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Union Density in a Global Perspective

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Project: Union Density in a Global Perspective (FAS 2006-2013)

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Summary (Publication list see below):

There are still considerable international variations in union density. With 70 per cent unionized employees, Sweden, Denmark and Finland occupy a top position. Although a relatively large decline has taken place in Sweden, no convergence can be discerned vis-à-vis Germany or the UK for example. In 1990 Swedish union density was twice as large as the British: In 2011 it was almost three times larger and in the private sector four times larger. The rate of unionization has declined in almost all countries. Among the long-term causes are changed composition of the labour force, such as decreasing employment share of manufacturing industry and the public sector. Secondly, recruitment of union members is complicated by the fragmentation of the labour force caused by outsourcing, staff from temporary work agencies, increasing share of fixed-term employees, etc. Due to lean work organisations there is sparse time for union activities. The sharp membership decline in Sweden during 2007 and 2008 was, however, primarily caused by the significantly raised fees for union unemployment funds. In the course of two years, union density dropped by 6 percentage points. The unions lost 245 000 members and union unemployment funds 399 000 members. Since the government 2008 more closely linked fund fees to the unemployment rate for each fund, the blue-collar density has developed much more negatively than the white-collar: 11 percentage points decline compared to 2 points among white-collar workers. Particularly in the crisis years 2009 and 2010, unemployment and consequently fund fees were much higher among blue-collar workers than among white-collar workers. In contrast, the high density of Swedish employers' associations, conducive to the high coverage of collective agreements, has not declined. The combined centralisation and decentralisation of industrial relations has promoted the strength of Swedish unions. By the central (industry) agreements, unions at workplaces can benefit from the bargaining power at central level. In Britain both the coverage of collective agreements and union density have declined considerably since industry agreements were dismantled in the private sector. Similarly, the German opening clauses have undermined industry agreements to such a degree that the unions today welcome legislated minimum wages. The appearance of new market economies in Eastern Europe and Asia have more than doubled the global workforce and sharpened the terms of competition. Frequent violations of trade of union rights and weak unions make it difficult to improve the conditions of precarious workers. Therefore, international union cooperation and global framework agreements are of great importance, but the latter are insufficient if they, as in the case of H & M, do not include subcontractors and production is located in countries without union rights. The importance of strong unions is evident from the fact that the great majority of global agreements are concluded with firms having head offices in Northern and Western Europe. In contrast to the global agreements, European frame agreements do not focus on basic union rights, but on restructuring, training, etc. As regards such issues firms often try to play the employees in different countries against each other. Location of production to East European countries with low wages and low union density has been a challenge in particular for German unions. Unions like IG Metall have lost much of their former strength, among other things by large membership losses. To analyze the challenges facing unions in a globalised world it is relevant to consider also other dimensions of union power than union density. For this reason a systematic review has been made of different dimensions of union power and their implications for the capacity of unions to act. Examples of such are mobilisation capacity, institutional power, political influence and strategic capacity.

Publication list:

1. A Kjellberg (2007) "The Swedish Trade Union System in Transition: High but Falling Union Density" in C Phelan (ed.) *Trade Union Revitalisation: Trends and Prospects in 34 Countries*. Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 259-286. Info: <http://www.peterlang.com/index.cfm?event=cmp.ccc.seitenstruktur.detailseiten&seitentyp=produkt&pk=13613&concordeid=11009>
2. A Kjellberg (2008a) "Ett nytt fackligt landskap bland tjänstemännen: Unionen och Sveriges Ingenjörer". *TAM-Revy* no 1 2008, pp. 4-21. Comparisons are made with Denmark, Norway, Germany and Austria. <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=1144977&fileId=1144984>
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12. A Kjellberg (2011c) "Trade Unions and Collective Agreements in a Changing World" in A Thörnquist & Å-K Engstrand (eds.) *Precarious Employment in Perspective. Old and New Challenges to Working Conditions in Sweden*. Work & Society. Vol. 70. Bruxelles: Peter Lang, pp. 47-100. Info: <http://www.peterlang.com/index.cfm?event=cmp.ccc.seitenstruktur.detailseiten&seitentyp=produkt&pk=62907&concordeid=21730>
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15. A Bruhn, A Kjellberg, Å Sandberg (2013d) "A New World of Work Challenging Swedish Unions" in Å Sandberg (ed.) *Nordic Lights. Work, Management and Welfare in Scandinavia*. Stockholm: SNS, pp. 126-188. Info: <http://www.sns.se/forlag/nordic-lights-work-management-and-welfare-scandinavia>
16. A. Kjellberg (2013e) *Union density and specialist/professional unions in Sweden*, Lund University: Studies in Social Policy, Industrial Relations, Working Life and Mobility. Research Reports 2013:2 <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=3912694&fileId=3912695&cover=0>
17. A. Kjellberg (forthcoming book) *Facklig styrka och organisering i en globaliserad värld*.

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