organisation while trade union chair resigns

It has been an eventful month for the Icelandic labour market. On the employer's side, representatives of smaller companies formally founded a new association to further their interests, since they believe that they are not properly looked after elsewhere. At the same time, the chairman of one of the largest trade unions in the country resigned after accusations from union employees of bullying.

NEWS

16.11.2021

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON

But let us start with the latest addition on the employees' side. Atvinnufelagið (the job association) was formally founded in October. According to its webpage, the purpose is to become a clear voice for smaller and medium-sized companies. Atvinnufelagið intends to make their own collective agreements for companies they represent and guarantee that each company has one vote within the association.

Arna Þorsteinsdóttir and Ómar Pálmason are two of eight members of the preparatory board. Þorsteinsdóttir is a co-owner of the advertising company Sahara and Pálmason is the owner of the car inspection company Adalskodun. They say that the main reason for starting the association is a lack of diversity.



Arna Þorsteinsdóttir og Ómar Pálmason. Foto: Hallgrímur Indriðason.

“Smaller and medium-sized companies, and also independent employers, need someone to represent their interest on common ground. We started discussing these matters, more

people joined in and then we thought: We have to do something!” Þorsteinsdóttir says.

Before launching the new association, the board sent a survey to 1,200 firms. Just over half of them replied, and around 70% thought that forming a new association was necessary. Pálmason says that in the Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise (Samtök atvinnulífsins), the main interest group for Icelandic companies, the largest control everything.

“They control which interests are being protected within the confederation. There is nothing wrong with that as such. But this confederation has not focused on the smaller companies. Their environment is very different from the bigger ones. One example is that salaries represent 60 – 70% of the cost, which is much higher than in the bigger companies, and they don't have huge profits.”

One vote no matter the size

Þorsteinsdóttir adds that in the Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise everyone's voting rights are based on income. The bigger the company, the more votes you have, the more weight you carry. In the new association, this will be different.

“Here it will be one company, one vote. So, no matter how big your company is, you always get your vote, just like everybody else. That's something Samtök atvinnulífsins can't offer because of the way they work.”

Pálmason says that even though the companies' backgrounds are very different, their interests are largely the same. The issues they want to put on the agenda are many, but he mentions a few examples.

“We want changes in taxation. For example, a self-employed painter pays the same amount in radio fees as a big company with millions in profit. Why isn't that fee, and other similar fees, income-based? We want a level playing field when it comes to taxes. Another example: A self-employed person pays part of his own salary to the fund for unemployment benefits. But if he goes bankrupt he does not have the right to get benefits since he was running a business.”

Atvinnufelagið has also announced that they want to make their own collective agreements instead of the ones Samtök avinnulífsins have. Þorsteinsdóttir says these contracts are not beneficial to the smaller companies.

“We want simpler agreements that the employers have time to read. Existing agreements are sometimes over 100 pages long and lawyers sometimes disagree on how to interpret them.”

Pálmason says that some parts of these agreements are not beneficial for the smaller companies, for example shorter working hours.

“Service companies can't simply close earlier or reduce their service. So the only option is to pay overtime.”

No hierarchy

Atvinnufelagið has started fairly well. Around 500 members are now registered. Even though its goal is to look out for the interests of smaller companies, there are no conditions on the size to become a member.

“If you think the interests we want to represent are your interests as well, you are welcome to join,” Þorsteinsdóttir says.

Þorsteinsdóttir says that the association is somewhere between an enterprise confederation and a labour union – but it really is neither. It will be up to the members which direction it will take.

“We want to do this with our members. They can have their say on what issues we should emphasise from the start and what will then come after that. We are still not sure where we're heading – we've just created the foundation.”

The first annual meeting will be held next spring and then the first formal board will be selected.

“But our goal is not for the board to be some kind of hierarchy. We want the members to participate directly.”

Þorsteinsdóttir expects that the main test will be next year when the current collective agreements expire.

“Then we will see how things will go. But our goal is not to be in a competition with anyone or to be a threat. We simply want to improve our situation and protect the interests that are important to us.”

Trade union controversy

On the labour union side, there have also been some changes. Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir, who has been chair of Efling since 2017, resigned from that position on 31 October. With more than 30,000 members, Efling is one of the largest unions in Iceland representing mostly low-skill workers in the Reykjavík area.



Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir, som ledet fagforbundet Efling, har trukket seg på grunn av en konflikt med sine ansatte. Foto: Björn Lindahl.

In a statement on her Facebook page, Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir said that her resignation was connected to a written complaint from union staff delegates in June, claiming she had broken collective agreements by laying off staff without notice and that she even had a special hit-list of employees. This had made staff feel very uncomfortable, according to the statement.

She thought the complaints had been dealt with until it was covered in the media last month. In the statement, she said she held a meeting with staff on Friday 29 October.

“I told the staff that there were two options. Either something would come from them in writing that would take back these demeaning descriptions from the written complaint [...] or I would resign as chairman.”

The result was the latter. The Efling CEO, Viðar Þorsteinson, resigned as well, supporting Jónsdóttir's cause. She said that it was hard to accept that the Efling staff had pushed her away from the job as chairman.

Jónsdóttir was a controversial and outspoken union leader. During her tenure, two strikes were called. She is considered to have played a significant part in the making of the quality of life contract between the enterprises and the government in 2019, which has contributed to a stable economic environment.

She also gave special attention to foreign workers and the number of foreign-born board members increased. More than 40% of Efling's members are foreign workers, up from 5% 20 years ago.

Most of the board has expressed support for Jónsdóttir as chair, but also for her decision to resign. The vice chair, Agnieszka Ewa Ziolkowska, has now taken over as chairman and is the first person of foreign origin to lead an Icelandic labour union.

Drífa Snaedal, the chair of The Icelandic Confederation of Labour, where Jónsdóttir was second vice chair, wrote in an article on the confederation's website that Jónsdóttir had played a big part in getting good collective agreements for those with the lowest salaries.

But she also said that all this had brought attention to the situation that union staff are in, especially the delegates.

“The delegates have to speak on behalf of the staff, which can be hard as delegates all over the country know well. It's no coincidence that the delegates are protected by law because they can be caught between a rock and a hard place when difficult issues come up at the workplace,” Snaedal wrote.



Hadia Tajik, a trade union-supporting labour minister

Hadia Tajik, Norway's new Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion, is a strong defender of trade unions. She will be responsible for what the red-green coalition government calls a spring clean of the labour market.

PORTRAIT

16.11.2021

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

This is not Hadia Tajik's first time as a government minister. She served as Minister of Culture between 2012 and 2013. She has also been the Labour Party deputy leader since 2015. It adds up to making her a heavyweight among Norway's social democratic politicians.

This might not be a description she agrees with when she is training *krav maga*, an Israeli self-defence system. In her new book "Freedom", published just before Norway's par-

liamentary elections in September this year, she describes a workout:

"I had no illusions about what the training would do for me: I was but a 162 centimetres tall woman. Most men would wrestle me to the ground anyway.

"I did not train *krav maga* to protect myself against street violence. I did it because it gave me psychological strength dur-

ing a rough time. I got divorced in 2016. I was dealing with demanding situations at work."

Hitting without apology

Learning how to hit without apology, to protect yourself against blows, learning to get back up again every time she ended up on the exercise mat and to react quickly rather than growing irritated or developing a bad conscience.

"That is what I was there for. It helped."

As I walked past the Norwegian Parliament in 2018, there was a demonstration against the EU Commission's fourth railway package directive. Among big, muscular railway workers and red trade union banners stood Hadia Tajik with arms crossed and a serious frown. I snapped the photo you can see above.



She radiates the same attitude on the cover of her book. She sits leaning forward wearing an elegant trouser suit and high heels, ready for battle. The critics were quick off the mark:

"The super-hot picture of Tajik is not meant to sell makeup or clothes but to tempt us into reading a book which starts with 50 pages on the importance of trade union work. In this context, the feminised and sexualised portrait is very misplaced,"

wrote Faculty Director at the University of Stavanger, Karoline Holmboe Høibo in an opinion piece in the Stavanger Aftenblad newspaper.

"I could have understood if this accusation had come from a slightly conservative Pakistani man," answered Tajik, who called the piece "nonsense".

Her book's subheading is "A political and personal story". It is not, however, personal in the sense Norwegian politicians' biographies usually are. This autumn alone, former Progress Party leader Siv Jensen, former Labour Party leader Thorbjørn Jagland and former Labour Party secretary Martin Kolberg published books full of anecdotes and personal attacks – most often directed at people in their own parties.

Hadia Tajik shares a few glimpses into her childhood. Her parents moved to Norway in 1974. Her father had dreamed of studying mathematic. Instead, he became a welder for a company making oil rigs in Stavanger during the early years of Norway's oil industry. Her family settled down in Bjørheimsbygd, a small community of 500 people in commuting distance from Stavanger.

Her mother found work in the fisheries industry, putting sardines in tins. Later, Hadia Tajik's parents opened a local shop called Ali Kolonial. Contact with their home country was a once-weekly telephone call. If nothing much had happened, her mother would let it ring three times before hanging up, in order to save money. That way, the family in Pakistan knew she was doing fine.

If Hadia Tajik and her older brother had not learned the language, they would not have been able to talk to their grandparents. So they learned Farsi well enough to understand the nuances.

"To say that someone *is like my liver*, is equally warm and praising as saying *he is my heart*," writes Tajik.

But most of the book is about politics, why trade unions are so important, what will happen to the oil industry and how gender equality will be reached despite the social control that exists in small societies like Bjørheimsbygd and in immigrant environments.

The Hurdal platform

The political agreement reached between the Labour Party and the Centre Party at Hurdal – hence the name the Hurdal platform – is full of political aims for the labour market:

- The government wants to strengthen the tripartite cooperation making it more binding and more strategic in order to face the big challenges that Norway faces in the years to come.
- It wants to stimulate more union membership among both workers and employers. The government wants to work closely with the social

partners to secure a serious and organised labour market.

- It wants to carry out a spring clean of the labour market to secure permanent full-time jobs with Norwegian wages and working conditions.

Some of the concrete measures include a doubling of the tax rebate for trade union fees, the reintroduction of the right to collectively sue companies that hire illegally and making public employers hire more people with physical handicaps.

Hadia Tajik also inherits what has been called the greatest legal injustice in recent Norwegian history – the imprisonment of 80 people and the forcing of a further 2,400 people to pay back benefits.

The accused had taken unemployment benefits with them abroad, which the Norwegian welfare authority NAV claimed was illegal. However, it turned out both NAV, Norwegian governments and the courts had misinterpreted regulations in the EEA agreement, which gives Norway access to the EU common market.



A third version of Hadia Tajik: the official photograph of her as Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion. Photo: NTB Kommunikasjon/Prime Minister's Office

Hadia Tajik's first decision as Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion was to extend Covid support measures until the end of the year.

“This government is in no doubt: The measures will be in place for the duration of the crisis,” said Hadia Tajik.



Collective agreement extensions – the second best alternative?

Why is there so much resistance in the Nordics against the EU Commission directive on minimum wages? The answer is that the countries believe they have a nearly perfect system of collective agreements, so why change something that works? In many European countries where the social partners are weaker, extensions of collective agreements form an important part of the wage model.

THEME

16.11.2021

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

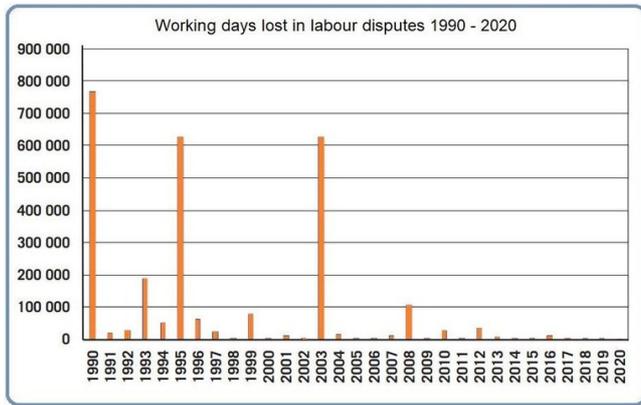
In her opening speech at a Nordic conference on wage formation in Helsinki on 14 October, Minister of Employment Tuula Haatainen emphasised that wage formation based on collective agreement negotiations is an integral part of the Nordic welfare state. The success of the Nordic wage formation model in terms of social justice has been recognised both internationally and in the EU.

“Research shows that a strong culture of agreement and wage formation through negotiations support a society's success

and competitiveness and reduce poverty among employed people,” Haatainen said.

This is about more than equal pay – it reduces the number of industrial disputes.

“Last year, not a single day's work was lost to labour disputes. This has never happened before,” said Irene Wennemo, Director-General of the Swedish National Mediation Office.



The number of working days lost to industrial action. Source: The Swedish National Mediation Office

This could be the endpoint of a development that started in the 1920s and 1930s. Back then, Sweden saw more industrial action than most countries, and now the opposite is true, according to Irene Wennemo.

There are two important dates in this story. In 1928 it was decided that no industrial action should be taken once the partners had agreed to a collective agreement, and any disputes would be solved in a dedicated labour court. In 1938, employers agreed that wages would be set through collective bargaining – the so-called Saltsjöbad agreement.

“These agreements still mean a lot for the Swedish model,” said Irene Wennemo.

Other important dates are 1956, when coordinated negotiations were introduced, and 1997, the year of the Industrial Cooperation and Negotiation Agreement which gave export industries a leading role in the wage formation process.

Collective agreements are considered the norm in the Nordic region, and it is often understated quite how different the Nordic model really is.



Jelle Visser, Professor at the University of Amsterdam. Photo: Niva.

Sectoral bargaining does not exist outside of Europe, except in South Africa and Argentina. It is a very rare thing, pointed

out Professor Jelle Visser from the University of Amsterdam. He is one of Europe’s leading experts on collective agreement negotiations.

Visser has edited a book on the extension of collective agreements together with Susan Hayter. It is published by the International Labour Organisation.

When Jelle Visser gave a quick introduction to how wage formation works in Europe, the most striking thing was the differences. No one model dominates, but in all the countries wage negotiations happen on different levels, both within sectors and locally in the workplace.

National agreements are rare. Belgium is the exception, where there is a national wage level ceiling. By law, wages cannot increase beyond the average wage increases in the Netherlands, France and Germany.

“The minimum wage is in turn decided by an inflation index, but the Belgian system is very unusual,” pointed out Jelle Visser.

The most common solution is sector-based agreements which are adjusted through local negotiations in the workplace – but here too there are exceptions. In the Netherlands, collective agreements allow for individual choices based on your own situation. Anyone is free to choose between shorter hours or higher pay.

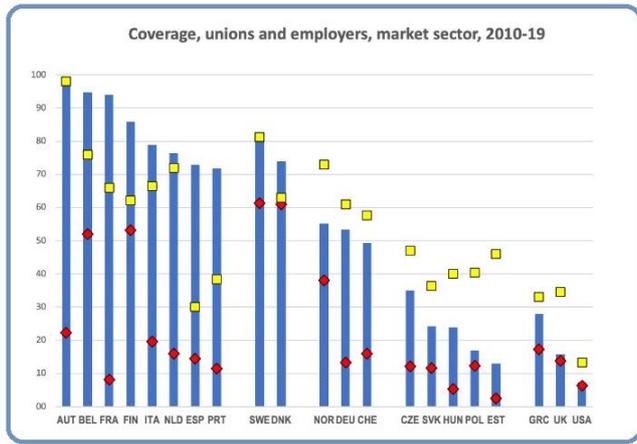
“The most common solution is that local negotiations can only lead to better conditions than the ones that apply to an entire sector. But in Spain employers can also negotiate conditions that are worse, in which case the local agreement takes precedence over the one covering the sector. This is, of course, very problematic for the trade unions.

Weaker unions

Trade union membership in the private sector has fallen across Europe. According to researcher Lawrence Summer, a former advisor to Presidents Clinton and Obama, the past 20 to 30 years have seen a structural weakening of trade unions. There are three main reasons:

- There has been a negative political attitude towards trade unions since 1980, especially in countries like the USA and the UK.
- Shareholders have gained more power, limiting wage growth.
- Many of the jobs that have had high union membership numbers face competition from both robots and AI, as well as from low-wage countries.

Jelle Visser showed a graph of collective agreement coverage in the private sector in 21 OECD countries, marked with blue columns. Austria is top with nearly 100%, while the USA is bottom. The tall columns to the left are countries where the extension of collective agreements play an important role.



Only Denmark and Sweden have both high collective agreement coverage (blue columns) while more than 60% of private sector employers (red square) and the employees (yellow square) are organised.

The extension of collective agreements means trade unions and employers negotiate an agreement that the state then decide will cover an entire sector.

The yellow squares show how many of the employees are unionised, while the red square shows how many employers are members of an employers’ organisation.

Sweden and Denmark are the only countries where more than 60% of employers are organised. Even more employees are organised in these two countries. If Iceland was included, the country would have ended up in the same group, while Finland, where the extension of collective agreements is commonplace, falls into the group with the highest coverage.

Norway, along with Germany, has lower collective agreement coverage, only partly compensated for by the extension of collective agreements in some sectors with a high level of foreign labour.

“Undoubtedly, the extension of collective agreements has a stabilising effect on the institution of collective bargaining,” concluded Jelle Visser.

But his presentation also shows how isolated Denmark and Sweden are in their fight against statutory minimum wages in Europe. The “perfect” collective agreement model really only exists in these two countries.



"Important to continue the extension of collective agreements"

Many workers enjoy improved conditions thanks to the extension of collective agreements. One leader of a trade union organising fisheries workers believes the solution must continue even though it is not a magic solution.

THEME

16.11.2021

TEXT: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

Collective agreements are commonplace in the Nordics, but nearly unknown elsewhere. For them to work, both employees and employers must be organised. Researchers in Norway have said that the extension of collective agreements is not a magic solution for a fair labour market.

The extension of collective agreements means some or all of the elements of the agreement will cover everyone working within one sector, whether they are organised or not. One way of achieving agreements for a whole sector is to let trade unions and employers negotiate an agreement – and then extend it.

It was the Norwegian parliament's recognition of the EEA agreement in 1992 that brought about the introduction of legislation for the extension of collective agreements. The EEA agreement meant that workers from EU countries no longer needed work permits. Foreign employees working in Norway must be treated like Norwegian employees in most areas. The law on extensions of collective agreements aims to secure equal conditions for foreign labour, explains the independent analytical group Economics Norway.

It means some parts of a collective agreement becomes compulsory minimum requirements. This was first used in Norway at seven petroleum plants in 2004, yet it was dropped after 2010.

A necessary measure

The Fafo research foundation has studied the importance of extending collective agreements. One report about low-paid workers asks whether union membership will fall if, due to the extension of collective agreements, you no longer need to be organised to receive a collective agreement-based salary. As Europe faces falling union membership numbers, the extension of collective agreements will naturally come up for discussion.

Yet Ann-Solveig Sørensen, trade union secretary at the Norwegian Union of Food, Beverage and Allied Workers (NNN), believes the extension of collective agreements is necessary. Her union members include all those working in Norway's fish-farming sector.

"NNN demanded the extension of parts of our collective agreement because we could document instances of social dumping in that sector – in particular foreign labour hired for shorter periods. We saw examples of double work contracts with salaries as low as 400 euro a month," she tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

Social dumping is real

NNN believes the extension of collective agreements is necessary to avoid social dumping.

"People working for Norwegian employers should enjoy proper pay and working conditions. Companies should have a level playing field. The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority says most pay wages according to collective agreements, but some still cheat. That is why it is important to continue with the extension of collective agreements – we should not remove something that works," says Sørensen.



"So far, elements like minimum pay, apprenticeship certificates and shift allowances are covered by the extension. We

must now consider whether this is enough or whether other parts of the agreement should be extended. NNN has so far not taken a position on this," she says.

It is important to strengthen the watchdogs' mandate to allow them to supervise companies in order to discover any discrepancies or social dumping.

A board decides

The Labour Inspection Authority says the extension of collective agreements only happens in sectors where it has been proven that foreign workers can be paid less and offered lower working conditions than what is normal.

The Collective Bargaining Board of Norway can decide that a national collective agreement must apply to all workers within one sector, by adopting regulations for extensions for the relevant sectors. These regulations will state which parts of the collective agreements are extended, for instance the rule for minimum pay.



Iceland received the most refugees per capita in 2020 among the Nordics

Immigration to OECD countries fell by 30% in 2020 to 3.7 million people. That is the lowest level since 2003. Denmark, Finland and Norway received fewer asylum seekers per capita than the OECD average, while Iceland and Sweden took in considerably more.

NEWS

01.11.2021

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: UNHCR/VINCENT TREMEAU

The International Migration Outlook 2021, the OECD's annual report on migration and integration, shows that the pandemic had a huge impact on the 2020 numbers. Corona hit people with foreign heritage, and especially young people, more than other groups.

As he presented the report, the OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann warned that an entire decade's progress of bridging the gap in employment and unemployment between immigrants and native citizens had been eradicated.

Employment levels among immigrants in three out of four OECD countries fell during the pandemic. On average, employment levels among foreign-born are now three percent-

age points lower than those among the native-born. Unemployment among immigrants is two percentage points higher.

The OECD has 38 member states, and its statistics look slightly different from what we are used to seeing with European eyes. For the second year running, the highest number of asylum seekers came from Venezuela, followed by Afghanistan and Syria. Six in ten of the asylum seekers' main country of origin were in Latin America.

Among all the OECD countries, the USA has received the most asylum seekers since 2017. In 2020, the country saw 250,000 applications, which represented a 17 % drop com-

pared with the previous year. Germany is in second place with 103,000 applications.

Last year, Spain was for the first time among the three countries that had the most asylum applications with 86,000. Nine in ten of those seeking asylum in Spain came from Latin America or the Caribbean.

The Latin American refugee wave has had a smaller impact on other European countries, where Afghanistan has become the most acute problem.

“So far EU countries have already evacuated more than 18,000 Afghans who worked for EU countries, but also journalists, female football players, female judges, fundamental rights defenders and others in need of protection,” said Ylva Johansson, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs with responsibility for EU’s refugee and integration policies, in a comment to the report.

The report notes that the Nordic region as a whole no longer has a very generous refugee policy.

“The Nordic countries have long been among the OECD countries that receive the highest number of asylum seekers. However, in 2020 there were considerably fewer people seeking asylum in the Nordics compared to previous years. In fact, 2020 has been a low-water mark compared to the 15 previous years in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway,” the report’s authors write.

Country	Asylum seekers 2020, total number	Asylum seekers per million inhabitants
Denmark	1 140	249
Finland	1 460	264
Iceland	630	1 846
Norway	1 340	247
Sweden	13 630	1 350
OECD	1 289 170	630

The grid shows that Iceland and Sweden received the most asylum seekers per capita compared to the other Nordic countries. Source: OECD

Sweden, however, did receive a significant number of asylum seekers – both in numbers and relative to the country’s population size. But it was in fact Iceland that received the most asylum seekers per one million citizens. Since there are not one million Icelanders, the average number is three times higher than the total number of asylum seekers, of which there were 630. The three largest groups of asylum seekers came from Palestine, Iraq and Venezuela.

Citizenship	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Total
VE - Venezuela	2	1	3	10	12	13	16	29	23	109
PS - Palestina	15	1	7	1	2	25	7	9	5	72
NG - Nigeria	1	6	5	6	3	8	12	3	-	44
SV - Syriland	3	3	2	3	4	11	1	7	10	44
IQ - Irak	12	4	6	7	-	2	3	1	5	40
AF - Afghanistan	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	19	6	28

Asylum seekers from Venezuela have so far this year been the largest group of refugees in Iceland. Source: Útlendingastofnun.

The number of foreign-born people in Iceland has nearly doubled between 2010 and 2020.

Asylum seekers are just one of several groups of migrants. Some of the other major groups include family reunions, labour migrants, seasonal workers and students. According to the OECD report, family reunions was the group that fell the most with 35 %, while labour migration fell 24 %.

The pandemic did not have that much of an effect on migration patterns between different EU countries, nor for seasonal workers. The latter fell by 10 % on average across the OECD. In certain countries like the USA and Poland, it even increased despite the pandemic.

Foreign-born people were harder hit than the rest of the population in most OECD countries. Yet the effect on employment and unemployment was highest in the Nordic region, except from in Denmark and Finland. In Sweden, foreign-born people were four times more hard-hit than the native population, according to the OECD.

Country	Unemployment, foreign-born	Increase in unemployment, percentage point	Gap to native-born
Denmark	8.6	+ 0.2	3.2
Finland	13.8	+ 1.8	6.3
Iceland	11.7	+ 7.0	6.9
Norway	8.9	+ 1.4	5.5
Sweden	19.0	+ 3.5	13.8
OECD	10.0	+ 3.4	2.6

The grid shows unemployment among foreign-born people and how this changed compared to 2019. The last column shows the gap between the foreign-born and the native population (in percentage points). Source: OECD