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Security issues drive political changes in Nordics and EU

Sep 19, 2024

Theme 1: Fighting work-related crime, Theme 2: Sport as occupation



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All prim and proper in sports and construction

In this edition, we have two themes: The fight against work-related crime and Sport as occupation. We thought they were very different. But there are things in common also here.

NEWS

19.09.2024

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

When we brainstormed story ideas about sports, we had a somewhat critical perspective, envisioning a famous athlete giving a pep talk at a corporate seminar. But does hurdling, handball or high jump really have anything to do with how a company or organisation is run? Even for driven managers aiming to advance their careers?

However, it did not take us long to realise that if you look at sport as an occupation, you still face all the usual working life issues. How do you combine your job with your private life, especially when it involves a lot of travel? When so much is expected from you, is there a risk of burnout? And do coaches really have any job security or are they out the door after one lost match?

But sports also play an important role, not only as training for working life but also in promoting inclusion and offering vulnerable youth an alternative to crime.

“Training makes me physically stronger. But it is about much more than that. It also gives me discipline, mental strength, improved self-confidence and a feeling of achievement,” says Matěj Petrovič who ended four years of passivity thanks to the Boost project, which is run by the Rosengård football club in Malmö.

When the Nordic Labour Journal’s reporters suggest stories to cover in their patches, it is always exciting to see how they interpret a theme. This edition features stories about:

- The researcher who argues coaching as a profession must become more sustainable
- The Finn and Swede who play and coach football in Norway
- The Danish football player who is making history in the Faroe Islands
- The cross-country ski coach who hunts for gold – but not at any price
- The company sports programmes that make Icelanders ride their bikes to their workplace

From Finland, we received a completely unexpected perspective – there are often two different sports clubs within the same discipline and sport. This has a historical explanation rooted in the 1918 Finnish Civil War when the Finnish Sports Federation sided with the Whites.

The Reds, who fought for the working class, formed their own sports clubs after the war. This division extended even to sports typically associated with the upper class, such as sailing.

Class war feels like an outdated concept. Are we not all enjoying the good life in the Nordic welfare states? Yet there is still exploitation and outright criminality on construction sites, in cleaning businesses and in the blueberry forests.

Foreign labourers are not paid what they are due and their working conditions often fall short of being decent.

Just how bad the conditions can be was revealed in the Danish TV documentary *The Black Swan*, which unveiled how criminal gangs and corporate lawyers cooperate to defraud the state of millions, launder money and exploit foreign labour in violation of regulations meant to prevent social dumping.

Hired labour often comes from the Baltics. For several years, there has been Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the fight against work-related crime, which Sweden will now also join. A seminar in Stockholm assessed how this cooperation can develop and become more efficient.

“We have different skills and experiences from our work against work-related crime, so the collaboration and knowledge exchange between the Nordic and Baltic countries run both ways,” says Renars Lusis, Director of the Lithuanian State Labour Inspectorate.

An effective way to create more orderly conditions has been implemented in Norway. Last year, the government changed the regulations for temporary labour and introduced a ban in Oslo on the use of staffing agencies for temporary work.

This had consequences for the construction of the new government quarter.

“There was a considerable amount of staffing agencies involved in the project between January and June last year. When the ban came into effect, it all stopped,” says Øyvind Helle, the LO representative on the site.

Sixteen staffing companies have sued the Norwegian state, claiming that the ban violates the EEA Agreement, which grants Norway the same rights as EU countries in most areas. The matter will be decided by the EFTA Court this autumn.

The Nordic and Baltic countries’ cooperation takes place within the EU framework, where Ursula von der Leyen has been re-elected for a new five-year term as Commission President.

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has expressed concern that there is no longer a Commissioner for Employment, following von der Leyen’s presentation of her new commissioners.

Instead, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the intensifying global competition between the major trading blocs – the US, EU, and China – get most of the attention. This has also led to political changes in the Nordic region.



Norway doing construction in a more orderly way, but EU temping rules might stop it

When Oslo's new government quarter is constructed, it is done with workers who have regulated wages and working conditions. This is ensured, among other things, by the controversial hiring ban.

THEME

19.09.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

It is now 13 years since the 2011 terror attack. The bomb outside the highrise *Høyblokka* where parts of the government had offices caused structural damage to the building that had been built in 1958.

In January 2021, the rehabilitation of *Høyblokka* began, along with the construction of new buildings in the government quarter in Oslo's city centre.

The builder Statsbygg initiated one of the largest construction projects in Norway's history, which aims to provide secure and quality workplaces for government departments.

The construction of the new government quarter has been underway for three and a half years. It is due to be finished in 2030.

Strict security measures

Øyvind Helle has been the government quarter coordinator for the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions LO since the beginning in 2020.



Øyvind Helle is the LO coordinator at the Oslo government quarter construction site. He makes sure everyone is following the rules.

“It is very demanding. The construction of the new government quarter is a special project covered by a strict security regime,” says Helle.

We meet him outside the construction site, as there are tight rules for who can get inside. Norwegian press photographers were only allowed in to take pictures from the inside a few weeks ago.

A large workplace

Helle has been an LO coordinator for many years and across many major construction projects. He was the trade union movement representative when Oslo’s new National Museum was built.

Helle is also part of *Samarbeid mot svart økonomi SMSØ* (Cooperation against the black economy) Oslo/Viken, where he represents LO. *SMSØ* is an alliance of key players in the labour and business sectors who wish to cooperate in the fight against the black economy.

And that is partly why we are talking to Helle. Because at a site with multiple contractors, many subcontractors, and even more workers – how do they ensure that everything is running as it should?

“It is challenging to keep an overview. But we feel we have good control with the operators that are involved and an overview over the workers, and that we can keep a tab on what we want, like wages and working conditions,” says Helle.

The LO coordinator gives praise to Statsbygg, who he sees as being at least as keen as himself on following laws and regulations.

While we are waiting for EFTA

Last year, the government tightened the rules on temporary labour. This included a ban on hiring employees from staffing agencies for temporary work. 16 staffing companies sued the government, arguing that the rules on temporary labour were in conflict with the EEA Agreement.

The EFTA Surveillance Authority (ESA) and the EU Commission also believe the ban contravenes the EEA Agreement. However, the Oslo District Court and the Borgarting Court of Appeal have determined that the hiring ban does not violate the EEA Agreement.

The staffing agencies brought the case to the Supreme Court’s Appeals Committee, which overturned the Court of Appeal’s ruling.

A new ruling in the District Court will only be made after the EFTA Court has issued its opinion. The EFTA Court has indicated that it will deliver its judgment sometime this autumn.

Before and after the ban

At the new government quarter construction site, there is a time “before” and “after” the hiring ban that came into effect in the summer of last year. From one day to the next, the main rule in Oslo changed from no ban to a ban on the use of temporary labour.

“There was a considerable amount of staffing agencies involved in the project between January and June last year. When the ban came into effect, it all stopped,” explains Helle.

Hired workers got permanent jobs. This was the same across all sectors – from concrete workers to electrical workers.



This is how the new government quarter will look when it is finished in 2030. Photo: Statsbygg/Team Urbis/Nordic Office of Architecture

“A number of people who were employed by staffing companies were given permanent positions at the companies where they were hired to work. It worked out very well,” Helle explains.

They also see that contractors, in the absence of available labour, borrow from each other, as was the case before staffing companies made their entrance in the 2000s.

Trying to find loopholes

He believes that things went smoothly partly because Statsbygg is also committed to following laws and regulations. Perhaps the strict safety regime of the construction project has also helped a bit. The trade union movement does say that there are attempts to circumvent the current hiring ban.

“We hear about staffing agencies who do not ‘hire’ out but ‘borrow’ labour for a fee. Some will always try to find loopholes. But we discover this and take action,” says Helle.

As the LO coordinator, he works closely with workers’ representatives and unions. This network is crucial in order to pick up such cases and follow them up, according to Helle.

What is the biggest change from before and after the ban?

“Before the ban, everything was very unclear. We would for instance be dealing with tens of staffing agencies on the project. It was difficult to monitor and verify things. We might only get an overview after the workers had gone. It was difficult to follow up on salaries and contracts, and as a result, it was difficult to disclose potential labour crimes and social dumping.

“With the new rules, we don’t have staffing agencies on the construction site, apart from those who might be working under the exception rules.”

What do you think about the total ban on hired workers? Is that the right measure to prevent social dumping?

“I am not entirely sure. Bringing in a ban will always mean that someone tries to find ways around it to reach the market they operate in. New and stricter rules on hiring were brought in as early as 2019. They were not in place long enough for us to find out whether they were sufficient,” says Helle.

A sustainable culture

The construction unions in the Oslo area have been mapping the use of temporary labour on construction sites in the region every other year since 2011. The latest survey was conducted in the autumn of 2023.

The De Facto report, "Out on the Construction Site, Entering a New Era," examines the situation on construction sites in Oslo and Akershus following the ban on the use of staffing agencies. The report also provides an insight into the situation in Bergen.



LO coordinator Øyvind Helle at Youngstorget, often the trade union movement's arena, with the new government quarter rising in the background.

The report concludes: “We are seeing the emergence of a new and more sustainable culture when it comes to staffing and production on the construction sites.”

Here’s an example from the electrical industry: Before the ban, temporary labour made up almost 50 per cent of the workforce, but now, according to the survey, "there are almost no people from the staffing industry to be seen on the construction site.”

No pure idyll

The report also says the survey indicates an increasing awareness and understanding of the hiring regulations among construction management and project leaders on-site.

“At the same time, the survey shows that the construction industry in the capital region has not become a ‘pure idyll’ after the ban on staffing agencies was implemented. There are still isolated cases of illegal hiring, where employees from staffing agencies are used on construction sites.

“More concerning, though, are cases where companies operate under ‘false flags’. This refers to former staffing agencies that have changed their business code in the Brønnøysund Register and re-registered as production companies in the construction industry, without meeting the required specifications that apply to construction firms,” the report says.

In Bergen, Unionen, a trade union under the United Federation of Trade Unions, conducted a survey of over 50 workplaces during the summer and autumn of 2023. The situation there is somewhat different from Oslo and its surrounding areas:

“Despite significant changes in the rules, which now prohibit hiring for temporary work, the improvement in compliance has been only marginal,” according to the findings from Bergen.



Tight Nordic-Baltic cooperation against work-related crime

Work-related crime is a growing problem that requires cross-border collaboration between state authorities and countries. For several years, a Nordic-Baltic collaboration on work-related crime has been in place. In January 2025, it will be formalised on the initiative of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

THEME

19.09.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: GUNHILD WALLIN

Even before the conference “Nordic-Baltic Seminar on Work-Related Crime” has begun, the sound levels are high and the lobby is filling up with Nordic and Baltic colleagues greeting each other warmly. They are representatives from different authorities in their respective countries who fight work-related crime on a daily basis.

Many have also worked together in recent years to find ways of reducing cross-border crime. The focus is on communicating successful practices and shaping joint measures and collaborations. The exchange of knowledge and information is also on the agenda.



Renars Lusis, Director of the Lithuanian State Labour Inspectorate.

“We have different skills and experiences from our work against work-related crime, so the collaboration and knowledge exchange between the Nordic and Baltic countries run both ways,” says Renars Lusis, Director of the Lithuanian State Labour Inspectorate.

“We have also developed an informal network, so if I want to hear how one country has solved a problem I can simply call one of my Baltic or Nordic colleagues.”

The conference is held in Stockholm on a Thursday in September and is hosted by the Swedish government under the Swedish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Sweden is the only Nordic country that has not been part of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation on work-related crime, but from January 2025, the cooperation will be formalised following an initiative by Sweden presented during a labour ministers' meeting in Iceland in November.

This means that Sweden will also become part of the Nordic-Baltic collaboration on work-related crime, even though there have already been significant exchanges of inspiration and knowledge before this.

“It is crucial to fight crime, fraud and abuse linked to the labour market. Work-related crime means workers risk being exploited in various ways, which increases insecurity in working life. To stop these types of crime it is important to cooperate across borders,” said Minister for Employment Paulina Brandberg as she opened the Stockholm conference.

Many kinds of work-related crime

The Swedish delegation against work-related crime has defined work-related crime as “qualified practices that violate provisions in laws and agreements related to working life”. These involve deliberate and/or organised violations of existing laws and regulations where workers are exploited, competition with other companies is distorted or the public sector is affected.

It is difficult to estimate exactly how extensive work-related crime is, but according to the Swedish delegation against work-related crime, it is a serious problem. For instance, they estimate that undeclared wages linked to work-related crime in 2021 amounted to 81 – 91 billion kronor (€7m – €8m) in Sweden alone.

Dependency creates fear and poor self-control

Work-related crime also has major effects on working environments. The Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise, Mynak, presented to the conference a new survey of Nordic countries' experiences of the effect that work-related crime has on working environments.

The results show that where work-related crime occurs, workers are exploited in various ways regardless of gender and industry, and that the working environment suffers.



Monica Kaltenbrunner, process-oriented analyst at the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise Mynak. Photo: Mynak.

Monica Kaltenbrunner from Mynak conducted the survey and describes a world of workers who are afraid to complain because they think they might lose their jobs, and workers who earn far less than the wages agreed in collective agreements and who sometimes are paid late or not at all.

Many of the workers who were sent by their employers from their home countries arrive in countries where they do not understand the language. It is also not unusual that workers have signed contracts that they do not understand. They might believe they have a formal employment contract, when in fact they do not.

The survey also exposed problems with the physical working environment. For instance, in sectors such as agriculture and cleaning, workers face high temperatures and few opportunities for ventilation or time to recover. Others describe disturbing odours, poor lighting and dust. Safety is another problem.

This could be down to the fact that posted workers have a different approach to safety – “I am a man and will not be wearing a helmet”. They might not understand existing safety regulations or may be asked to cover the cost of safety equipment themselves. Workers who come from other countries than the host country often work harder than domestic workers and get paid less.

Several workers also describe working environments where workers are treated differently based on appearances, origin or migration status.

“In all of the surveyed industries we met workers facing high demands and little control. That is not good at all,” said Monica Kaltenbrunner during her presentation.

Nordic trust being challenged

Cecilie Myrvold and Anne Kristine Holstad are both facing the reality described by Monica Kaltenbrunner in her report “How Work-Related Crime Impacts Workers’ Working Environments”. They have been inspectors with the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority since 2017.



Cecilie Myrvold and Anne Kristine Holstad, both inspectors with the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority.

They explain how they might arrive to inspect a company and workers run away because they lack the relevant paperwork. Or they meet workers who have signed working hour agreements that mean they do not get paid overtime. When an employee has signed something like that, there is little the inspectors can do.

“We cannot lie down and cry. Instead have to use the measures that are available to us and escalate further up the organisation the things we cannot address,” says Anne Kristine Holstad.

Both inspectors wish they had more tools at hand when they meet workers who have fallen victim to work-related crime.

“I wish there were stricter requirements for employers to register workers so that everyone must be registered in national databases before they start working here,” says Cecilie Myrvold.

When they face companies that are part of organised crime, they collaborate with the police and other relevant partners. The inspectors are never alone in the field and are always operate at least in pairs.

“What separates organised crime from smaller fraudsters is that they have a lot of money. Their legal papers are often in order and if we say a new ventilation system is needed they can afford to invest a million kroner to do it,” says Cecilie Myrvold.

Anne Kristine Holstad considers how one of the main pillars of Norway’s labour market is being challenged when people from many different countries and companies become a part of that labour market.

“The Norwegian model is built on tripartite cooperation and it is based on trust, voluntary action and consensus. We have built our system around this way of thinking. When we then face cultures that are not built on trust, they do not understand our conditions or way of reasoning.”

Both believe there has been an increased and welcome awareness of work-related crime, which includes an understanding that is not a “quick fix”.

Increased cooperation between countries and their authorities

The idea that the fight against work-related crime is not a “quick fix” is also confirmed when all the countries that have participated so far in the cooperation share their experiences and explain how they are working to combat the issue.

There are many measures in place, including increasingly developed cooperation between authorities such as the police, tax agencies, labour inspectors, and local and regional stakeholders. Several countries, including Norway and Sweden, have also established regional centres focused on work-related crime.

The Nordic-Baltic cooperation has also seen countries carry out joint inspections, a project that has been studied by the Norwegian Fafo Research Foundation.



Anne Mette Ødegård, senior researcher at Fafo and head of the project Fafo Østforum, which collects news on labour immigration and organises seminars.

“You have to cooperate across borders to keep a tab on posted workers. Today, labour moves easily between countries and national authorities cannot keep up. National labour inspection authorities cannot manage this in isolation and this is not only about working environments but also the right to security and taxes,” says Anne Mette Ødegård at Fafo.

It is not clear exactly how many EU citizens are sent to work in a different country, but in 2022 there were approximately 1.8 million. On top of that, some are sent from non-EU countries, and they are often even more vulnerable.

“In Norway, organised crime is increasingly infiltrating the labour market. During labour shortages, third-country citi-

zens become more attractive and it has been said this labour is as profitable as the drug trade. That's why countries must face the challenges together, exchange experiences and formulate requirements," says Anne Mette Ødegård.



Denmark cracks down on social dumping and money laundering

Danish authorities have introduced tighter legislation and lawsuits to stop cooperation between gangs and lawyers in cases of money laundering and social dumping.

NEWS

19.09.2024

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

The TV documentary *The Black Swan* sent shockwaves through Denmark in early 2024 with revelations that criminal gangs and corporate lawyers are collaborating to defraud the state of millions, launder money and exploit foreign labour in violation of rules designed to prevent social dumping.

In the months following the documentary's release, the Danish government and parliament have tightened legislation in several areas. Multiple lawsuits against the main figures in the case have been initiated or are already on their way to the courts.

Corporate lawyer Amira Smajic played a main role in the scandal exposed by *The Black Swan* and was subsequently charged with fraud, forgery and theft. She was sentenced to three months in prison for fraud but pleaded not guilty and appealed the verdict.

A new trial against Amira Smajic includes ten other alleged criminal offences, and it was scheduled to start on 12 September 2024. However, she reported being ill a few days before and the trial was delayed, according to several Danish media.

Angry minister of justice

Another lawyer was charged in September 2024 for money laundering involving millions of Danish kroner and for allowing large sums of money to flow through their own client account without making sure it did not stem from criminal activities. The charges were brought by the National Special Crime Unit (NSK) following more than 18 months of investigations.

According to the NSK, the lawyer used so-called pooled client accounts, where funds from multiple clients are collected in order to conceal and obscure the origins of the money. According to the NSK prosecutor, the lawyer had also carried out several money transfers to so-called invoice factories – companies that issue fake invoices.



Minister of Justice Peter Hummelgaard. Photo: Ministry of Justice

On 10 September 2024, the Danish government announced it would introduce a bill to strengthen control over whether lawyers are using pooled client accounts for money laundering. Banks will be given greater powers to check that lawyers' pooled client accounts are not being used for money laundering, and Minister of Justice Peter Hummelgaard said this in a press release:

"I, like many others, was deeply outraged to see how members of society's elite and violent criminals appeared to help each other defraud our common funds in the documentary *The Black Swan*. It is deeply reprehensible, though unfortunately not surprising, to see how, among other things, lawyers' pooled client accounts were exploited."

Stricter penalties

On 1 July 2024, Denmark also introduced a so-called "gang package" which involves stricter penalties and improved tools for police to fight gang-related financial crime like that unveiled in the TV documentary.

The gang package was passed by a broad majority in parliament. It means there is now a double penalty for certain forms of gang-related financial crime. Police have also been given better tools to investigate cases involving serious money laundering.

A multidisciplinary team has also been established at the National Special Crimes Unit, which will specifically target gang-related organised financial crime, including the invoice factories.

Police have been given additional powers to perform covert searches in cases of severe money laundering, and it has become easier to confiscate criminal proceeds from gang members, often hidden with their partners or children.

There are now also expanded options for using undercover agents and phone tapping in cases involving various economic crimes, including serious money laundering.

"With the gang package we are taking a tough stance against the gangs' shady businesses and organised financial crime," said Minister of Justice Peter Hummelgaard when the gang package was adopted.

90 fled and Indian nationals charged

Danish controls on social dumping have also been significantly tightened. In 2023, the Danish Working Environment Authority, the Tax Agency and the police began a tight collaboration to secure proper conditions in the labour market, and the results were presented in September 2024:

Inspections were carried out at nearly 8,000 Danish and foreign companies, resulting in 4,550 working environment notices. The Working Environment Authority has noted that 90 people have fled their workplaces.

The Tax Agency carried out more than 3,000 tax and duty inspections aimed at companies and people in sectors with the highest risk of rule violations. It resulted in tax collections worth half a million kroner (€67,000). That is an increase of 60 per cent on last year.

This joint authority drive against social dumping has also led to collaboration with Poland and the European Labour Authority (ELA) with the aim of coordinating inspections of Polish companies in Denmark.

A Polish temporary employment agency that posted Indian workers to a construction site in Denmark was inspected in February 2024, and 33 Indian workers were charged with violating immigration laws because they did not have the required work permits for operating in Denmark.

Minister for Employment Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen (Social Democrats) said:

"Many of the challenges we face in Denmark with the illegal posting of third-country citizens are the same facing the rest of Europe. That's why it is positive that we collaborate across borders which makes it easier to enforce the rules."

More tools

Recently, a broad political majority reached a new agreement that further tightens efforts against social dumping by pro-

viding more opportunities to crack down on illegal labour. It will now be possible to stop contractors who repeatedly and severely violate the rules – a key demand from trade unions.

It is also now possible to inspect housing rented to employees by employers. Additionally, the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI) can now demand that employees identify themselves during company inspections.

Minister for Employment Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen said in a press release that “the government will not accept that bad actors break the rules and exploit other people. That is why it is positive that authorities jointly continue the fight against social dumping. I want our authorities to have effective tools so that we no longer see the same problems recurring.”



Security issues drive political changes in Nordics and EU

Sweden has a new minister for employment, Denmark has established a new ministry for civil security and Finland secured one of six Executive Vice Presidents in the European Commission.

NEWS

19.09.2024

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Security is a common theme across the changes that have taken place in governments and in the Commission. The Swedish government reshuffle on 10 September was triggered by the surprising announcement from Tobias Billström that he was stepping down as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

He has been given much credit for Sweden finally managing to join Nato. There is speculation that Billström ultimately did not accept that security policy was increasingly being directly managed by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson.

Since Jessika Roswall also became Sweden's candidate for the European Commission and hence disappeared from the government, Kristersson made a wider reshuffle. Two new government ministers were appointed and four others changed ministries.



The new ministers with Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson in the middle. Photo: Magnus Liljegren/Regeringskansliet.

The Liberals' party leader Johan Pehrson was appointed Minister for Education while Mats Persson from the same party took over his previous role as Minister for Employment and Integration.

Maria Malmer Stenegard is the new Minister for Foreign Affairs. She was previously the Minister for Migration.

Denmark also saw a government reshuffle on 29 August. It resulted in an expansion from 23 to 25 government ministers – a new record.

Denmark is the first of the Nordic countries to establish a separate ministry for civil security – the Ministry for State Security and Emergency Management, headed by Torsten Schack Pedersen.

Norway's Ministry of Justice changed its name to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security back in 2012. Since 2021, it has been led by Emilie Enger Mehl. The 22 July 2011 terror attacks were among the reasons why more emphasis was put on civil security.

In Sweden, Carl-Otto Bohlin became the Minister for Civil Defence in 2022, a title not seen since 1951. During World War II, Tage Erlander was one of those who held that position. It was reinstated when the centre-right coalition last came to power in Sweden.

Security is also a priority for the new European Commission, which Ursula von der Leyen presented on 17 September.

Finland's Henna Virkkunen will be the European Commission's next executive vice-president for Tech Sovereignty, Security, and Democracy. She will also be a member of the Commission's top leadership in her role as one of six Executive Vice Presidents.

Virkkunen was re-elected this summer for a third term as an MEP. Before that, she served as Minister of Education, Minister of Local Government and Minister of Transport.

"We have had to strengthen our defence industries since Russia started its war. It has shown us how important high technology is in the defence industry," said von der Leyen as she presented the new Commission.

Sweden's Jessica Roswall will be responsible for the environment, water resilience and a competitive circular economy, while Denmark's Dan Jørgensen will be responsible for energy and housing.

Ursula von der Leyen had asked the 27 EU member countries to nominate both a man and a woman for the commissioner roles. That did not happen.

"When I received the first nominations, we were at a point when we had a share of 22 per cent women and 78 per cent men," said von der Leyen.

"This was totally unacceptable, so I worked intensively with the member states and we were able to improve the share to 40 per cent women and 60 per cent men."

That is a slightly lower share than in the outgoing Commission. But von der Leyen has appointed four women and only two men to what is known as Executive Vice Presidents.

The European Trade Union Congress is negative to the fact that there is no longer a commissioner for social rights, which has existed since the 1970s. The new Commission has instead a portfolio called People, Skills and Preparedness. The Commissioner is Roxana Minzatu from Romania.



This is Ursula von der Leyen's proposed new EU Commission. The commissioners in the outer circle have an overarching responsibility and are known as Executive Vice Presidents. Source: EU.org.

The European Commission will have a dedicated Commissioner for Defense; Andrius Kubilius from Lithuania. He will report directly to Virkkunen, who has the overarching responsibility for security issues.



Coach to Norwegian ski stars: Burnout not worth it

Lage Sofienlund is a successful cross-country skiing coach. While training to be one, he asked himself more than once: “Is being a coach really a career?”

THEME

19.09.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

At Konnerud in Drammen outside of Oslo, people are dreaming of winter and snow. Because this arena is where the foundations for new skiing medals will be laid.

Lage Sofienlund (35) is a full-time cross-country skiing coach at Konnerud Sports Club. One of the athletes he coaches is Kristine Stavås Skistad, right now one of the world’s best female skiers.



Although cross-country ski coach Lage Sofienlund love his job, there are days when he finds it hard to combine work and life as a father of small children.

Lage Sofienlund from Konnerud in Drammen first became aware of coaching as a career through his college's sports programme "coaching leadership". Positive feedback from teachers made him curious.

"I understood that this was something I could both master and enjoy," he says. He had caught the coaching bug and the dream of becoming one grew ever stronger.

Sofienlund now has a master's in coaching and psychology with a specialisation in the coaching role from the Norwegian School of Sports Science.

More than sports

Sofienlund has worked with several different sports. Now he is working full-time for his home club Konnerud.

Before that, he has been the development leader at the Norwegian top-division football club Strømsgodset Toppfotball, among other things.

"Many coaches burn for one particular sport, but I am passionate about developing people," says Sofienlund.

"I approach the coaching role through team building, establishing a culture and getting people to work together," he says.

For him, being a coach is all about getting the best out of the athlete, no matter their age, level or sport. It can be a 14-year-old football player on an amateur team or a cross-country skier aiming for medals at the Cross-Country World Cup in Trondheim in February next year.

When cross-country ski sprinter Skistad was at the top of her game last winter, the coach told the local Drammens Tidende newspaper:

"I am as passionate about becoming a good coach as she is about becoming a good athlete."

A challenging existence

Being a full-time coach is far from a nine-to-five job. The day can begin with coaching senior athletes in the morning, having a few hours off later in the morning before coaching younger athletes in the afternoon and evening. During the season, weekends are taken up with competitions.

A 100 per cent job for the club means Sofienlund has other tasks to attend to also.

"It does allow me some breathing space, but my working days do get very fragmented. I am rarely completely free. This is the existence for many coaches, especially on an amateur level," says Sofienlund.



Just like "everyone" at Konnerudd, Lage Sofienlund is waiting for winter. The snow arrives early and disappears late at the ski arena.

"Lage 24/7"

It is particularly challenging for coaches to have small children. When Sofienlund became a father, he had to rethink his coaching career and how to balance his job and home life. He now has two children aged three and six.

"When you have a family, it is for instance far more challenging to be away from home for long periods of time at training camps and competitions," he says.

"I have told my athletes that they have to accept they cannot have Lage 24/7. If that is what they want, they will have to find a different "Lage"."

A lonely job

As a coach, Sofienlund gives a lot of himself. The coach is an important support for athletes who are striving to reach their full potential – but who is there for the coaches?, asks Sofienlund.

"Coaches are often very alone," he says.

"It is important for success to have someone who can back you, but in many clubs, you have no colleagues to lean on. Being a coach can therefore often feel very lonely, especially in lower levels where you don't have more staff who can share the ups and downs with you."

Your own employer

Many coaching jobs are part-time and must be combined with other jobs.

What do you think about your pension?

"I think that there might not be much of a pension," says Sofienlund.

Few clubs employ coaches. They do not want, or cannot afford, to take on the responsibilities of an employer. The financial conditions are too uncertain.

So coaches often operate independently, for instance as sole traders. They hire out their own labour and invoice for their

hours. They are responsible for their own workers' rights, paying taxes, securing themselves in case of illness and saving for retirement.

It is not uncommon for coaches to face an uncertain future. They do not always know whether they have a job next month or next year.

Is coaching a job?

Sofienlund believes it is important to give the coaching profession the recognition it deserves.

"I think many coaches – especially younger ones – feel they are not being taken seriously. Because is coaching really a job? Many think that being a coach is something to do in addition to your normal job. Or you think of the coach as your dad's mate.

"I wondered myself for a long time if I could call myself a coach and write 'occupation: coach'. It took a few years before I did that. Today, it is the most natural thing in the world for me," says Sofienlund.

The state must help

He believes the Norwegian state should invest more in coaches. He wants to see funds earmarked for coaches' salaries so that more people can become full-time coaches without combining that job with other jobs.

"More government funding must be directed to the clubs and Norway's sporting community. We need to believe that coaches are important from a public health perspective, important for mental health, important to fight exclusion and to get more people into sports. We have to see the coach as an important resource in building a more resilient society," says Sofienlund.

The different occupation

Researcher Marte Bentzen has spent years looking at coaching as a profession. She is an associate professor at the Department of Sport and Social Science at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences in Oslo.



Researcher Marte Berntzen believes efforts must be made to create a more sustainable coaching profession.

Bentzen says that if you compare the coaching profession with more "ordinary" professions, it stands out in several ways.

- Coaches are passionate about their job. They find it difficult to separate work and private life. Many coaches describe their occupation not as a job, but as a lifestyle.
- There are no limits to working hours and workplaces.
- Many find it difficult to combine the coaching role with family life, especially because of unpredictable working hours and much travel.
- The coaching profession is demanding but the working day is a lot of fun. There are more high fives and hugs when you are successful compared to in an ordinary office.
- Many coaches lack workers' rights that workers in other occupations take for granted, like working time arrangements, pension benefits and a clear job description.

The downsides

Even though being a coach can be said to be a lot of fun, a passion and "life itself", it can become tiresome in the long run. Not everyone can take the incredible pressure that a coach might face over time, according to Bentzen.

In her doctoral research, which she finished in 2015, Bentzen looked at top coaches and the prevention of burnout. The study of nearly 300 top coaches in Norway and Sweden showed that one in four coaches reported a high degree of burnout at the end of a season.

A male-dominated occupation

Bentzen does not believe coaching can become a "standard job", but she thinks it is possible to improve conditions so that coaches can enjoy work while also having a good life outside of the sporting world.

The researcher thinks it is important to professionalise the coaching role to make it more sustainable. This can help reduce the gender imbalance and retain competent coaches who might otherwise give up because of the complicated working conditions.



Researcher Marte Bentzen at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences is fascinated by the coaching profession, but also worried about the working conditions for some of the coaches.

The coaching profession is male-dominated, and only seven per cent of top coaches in Norway are women.

“I think we lose many skilled coaches, young men and women because it is too hard to combine the job with family life,” says Bentzen.

Queueing up for your job

Bentzen believes the image of the top coach is something sports need to step away from. She argues that coaches should not have to work around the clock, endure a lot of criticism, hit the wall, burn out and always live in fear of not having their contract renewed or being fired.

“One of the challenges is that several coaches help maintain this stereotype of an “all-in” profession. They argue that a coach needs to put up with it and if they can’t, the profession is not for them.”

And if you do not want to work under such conditions, there will be many who are queueing up to take over your job.

“There is a fight for the good coaching positions because it is considered lucrative to work as a top coach,” says Bentzen.



Living his boyhood dream on Faroese football pitches

Mikkel Dahl has played against global stars like Ivan Perisic, he has won the championship, the cup final and holds the record for most league goals. He has done it all with a club he never heard about before he was 27: Havnar Bóltfelag in the Faroe Islands.

THEME

19.09.2024

TEXT: RÓLANT WAAG DAM, PHOTO: ÁLVUR HARALDSE

There are Danish football players like Christian Eriksen at Manchester United and Andreas Christensen at Barcelona. Players most people will have heard of, who make millions and who have been written into Danish history books as some of the country's greatest footballers.

Into the history books

Mikkel Dahl is not one of them. But he shares the same profession – he makes a living from playing football. It is his job. It is his dream.



Mikkel Dahl's everyday is not like everyone else's everyday. He makes a living playing football.

And he has got himself written into the history books. Not Danish ones, for sure, but the Faroese ones, because with 27 goals he is the player with the most league goals ever scored in one season for the Faroese Premier League – Betri deildin.

For that same reason, Mikkel Dahl is also a name that all football-interested Faroese know. 67 goals in 104 matches make an impression.

An offer out of the blue

Mikkel Dahl is in his fourth season playing in the Faroese Premier League. He was 27 when he joined the Havnar Bóltfelag (HB) club in Tórshavn in 2020. He has remained there ever since, bar for a brief visit to play football in Iceland in 2022.

“The offer from HB was a bit of a surprise out of the blue. One day, after a training session in Denmark, Jens Berthel Askou rang. I had played against his team when he was their coach in Denmark. Now he had moved on, and he told me about HB and the Faroe Islands.

“I must admit I was a little sceptical to begin with. It wasn’t what I had been imagining, but it is a choice I am very happy I made,” explains Mikkel Dahl, who by the way scored in that match against Askou’s team in Denmark.

Police escort

After some discussions back and forth with Askou and his own family in Denmark, Mikkel Dahl decided to try his luck in the top Faroese football league, which also meant a chance to play European football.

This was not an option in Denmark's first division with Nykøbing FC, where Mikkel Dahl played. HB has European matches on the schedule almost every year.

As a result, Mikkel Dahl has played against Glentoran and Derry City from Northern Ireland, Maccabi Haifa from Israel, Budućnost Podgorica from Montenegro, and this year, Hajduk Split from Croatia, with Ivan Rakitić and Ivan Perišić on the team.

Rakitić has played for Sevilla and Barcelona, while Perišić has played for Borussia Dortmund, Inter Milan, Bayern Munich, Tottenham Hotspur, and, yes, his childhood club Hajduk Split, which faced HB and Mikkel Dahl in the UEFA Conference League in July this year.

“The matches against Maccabi Haifa and Hajduk Split are among the best experiences I’ve ever had. Being escorted by police cars to away games, training in a huge stadium the day before the match, and then playing in front of more than 28,000 people.

“It gave me a glimpse of what it must be like to play at the very highest level, if only for a short while. I would never have had these unforgettable experiences if I hadn’t moved to HB,” explains Mikkel Dahl.

No millionaire

There are usually only a couple of European matches each summer. Other than that, it is everyday life – although Mikkel Dahl’s everyday is not like most people’s.

“It’s not a nine-to-five job. And when other people are off, I must perform because our matches are typically on a Saturday or a Sunday. I have to stay in shape and for that reason too I have never really any time off. There is no time for alcohol, partying and celebrations, and because I live abroad I have given up on family gatherings and birthdays,” says Mikkel Dahl.

But he in no way complains about his situation.

“I would of course have liked to be paid the same as Haaland and Mbappé, but you don’t become a millionaire by playing Faroese football. I have all my expenses and needs covered. This is my dream and I am happy about it,” he says.

Can live from football

Mikkel Dahl intentionally mentions Norwegian and French football stars Erling Braut Haaland and Kylian Mbappé, as they are two of the world's highest-paid players.

“Many people think that if you’re a professional footballer, you earn millions and drive a Ferrari. But very few footballers actually do that. On the other hand, I’m often asked if I can make a living playing football when I tell people where and at what level I play. But I can,” says Mikkel Dahl, who is living the dream on the Faroe Islands’ football fields.

When reality replaces the dream

Mikkel Dahl is now 31. He makes sure to eat well and get enough sleep because he hopes and believes that he still has some years left on the pitch. He is also very aware that he has a sell-by-date as a football player. He knows reality will one day come knocking.

“This has been my dream all of my life. I have gone all-in and I am very dedicated. But I have also tried to prepare for life after football as I am very aware that I will be a bit late starting an education compared to many others.

That’s why I pursued a bachelor’s degree in nutrition and health while playing football in Denmark. I think about the fact that I’m not just a football player. It’s my primary focus right now, but it’s not my entire identity,” says Mikkel Dahl.



Pro footballer: Takes more than playing ball

Santeri Väänänen (22) from Finland is a professional football player for Norwegian Rosenborg BK. Everyday life is pretty much the same regardless of which country you are playing in, he thinks.

THEME

19.09.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

Santeri Väänänen has worked for Norwegian Rosenborg BK (RBK) in Trondheim for nearly two years.

“It is good to be here. Living in Trondheim is pretty similar to living in Finland. The similarities made it quite easy for me to move here. Nearly everyone speaks English,” he says happily.

Are you learning Norwegian?

He laughs and points out that Finnish and Norwegian are two very different languages.

“I try to learn a little bit,” he smiles.

“I play football, which I love. I have always played football. When you are a professional it is a bit more than just having

your hobby as a job. You have to turn up on time and be ready to play or train. I have to look after my body,” he says.



You have to turn up on time and keep in shape when you are paid to play football for the top-tier club Rosenborg BK in Trondheim.

Can it be compared to an ordinary job?

“I don’t know. I haven’t had an ordinary job. But my job has some similarities I guess, because you try to get better. I cooperate in groups while I also have to be independent,” says Väänänen.

What about the future? He has no partner and no children.

“Having a family should be possible to combine with the football. It would be more responsibility, but I do think it is possible.”

How do you prepare for the years after your career – what about a pension?

“I am saving money, but I am not giving a pension that much thought,” he says.

What is your annual salary?

Väänänen laughs and looks around the training ground where we are meeting.

“I don’t think the club would let me answer that,” he says and smiles.

A comfortable life

But viewed with Finnish eyes, RBK as an employer is pretty similar to other employers when it comes to holidays and other rights.

“As far as I know, most things are well-regulated. The club takes good care of us. We eat breakfast and lunch together. You get help if you need a flat. I don’t have to stress with anything to do with my life outside of football. So for me, it is a comfortable life. It is a privilege to play for a club like this,” points out the 22-year-old.

What made you choose Trondheim and RBK?

“It was mostly about football. I didn’t know Trondheim before I had this chance, but I have made the right choice. RBK is a step up on my career path. The city is nice. The only thing I wish would be different is for shops to stay open on Sundays, but it is OK without.”



Football player Santeri Väänänen (left) and coach Alfred Johansson do what they enjoy the most at work – playing with a ball.

Everyday life is the same

Väänänen has also played professional football in Finland and can see very few differences.

“Everyday life as a football player is pretty much the same wherever you work. A footballer’s working life is very similar no matter where you might be. But I do get more follow-up here and the support team is bigger compared to in Finland,” he says.

What do you consider to be your home town?

“Helsinki is my home town, even though I can call other places home too. As a professional footballer, your career changes quickly. That’s why I haven’t thought of Trondheim as my home town. But I am open to staying in Norway,” says Väänänen.

“The nature is nice and everyday life is generally good,” the Finnish player points out.

More money in Norway

There are also many similarities to working as a professional footballer in Norway and Sweden, says RBK’s Swedish coach Alfred Johansson (24).

“The way football clubs are run by the members is pretty similar in Sweden and Norway. But as Norwegian football develops and secures more capital compared to Swedish football, salaries have become higher in Norway,” he says.

More professional in Denmark

There are more differences if you compare conditions within the Danish league.

“From what I have seen here in Mid-Norway, most things are like they are in Sweden. But I have also worked for several years in Denmark. F.C. Copenhagen is not run by its members. You quickly feel that there is a more business-oriented mindset compared to here. In Denmark you talk about business models,” he says.

“The difference is obvious when it comes to things like management. There are also differences for players. In Denmark, expectations are high. It is expected that things should be good and improve. In Sweden and Norway it’s a bit more “like we’ve always done it”,” explains Johansson.

In Denmark, the focus on business is clearly more prominent.

“This also leads to differences in mentality. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the Swedish and Norwegian languages are more similar than Danish,” the coach says.



The Swedish football club using sports against unemployment and for inclusion

The challenge for sports clubs is to attract those who have not yet become engaged, especially those who need support on their journey toward a healthier life and who want to become more involved in society. It's about more than just building muscles.

THEME

19.09.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: FAYME ALM

“Training makes me physically stronger. But it is about much more than that. It also gives me discipline, mental strength, improved self-confidence and a feeling of achievement,” says Matvej Petrovic.

He is 23 and started his dream education two weeks before the Nordic Labour Journal met him at Boost by FC Rosengård's premises in Malmö where he has returned for the interview.

“I sat at home for four years doing absolutely nothing. Since 1 September I have been attending vocational school to study game programming in English,” he says, not without pride, as the path to get there has not been straightforward.



Matvej Petrovic.

Despite being a licenced personal trainer, Mattej Petrovic could not manage to get himself out of his inactivity on his own.

“If Boost had not pushed me, I would not have applied for education. Thanks to having regular meetings with my mentor and taking part in the motivational programme, I was reminded of what I already knew about the importance of routines and other things for feeling good. The staff here are so dedicated and they kept pushing me. It helped,” he says.

“Believe in your dreams”

That is the motto of FC Rosengård, the football club whose vision is “to create an equal Malmö that includes all areas and people. Where all children and families dare to believe in their dreams and have goals for the future. Both on and off the pitch.”

The club rests on two main pillars. One is about football – the ladies’ team has won 13 Swedish championships – and the other is social, where Boost by FC Rosengård is one of several initiatives.



Boost, as it is known in everyday language, is a non-profit organisation where unemployed people between 18 and 29 get personal guidance and help to create their own plans and goals. The path to get there goes through the Swedish Public Employment Service.

Since the beginning in 2011, Boost has successfully guided 40 to 45 per cent of participants onward, primarily into further studies.

Looking to the future

Right now, 80 people are signed up. One of them is 25-year-old Bella Petrén. She started at Boost six months ago.

“I’m participating in the motivation-boosting programme which has helped me become better at expressing myself, standing up for myself and even helping others,” she says.



Bella Petrén.

Bella Petrén goes to the gym in her spare time and enjoys strength exercises.

“I can deadlift 120 kilos,” she says. A lift the Nordic Labour Journal’s writer cannot even dare to dream of repeating.

Jesper Henningsson started at Boost two months ago. He soon turns 23 and is already taking his driving theory and has been introduced to the motivation-boosting programme.

“I am now going to the gym only occasionally and sense how my muscles are dwindling. I used to play table tennis when I was younger but stopped when the club went bankrupt. Now, I’m hoping to regain my motivation to start again, because I really want to progress in that sport,” he says.



Jesper Henningsson.

Three flexible paths

Ann Sigvant is the operations manager for Boost by FC Rosengård. She emphasises the holistic approach that characterises the organisation.

“We work with the entire person. That’s why those who come to us can choose between three paths:

- A study path with a tailored pace, individual study planning and help to navigate the education system.
- A work path to improve your CV, master interviews and plan a career.

- A health path that focuses on the connection between exercise and health, and how to achieve a better structure in daily life through diet, sleep, and mental health management.

Many move between paths and can participate in all three.

“Too much sitting still can soon become a vicious cycle,” adds Majlinda Ismaili, a mentor at Boost.

“That’s why we walk a lot. Everyone can do that. Sometimes we do it with an app that talks about the history of Malmö. It is a social event and we move at the same time.”

The young people at Boost can also test other physical activities like badminton, pedal boating on Malmö’s canals, outdoor gyms, yoga and martial arts.



“We try to introduce different sports and often it is the young people themselves who will suggest something. If I love my body, I want to take care of it. That’s when the health path becomes a natural choice,” says Majlinda Ismaili.

Looking to the European Social Fund

Boost by FC Rosengård is run in collaboration with the Employment Service in Malmö city and 11 surrounding municipalities.

The Nordic Labour Journal gets a chat with Mario Filipovic, head of the Youth Section at the Malmö Employment Service.

“When young people come to us, society has not been able to take care of them. If the Employment Service is to help them move on, collaboration with organisations like Boost provides the youths with the support they need to become employable.

“We don’t have the health-promoting resources ourselves but must rely on the non-profit organisations that can offer this,” says Mario Filipovic.

The existing agreement between Boost and the Employment Service runs out at the end of the year. An application has been sent to the European Social Fund to continue the collaboration. An answer is expected towards the end of November.



“The Employment Service must collaborate with several actors to help more people find work. We cannot do this alone and need help from businesses, municipalities and civil society. Good health plays a big role in achieving success. Both for the individual and for society to move forward,” says Mario Filipovic (pictured).

The number of young people outside the labour market has risen considerably after the pandemic, and keeps mounting, according to Filipovic. Right now, 2,118 young people be-

tween 16 and 24 and 2,274 between 25 and 29 are registered with the Employment Service in Malmö.

“It is important to work with social values, democracy, respect and inclusion,” says Majed Alabdallah. He has recently become FC Rosengård’s club and talent developer for the boys’ team.

This autumn term, FC Rosengård had 200 children queueing up for their football school. 100 got in.

“The aim is to attract the children to a fun and active life outside of school. We also offer homework help and reading sessions where we read books with football themes to practice empathy, solidarity, being a good friend and respecting the referee’s decisions.”

To ensure that everyone could participate in football training, FC Rosengård established Segerfondet in 2022, named after Caroline Seger, who for many years was captain of the ladies’ team and who captained the Swedish national team for 15 years.

“Money should be available to those who really need it. This might cover club fees, transport, equipment and more. Both businesses and private individuals can support Segerfonden.”

Football and parents

One of Majed Alabdallah’s tasks is to engage parents of players aged 5 to 12.

“Rosengård has an international population and many parents do not have knowledge about community life and do not speak Swedish either. For many, being active in a club is a completely new tradition and it is a major challenge to inspire them and make them realise that when they get active they also become more included in society.”

Sport and society

So how important is sport for society? And can it actually solve some of our social challenges? The question was posed during the Ystad Summit in September this year, an annual event where people from non-profit organisations, politics, society and business get together with private individuals to discuss current issues and the future.

Johan Norberg, professor of Sports Sciences at Malmö University, was one of the panellists in two of the four program items – out of a total of 80 – that focused on sports.

The societal benefits of sports have different dimensions, he tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

“We know that people benefit in different ways both physically and mentally by doing physical activities and that this can help fight depression and thus improve public health.

“It can also be a way into society for both children and adults. Organised sports are structured enough to be a way to break isolation and meet new people. There are social aspects to club sports.

“If you don’t have a job or have unwanted free time, I believe that sports can be a way to have a meaningful pastime. And all club activities have a welcoming structure. If I go there and say that I want to join, I’ll be welcomed.”

Another point on the programme about sport during the Ystad Summit was called “The Health Gap is Widening – is good health just for rich people?” As a researcher at the Swedish Research Council for Sport Science, Johan Norberg has helped write two reports looking into this issue:

- Sports and segregation – on the role of sport in an unequal society
- Sports and (in)equality – in the interest of members or society?

The short answer Johan Nordberg gives the Nordic Labour Journal is that when comparing Swedish municipalities, sports follow the same patterns as the rankings for income and health.

“Generally speaking, sports fare much better in suburban areas and significantly worse in rural areas. This is a common thread throughout all the analyses.”

Swedish sports analysed

The Swedish Research Council for Sports Science provides independent support to the Swedish government and conducts analysis to examine the status of sports.

“Sports are independent but state-funded. In recent years, this has amounted to 2.3 billion kronor a year (€203m). That is why we need a third party that is sufficiently independent from sports that can analyse how that money is spent,” says Johan Norberg.

Right now, there is no ongoing scientific research on the importance of sport for jobseekers.

“There is of course a need for that type of research. There are many issues to investigate. Sports cannot solve societal challenges like segregation, exclusion and unemployment but it can be an important support,” says Johan Norberg.

The Nordic Labour Journal has not received any answers to requests for comments from the Swedish Minister of Sports Jakob Forssmed and the new Minister for Employment Mats Persson on initiatives taken to promote job seekers’ physical health.



Company sports enjoys high participation levels in Iceland

In most Nordic countries, company sports are overseen by a special federation. In Iceland, it is done by the public sports section at the National Olympic and Sports Association. Participation levels have been good, and the companies see more and more benefits from increasing them.

THEME

19.09.2024

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON

Linda Laufdal, the company sports supervisor at the association, says that the company sports activities revolve mainly around two programs.

“One is called “Hjólað í vinnuna” (Bike to work) which aims to encourage people to use active transport to go to and from work – either cycling or walking. Walking to catch a bus counts.

“But most of those who participate cycle. Each employee is a team member within their company and the companies compete over a three-week period in May. The winner is the company that has the most rides per employee. We also have a

special competition for who rides the furthest – those who take a detour on their way to and from work.”

Linda Laufdal says participation levels have always been good, although it has been a little lower in the last few years.

“We think it’s because this has been going on for so long, many people are regularly cycling to work. We are convinced that this program has helped increase cycling’s popularity in Reykjavik.”

The other program is called Lífshlaupið (Motion for life), where all movement is recorded.

“We usually start in the first week of February to get people going after the Christmas period. Many people start exercising in January and we thought it was a good idea to start this when the power starts to diminish for many people at the end of that month.

“All movement can be recorded, whether it’s a lunch walk, walk or bike ride to and from work and also exercise outside of working hours. The participation is therefore much higher – around 16,000 people.”

Doing great per capita

And speaking of participation numbers, Linda Laufdal says they are very proud of them, especially in Motion for Life. And Iceland compares well to other Nordic countries.

“I just came from a Nordic company sports meeting in Finland. And in Sweden, they have a program called Motionlandslaget where everyone participates in the same team. There are 28,000 participants and they are very pleased with that. But they have of course a much bigger population than we have. So I think per capita we are doing great.”



Representatives from Nordic company sports recently gathered in Finland. (photo: Private)

Linda Laufdal says many companies participate in both programmes every year, and they see more and more benefits from it.

“This is a tool that companies can use to help their employees get some exercise. They know that people need it and when they get it, they feel better in their job. Also, there is sometimes a bit of competition between company divisions or stages. This boosts morale.

“I think this has also led to a lot of companies building locker rooms and showers for those that for example cycle a long way. This has increased significantly, I believe.”

Linda Laufdal says company leaders see the benefits of keeping their employees healthy.

“Healthy employers mean fewer sick days. Many companies are even getting strict when it comes to getting their employees to exercise. Most of us are sitting still for most of our

working hours. The companies are participating because they want their people to be healthy.”

“Everyone supports public health”

Linda Laufdal says their work also had very positive feedback from the ministries of health and education.

“Today everyone supports public health. I think people realised after the pandemic how important public health is. I would say that all our projects, including the ones we do in schools, are getting around 50,000 people to exercise.”

Most other Nordic countries organise company sports through special federations, while in Iceland it is organised through the National Olympic and Sports Association. Linda Laufdal says that there have been regular discussions on whether the association is the right place for company sports.

“This conversation is still ongoing, and after the meeting in Finland, we will be giving this even more serious thought. I’m not sure we will reach a conclusion before the end of this year, but the aim is to decide on whether to keep company sports in the Sports Association or move it somewhere else. But Finland has roughly the same system as we have.”

Push for World Games participation

When asked about new ideas and programs, Linda Laufdal mentions the European Week of Sports, or #BeActive, which is an EU project and gets support from the European Commission. The purpose is to introduce different sports events to the public.

“With that support, we have a program called “Swim” (Syn-dum), which is a national swimming introduction effort which takes place in November. We are always discussing possible new programs or changes, but nothing has been decided.

“We are just glad that our programmes are getting people to exercise. We are ready to look at any ideas for changes if something comes up, but while there are good participation levels in our programmes, we don’t want to stop it until we have something to replace it with.”

In conclusion, Linda Laufdal mentions the World Company Sports Games that will be held in Frederikshavn in Denmark in 2026.

“We will push Icelandic companies to register teams for these games. The organisers aim to get as many Nordic companies as possible to participate. They haven’t participated that much previously, so I believe there will be a lot of encouragement there to register.”



Red workers with white sails

Sports and politics are closely related in Finland. For more than a century, the country has had double sports clubs – for people on the political left and the political right. Now, the Finnish Workers' Sports Federation is considering its future as fewer and fewer identify as workers and class divisions decrease.

NEWS

19.09.2024

TEXT AND FOTO: BENGT ÖSTLING

Members at the Workers' Sailing Club in Helsinki are busy with the autumn cleaning and putting boats in dry docks for the winter. Most are pensioners and identify as workers. There are also directors among the members, and in Finland, the two groups usually get along. Yet that was not always the case.

Sailing was long considered to be a sport for rich people who had money, boats and spare time. Some might be surprised to hear that sailing can also be a “red” sport.



The Workers' Sailing Club has its harbour island next to the wealthy district of Brändö in eastern Helsinki. On the oth-

er side of the strait lies Brändö Sailors' club harbour. In the past, the sailing clubs competed for successful sailing talents. Now, things are much more peaceful.

The club also has a shipyard where it has been possible to build and repair boats since the start back in 2025. It has made it easier to manage the finances.

Together at work and play

Much of the sailing club's activity is built on common voluntary work, known in both Swedish and Finnish as *talko*. The *talko* spirit is prevalent throughout workers' sports.

This is also something which is highlighted by Pekka Paatinen, Reidar Studnitzkij and Markku Vähäniemi as they take a break from cleaning boats. Not that they are in any rush. They are all retired and spend a lot of time with their boats.



Pekka Paatinen, Reidar Studnitzkij and Markku Vähäniemi say they do not talk much politics, but the ideology is still important.

They work together a lot in the spring and autumn and make the world a better place by enjoying a few beers during breaks. There are fewer and fewer trips out to sea, even though it's right nearby, explains Pekka Paatinen, a retired electrician.

His wife considered the club's ideology so important that they chose this specific sailing club. Other workers have chosen the club because it is close to where they live in East Helsinki.

Civil War accelerated competition

The beginning of the Finnish workers' sports movement was dramatic. A new organisation was needed after the bloody 1918 Civil War. Anyone who had supported the Reds – and survived – was excluded from the old sports clubs. The main association of Finnish sports supported the Whites. The conflict continued even though the war had ended.



This was also the beginning of political competition in sports. At the start, workers' sports were not allowed to represent Finland at the Olympic Games. As late as the 1970s, you could find double sports clubs everywhere in Finland.

It created competition which now is considered to be healthy, leading to improved sporting achievements. Sports activities were also organised in workplaces.

Progress disappeared

The workers' sports clubs had success in sports like boxing, bandy, swimming, football and athletics. But the "winning culture" has disappeared. Finland took no medals at all during the Summer Olympics in Paris – the worst achievement ever.



Today, the Finnish Workers' Sports Federation has 800 member clubs, but it has nearly completely stopped training and competitive activities. It focuses on youth and fitness sports instead.

Their new vision is to focus on exercise for all, regardless of gender, age, economic situation, ethnic background or sexual orientation.

Still a need for workers' sports?

The Workers' Sports Federation has been funded by the state, but some now ask whether there is still a need for sports organisations based on class and political convictions. With the new centre-right government, the state support is also under threat.

“Today, it feels outdated to talk about a working class, we no longer have this large group of people working in production,” says Henrika Backlund, Secretary General at Finlands Svenska Idrott SFI – an umbrella sports association for Swedish-speaking sports federations in Finland and Åland. She nevertheless sees workers’ sports as a valuable ideal in a historical context.

“There is a great need for someone to speak for the vulnerable in sports,” says Henrika Backlund. Organisations that make sport affordable for all families with activities everyone is welcome to participate in. Yet she believes the Finnish Workers’ Sports Federation no longer represents this and has got stuck in a different century.



Sara Sirkiä has run the club restaurant at the Worker's Sailing Club for a long time. It is important for cohesion and the club economy.

Henrika Backlund herself is active in the workers’ sports organisation, as a member of a cycling club in her hometown in the west of the Uusimaa region.

“I love this club. The atmosphere is so genuine, a spirit money can’t buy. Everyone is welcome and has equal worth, and we all gather around the sport and pull in the same direction.”

But she takes part because she enjoys the camaraderie, cooperation and cycling. She is not drawn in by “the realities of the factory floor”.

Politically anchored

Sport in Finland is strongly politically anchored. The National Coalition Party and their supporters control the major central sports organisation and the Olympic Committee, Backlund points out.

“We need a counterforce that can speak for the poor and vulnerable, all kinds of minorities. This is where the Finnish Workers’ Sports Federation could be stronger and be the opposition they always have been,” says Henrika Backlund.

She underlines that this is often reflected in whose interests are represented and whose agendas are being pushed forward, and it is not those of the vulnerable.

Finnish sports seem to revolve around politics and power struggles, often neglecting the best interests of individual sports, says Henrika Backlund.

The Finnish Workers’ Sports Federation has a general assembly in 2025, where it will have to address these issues. There is already an emphasis on political independence, even though the name for now remains tied to the workers.