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Published in:
Nio - Fem Tidskrift om arbetsliv & profession

2021

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Kjellberg, A. (2021). The successive merger of Swedish teachers' unions. *Nio - Fem Tidskrift om arbetsliv & profession*, *2021*(1).

Total number of authors:
1

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Download date: 12. Nov. 2026

The successive merger of Swedish teachers' unions[1]

Today there are plans to merge the two major Swedish teachers' organizations, the Teachers' Union and the National Union of Teachers. However, merging teachers' unions into larger organizations has occurred before. Sociologist Anders Kjellberg shows how the history of teachers' unions is a story of trade union mergers.

The teachers' union history includes a number of mergers but also several breakaways. There are also examples of female and male teachers organized in separate unions. Leaving aside the unions of university teachers, we will find two main tracks, one leading up to the Swedish Teachers' Union (*Lärarförbundet*) and another to the National Union of Teachers in Sweden (*Lärarnas Riksförbund*, LR). In the parallel school system established in the mid-19th century, the secondary grammar school (*läroverken*) was side by side with the elementary school (*folkskolan*). When the teachers' unions emerged, it was within the two parallel forms of schools.

[1] This is an updated version in English of "Lärarnas successiva samgående", in *NIO – FEM. Tidskrift om arbetsliv & profession* no 1 2021, pp. 12-17. Translation from Swedish: Andreas Lindahl, TAM-Arkiv Stockholm. Published by TAM-Arkiv, Stockholm Sweden in November 2021. Website: https://tam-arkiv.se/

There are currently plans to merge the two unions that have their roots in grammar schools and elementary schools respectively. The Teachers' Union has wanted to do so for a long time while the LR has been hesitant, partly because of fear that its 64,600 professional members at the turn of the year 2020/2021, would be engulfed by the much larger Swedish Teachers' Union (163,300 members). That is why LR rather talks about a new organization of teachers (and school principals) than a merger. This also explains why there is a separate LR investigation into the issue instead of a common one carried out by the two unions together. Already when the Swedish Teachers' Union was founded in 1991, there were discussions that LR would also be included into that merger. Within LR, the union leadership was positive but a majority of the members voted against the proposal (Erikson 2017: 118).

In fact, the split into two large categories of teachers and the corresponding unions became obsolete already when the parallel school system from 1962 was gradually replaced by primary schools nationwide. Teacher training was reorganized as well. Differences in culture, identity and socio-economic status were much more persistent and still exist. Until quite recently, this also applied to school policy positions. Today, the members of the Swedish Teachers' Union and LR share a similar view of most things.

A group of teachers in science subjects, 1970s. Photo: unknown

In order to facilitate a merger, the Swedish Teachers' Union has taken a first step by requesting withdrawal from TCO, *Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation* (the Confederation of Professional Employees) in December 2020. In September 2021 an extra congress of the union applied for membership in Saco, *Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation* (the Confederation of Professional Associations). Thus, the Teachers' Union complied with LR's firm demand for a Saco affiliation of a new teachers' union. The fact that academic identity is fundamental to LR's members is underlined in the LR study on a new teacher organization published in March 2021. Up to the September 2021 congress of the Teachers' Union, however, all options were still open: affiliation to TCO or to Saco or outside both. The union

considered all three options before its final decision at its extraordinary September congress (see the interview with Johanna Jaara Åstrand, president of the Swedish Teachers' Union, in *NIO-FEM* 2021:1). Until then, one of the alternatives was taking the same position as the Military Officers' Union did, which meant that it stood outside of both TCO and Saco for a couple of years after its founding in 1995 by a merger of the TCO and Saco unions of military officers. The new union later joined Saco. All indications are that the Saco congress in November 2021 would grant the Teachers' Union entry from January 2022. Already from that very moment, the union is nothing short of becoming Saco's largest and relegating the Association of Graduate Engineers to a second place.

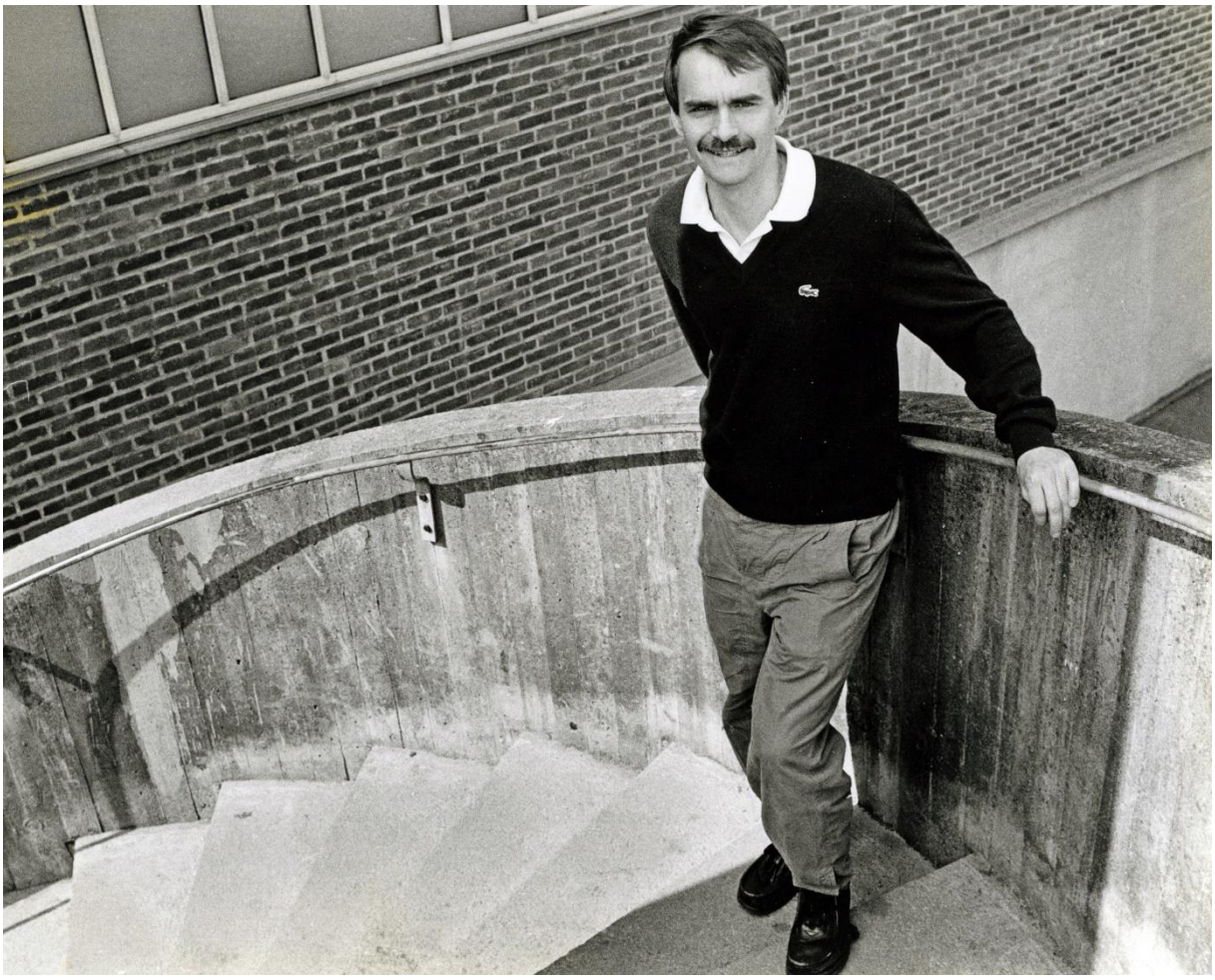
National union or federation?

Strong indications suggest that this time teachers will succeed in uniting into a new union or, as proposed in a study put forth by LR, a new federation. A merger would give teachers a stronger voice in the public debate and in relation to the state, as well as the employers in the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR) and *Almega*, which organizes private schools.[2] The positions of both teachers' unions have become increasingly similar, for example that only certified teachers (*behöriga lärare*) should be employed. Today,

[2] Sweden is distinguished by a significantly higher number of pupils in private schools than in other countries. In 2020/2021 more than every fourth pupil in the upper secondary school (gymnasiums) studied in private schools (29 per cent) and in the primary and lower secondary schools 16 per cent (source: Ekonomifakta).

only about 70 per cent of teachers in the primary and lower secondary schools are certified.[3] The Swedish Teachers' Union no longer welcomes non-certified teachers as members. Both unions are guarding the teaching profession and want to raise the status of the profession. The Swedish Teachers Union is also now demanding that the state seizes control of mandatory education. Furthermore, the two unions have been cooperating since 1996 through the Teachers' Collaboration Council (*Lärarnas Samverkansråd*) in collective bargaining. The members of both unions have very similar views on school policy issues, such as grades first from year 6 and no to profit-making schools. In addition, they want a salary system where individual setting of wages should have less significance while formal qualifications greater significance than today.

[3] In average 71 per cent of the teachers in primary and lower secondary schools (*grundskolan*) are certified, of which 72 per cent in municipal schools and 62 per cent in private schools. In the higher secondary schools 82 per cent of the teachers are qualified and certified, of which 85 per cent in municipal schools and 75 per cent in private schools (source: *Skolverket*). In the private schools there are fewer teachers per pupil than in the municipal schools. Furthermore, the private sector teachers have lower education and lower wages according to a parliament report 2020-02-27 from *Riksdagens utredningstjänst* (Skolvärlden 7 January 2021). The private schools also increase the social school segregation by recruiting relatively more pupils with well-educated parents.



Teacher in a concrete stairwell, 1980s. Photo: S. Ewers/Grupp Fem

A merger may well prevent a union overkill in terms of working-hours spent and keep expenditures low to avoid raised membership fees, as well as providing room for a stronger partner in negotiations. All teachers from preschool to upper secondary school now have academic education. Teachers are today the most common academic profession with more than 300,000 professionals from preschool to university. [4] **Indications are that a new teachers' union ultimately ends**

[4] According to the Swedish Occupational Register (part of Statistics Sweden), in 2019 there were approximately 108,800 primary school teachers, 30,500 upper secondary school teachers, 10,000 vocational teachers, 67,600 preschool teachers, 16,700 recreational pedagogues, 13,300 remedial teachers, 4,700 career counsellors and 18,700 other educators with theoretical specialist

up in the Saco family and, in that case will be the significantly largest Saco union with more than 200,000 members.

As mentioned before, union mergers have occurred previously in the world of teachers. The Swedish Teachers' Union (*Lärarförbundet*) was formed in 1991 by an amalgamation of the Swedish Union of Teachers (*Sveriges Lärarförbund*) and the Swedish Union of Specialist Teachers (SFL, *Svenska Facklärarförbundet*). Each of them was the result of mergers between a large number of teachers' organizations. Among the specialist teachers are included female unions of school kitchen mistresses (*skolkökslärarinnor*), weaving mistresses (*vävlärarinnor*), handicraft mistresses (*slöjdlärarinnor*) and kindergarten mistresses (*barnträdgårdslärarinnor*). Other specialist teachers' unions organized recreational pedagogues (*fritidspedagoger*), drawing teachers and music teachers. Many of these survived as associations within the SFL, which was a kind of federation for all of those mentioned above. The unions forming the Swedish Union of Teachers or later were affiliated with it included female and male elementary school teachers (*folkskollärare*), junior school teachers (*småskollärare*) and deaf teachers.

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competence. A total of 306,700 people. In addition, there were in 2019 36,300 university teachers, of which 9,800 graduate students.

School kitchen, early 20th century. Photo: unknown

LR was formed in 1884 as *Svenska Läraresällskapet* (the Swedish Teachers' Association) and changed its name in 1913 to *Läroverks-lärarnas Riksförbund* (National Union of Secondary Grammar School Teachers). In the wake of the Primary School Reform Act, which transformed the elementary school into a nine-year compulsory primary and lower-secondary school (*grundskola*), the union changed its name to the current one (Lärarnas Riksförbund). Among the many associations that joined LR were *Kommunala Realskolans Lärarförbund* (Teachers' Association of Municipal Junior Secondary School), *Lektorernas Förening* (Association of Senior Masters), *Allmänna Adjunktsföreningen* (General Association of Assistant Masters), *Sveriges Yngre Läroverkslärares Förening* (Association of Younger Secondary Grammar School Teachers), *Praktiska Mellanskolors Lärarförbund*

(Teachers' Association of Municipal Practical Junior Secondary Schools), *Sveriges Högre Flickskolors Lärarförbund* (Swedish Teachers' Association of Advanced Girls' Schools) and *Svenska Gymnastikläraresällskapet* (Swedish Association of Physical Training Masters).

Physical training, early 20th century. Photo: unknown

A third group of teachers' associations joined what is now the Saco union *Naturvetarna* (Swedish Association of Professional Scientists), namely the Swedish Association of Agricultural Teachers (*Sveriges Lantbrukslärareförbund*) to which the Swedish Association of Rural Domestic Mistresses (*Svenska Lanthushållslärarinnornas Förening*) and the Swedish Association of Teachers at Farmers' Schools (*Svenska Lantmannaskolornas Lärareförening*) previously had joined. Today, the

Swedish Association of Agronomical Science Teachers (*Naturbruks-lärarförbundet*) is a professional association within *Naturvetarna* that organizes teachers at agricultural gymnasiums. They are dually affiliated with LR.

There are also a number of university teachers' mergers. The Saco-affiliated Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers (*Sveriges universitetslärare och forskare*, Sulf) was preceded by special associations or unions of senior lecturers, assistant university teachers (*universitets- och högskoleamanuenser*), training college teachers (*seminarielärare*), professors, associate professors (*docenter*) and science associate professors (*laboratorer*). The LR has investigated if Sulf can be included in a new teacher body, but found that university teachers are not enthusiastic about the idea. That is not surprising given that they do not have much in common with school teachers. For example, the counterparty in collective bargaining is not the same, but this may change if schools are nationalized. Above all, the said members now perceive themselves more as researchers than as teachers. It is hardly a coincidence that Sulf's full name contains the word *researcher*.

In addition, the Saco-affiliated Swedish Association of School Principals and Directors of Education (*Sveriges Skolledarförbund*) was formed in 1965 by a merger between the Swedish Association of Directors of Education (Saco-affiliated *Sveriges Skoldirektörsförening*), the

Association of Vocational School Principals (*Yrkesskolerektorernas Förening*) within the Swedish Union of Specialist Teachers (SFL), the National Association of Principals (*Rektorernas Riksförening*) within LR, the Association of Principals at Advanced Technical Secondary Grammar Schools (*Högre Tekniska Läroverkens Rektorsförening*) within the Association of Teachers at Technical Secondary Grammar Schools (Saco) and the TCO-affiliated Swedish Association of School Principals, founded in 1930 as the Swedish Association of Head Teachers (*Sveriges Överlärarförbund*). The new association of school principals joined Saco from the start. For those who wanted to remain in the Swedish Union of Teachers, a special interest association was formed. It was called the Association of School Principals (*Skolledarföreningen*) and is called today *Lärarförbundet Skolledare* (literally, the Swedish Teachers' Union School Principals) and has more members (almost 10,000) than the Saco affiliated Swedish Association of School Principals and Directors of Education (5,700 members). The LR study proposes that all school principals should be united in the same union on the ground that teachers and their principals should not be in the same trade union and that they are two different professions. The Saco union of school principals welcomes the large contribution to its membership that this would entail, but it is not clear that the Swedish Teachers' Union is as enthusiastic about the proposal.

The LR investigation

The LR investigation, carried out by the administrative director of the union Anders Mörck, proposes two new organizations, *Sveriges Lärare* (Teachers of Sweden) and *Sveriges Skolledare* (School Principals of Sweden). *Sveriges Lärare* is intended as a federation of special associations for preschool teachers, primary school teachers (including recreational pedagogues), upper secondary and adult education teachers (including vocational teachers), state-employed teachers (teachers employed by different authorities) and teacher students respectively. The remedial teachers (*speciallärare*) and remedial pedagogues, as well as the study and career counsellors, will be present in both the associations of primary and secondary school teachers. The division into five associations is justified by differences in terms of culture and identity between different categories of teachers, in addition to the fact that the first three are employed in different school forms. So it is fairly possible that both LR and the Swedish Teachers' Union will reject the idea of dividing the subject teachers (*ämneslärarna*) into several associations. For example, it is uncertain that a fragmentation of LR's core group of subject teachers will be seen as positive. For efficiency and cost reasons, a single national office (*förbundskansli*) is proposed, jointly for almost 240,000 teachers and school principals.

The new organization is proposed to be in place on 1 January 2023. Before that, there will certainly be extensive discussions within and

between today's unions. It goes without saying that not everything will follow the investigator's blueprint, nor is it impossible this time the whole thing will be overturned, as before, by the forthcoming membership ballot within LR.[5] Only four out of ten LR members prefer a teacher organization for all staff categories if school principals also will be included. The investigator has readily decided to convince his fellow members that LR does not face a bright future as a singular union in a world of its own. If *Lärarnas Samverkansråd* (the Teachers' Collaboration Council) is replaced by *Sveriges Lärare* (Teachers of Sweden), this organization can become a strong negotiating partner. At the local level, which is the most important for the members, the associations are supposed to have their own positions as negotiating parties. However, if the teachers' unions do not merge, LR risk losing almost all influence in collective bargaining and will not be able to sign collective agreements on its own. That is the investigator's conclusion after in-depth interviews inside and outside the union. There is much to suggest that the Swedish Teachers' Union will then leave the Collaboration Council, which consequently ceases to exist. Public sector employers insist on signing collective agreements with only *one* counterpart, and that will hardly be LR.

[5] At an extra meeting on the 26th of October 2021 145 LR representatives from all Swedish provinces discussed for hours the future of the union. The executive committee of the union will consider the different points of views that emerged during the meeting. At a common meeting on 29 November the three unions will discuss the future. A membership ballot will take place at the end of January 2022. Should the members vote yes and a LR meeting in May 2022 decide the same, then perhaps a the new organization will be established by the 1st of January 2023.

Another strong reason for a merger is LR's poor economy with an accumulated operating loss 2006-2020 of almost SEK 100 million (about € 10 million). Every second member is reluctant to pay a higher membership fee. Only four out of ten can imagine that. The conclusion is that LR's survival as a union of its own would be at the cost of "poorer basic delivery to the members at a higher fee" (Mörck 2021:113).

Nor does LR's membership development look promising. A great many teachers are approaching retirement age, while the recruitment of student members has been declining for several years. Here, digital registration at the start of each semester makes it difficult for LR to be on speaking terms with the students. From an international perspective union density among Swedish teachers is high (79 per cent in 2021), however declining. Contributory to this development is the growth of private schools.[6] Between 2006 and 2020 LR and the Swedish Teachers' Union together lost 10,400 members (minus 4,4 per cent; Kjellberg 2021:87-88).

[6] In 2017-2019 the rate of unionization among municipal teachers in primary and lower secondary schools was about 85 per cent and in private schools about 66 per cent. The corresponding share in the upper secondary school was about 85 per cent in both the municipal and private sector (Kjellberg 2020: 32-33).

The Swedish General Union of Elementary School Teachers (*Sveriges Allmänna Folkskollärareförening*, SAF)

Once upon a time, there existed a sizeable trade union comprising several teacher categories, the Swedish General Union of Elementary School Teachers (SAF, *Sveriges Allmänna Folkskollärareförening*). At the turn of the 20th century, only the Metalworkers' Union was larger. The union, founded in 1880, included the teachers of the elementary and junior schools (*folkskolor* and *småskolor*), but proved difficult to hold together and was eventually transformed into a weak federation. A proposal passed by the Swedish *Riksdag* (Swedish Parliament) in 1906 to abolish the principle of equal pay, and that salaries of female teachers should be lower than those of male teachers, with which women naturally were quite dissatisfied and disconcerted. They broke away in the same year and formed the Swedish Union of Elementary School Mistresses (*Sveriges Folkskollärarinneförbund*), which took a more unionist approach than that of SAF. It also tried to influence through SAF, in which the new union was an affiliate member. Twelve years later, the junior school mistresses also felt the need to form their own organizational body, Swedish Union of Junior School Mistresses (*Sveriges Småskollärarinneförening*). This too was aimed at cooperating with SAF. It was only after the male elementary school teachers became increasingly vexed with how SAF acted regarding the cost-of-living allowances that they did form *Sveriges Folkskollärar-*

förbund (the Swedish Union of Elementary School Teachers). Several teachers were thus double-organized by belonging to both their own trade union and SAF, which in 1946 was transformed into the Federation SAF (FSAF). In 1963, after the merger of the male and female unions of elementary school teachers into the Swedish Teachers' Union, to which the Swedish Union of Junior School Mistresses was affiliated in 1967, FSAF was dissolved because the federation could not consist of just one single member.

As can be seen from the names, several teachers' unions included only women, such as the Swedish Association of Weaving Mistresses, Swedish Union of School Kitchen Mistresses (from 1963 Swedish Union of Domestic Science Teachers) and the National Association of Swedish Kindergarten Mistresses (1955 renamed the National Association of Swedish Preschool Teachers). During the 1860s, the teaching staff in junior elementary schools consisted of roughly equal proportions of men and women, but as a result of the rapid feminization process women almost completely dominated this category of teachers by the end of the century, hence _Sveriges Småskollärarinneförening_ (Swedish Union of Junior School Mistresses) became the name of the union at its start in 1918 (Florin 1987: 15). The share of women also increased among elementary school teachers: from 10 per cent in the 1860s to 37 per cent in 1906. The initiative for the abandonment of the principle of equal pay in that very same year came from the new Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Liberal Fridtjuv Berg, who belonged to the Liberal

Party . He was a driving force within the Swedish General Union of Elementary School Teachers (SAF) and was now supported by SAF's leadership (Florin 1987: 176). The motive was to convince men to stay in the elementary school teacher profession. In 1937, the *Riksdag* decided that female and male elementary school teachers should again have equal salaries. Since then, feminization of the teaching profession has continued. Today, 83 per cent of the members of the Swedish Teachers' Union are women and 70 per cent of LR's members.

As we have seen, the Swedish General Union of Elementary School Teachers initially gathered all the aforementioned teacher categories, then split up into three unions that were again united in a single one in 1967. The next merger took place in 1991 when the Swedish Union of Teachers (*Sveriges Lärarförbund*) and the Swedish Union of Specialist Teachers (SFL, *Svenska Facklärarförbundet*) were united. LR was also supposed to be included, but its members voted against the merger. A new attempt is now under way and is likely to be crowned with success. School teachers have too much to lose from continued division and much to gain from joining forces. Unity gives strength, but as the experience of the Swedish Union of Elementary School Teachers shows, unity must be based on the participation of different member groups and their interests must be met in a democratic organization.

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