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Wage formation in the Nordic Countries: Nordic Economic Policy Review Conference, Nordregio Stockholm 24 October 2024

Changes in union density in the Nordic countries

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Extended version

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The aim of the paper is to explain:

- Why union density (the share of employees affiliated to trade unions) **is so high** in the Nordic countries: 50-70%, in Iceland about 90%.

- Why the rate of unionization (union density) **varies** between the Nordic countries.

- Why union density in the last 25-35 years has **declined considerably** in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, but **not at all or only modestly** in Iceland and Norway.

Table 1. Union density in the Nordic countries 1990-2023 (% and percentage points)

	1990	1993	2000	2005	2009	2010	2013	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2000-*
Denmark	76	77	/**74**	72	71	70	71	70	68	68	70	69	68	68	**-6**
Finland	72	79	**71**	69	67/68		65		60			55			**-16**
Iceland		87	**89**				89	90		92					**+3**
Norway	57	57	**53/51**	51	50	51	50	50	50	50	51	50	50	50	**-1**
Sweden	81	85	**81**	78	71	71	70	69	69	68	69	70	69	68	**-13**

* *Change from 2000 to the latest available year.*
Denmark: Unemployed included. Own calculations based on data from LO-Denmark and Statistics Denmark (number of union members; number of employees and unemployed: 1990-1993 register-based data, 2000- labour force surveys 15-64 years.
Finland: 1990 refers to 1989, 1993 refers to 1994, 2000 refers to 2001, 2005 refers to 2004. 1990-2009:1 including unemployed. Based on questionnaire sent to trade unions *(*Ahtiainen 2001, 2011, 2023).
Iceland: OECD.
Norway: 1990-2000:1: labour force surveys (AKU); 2000:2-2023: register-based data (Nergaard 2024).
Sweden: Labour force surveys annual averages employees 16-64 years excluding full-time students with job.

According to this table union density **since 2000** has:

- Declined considerably in Finland (minus 16 percentage points) and Sweden (minus 13 points)
- Declined modestly in Denmark (minus six points)
- Remained almost unchanged in Norway (minus one point)
- Increased slightly in Iceland (plus three points)

Leaving Iceland aside, union density **since 2009/2010** has:

- Declined considerably in Finland (minus 12-13 percentage points)
- Declined very modestly in Denmark and Sweden (minus three points)
- Remained unchanged in Norway

Note on Iceland:
All employees must pay fees to the unions even if they are non-members.

Table 2. Union density in the Scandinavian countries 1990-2023 (% and percentage points)

	1990	1993	2000	2005	2009	2010	2013	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2000-*
Denmark (1)	76	77	/**74**	72	71	70	71	70	68	68	70	69	68	68	**-6**
Denmark (2)	74	75	/**72**	68	65	63	61	59	57	57	57	56	55	54	**-18**
Norway															**-1**
- blue-collar			**50**	49	46		49		43						**-7**
- white-collar			**59**	61	60		61		57						**-2**
Sweden	81	85	**81**	78	71	71	70	69	69	68	69	70	69	68	**-13**
- blue-collar	82	86	**83**	77	70	69	66	64	61	60	61	62	59	58	**-25**
- white-collar	81	83	**79**	78	72	73	73	74	73	72	73	74	73	73	**-6**

** Change from 2000 to the latest available year.*
Denmark: Unemployed included. Own calculations based on data from LO-Denmark and Statistics Denmark (number of union members; number of employees and unemployed: 1990-1993 register-based data, 2000- labour force surveys 15-64 years.
Denmark (2): So-called ideologically alternative or yellow unions excluded.
Norway: 2000 refers to 2001, 2005 refers to 2004, 2009 refers to 2008. Labour force surveys (AKU) 16-64 years. Kjellberg & Nergaard 2022: 62.
Sweden: Labour force surveys annual averages employees 16-64 years excluding full-time students with job.

Let us take a closer look at Denmark, Norway and Sweden:

Denmark: a considerable decline when **excluding the ideologically alternative or yellow unions** (minus 18 percentage points 2000-2023, minus nine points 2010-2023)

Sweden: a considerable decline among **blue-collar workers** (minus 25 percentage points 2000-2023, minus 19 points 2010-2023).
In 2005 blue-collar and white-collar union density was about the same (77-78%), in 2023 there was a gap on 15 percentage points.

Norway: in Norway too, there is a substantial gap between blue-collar union density (43% in 2017) and white-collar density (57%). Part of the explanation is the extremely low union density among some groups of blue-collar workers, such as restaurant workers and cleaners – see Appendix 2. The Swedish classification of blue-collar and white-collar workers is used.

Table 3A. Union density by sector 1990-2023 (% and percentage points)

	1990	1993	2000	2005	2009	2010	2013	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2000-*
Denmark	74	76	**75**	72	69	68	69	67	67	67					**-8**
- private sector			**64**	59			62	60							**-4**
- public sector			**96**	97			81	82							**-14**
Finland	72	79	**71**	69	67/68		65		60			55			**-16**
- private sector			**64**	60	61		59		54			46			**-18**
- public sector	85	85	**88**	88	82		76		73			77			**-11**
Norway	57	57	**53/51**	51	50	51	50	50	50	50	51	50	50	50	**-1**
- private sector		44	**40**	/			37			36		38	38		**(-2)**
- public sector		80	**81**	/76		77		79		77		79	79		**(-2)**
Sweden	81	85	**81**	78	71	71	70	69	69	68	69	70	69	68	**-13**
- private sector	75	78	**74**	72	65	65	65	64	64	63	64	65	64	64	**-10**
- public sector	91	94	**92**	89	84	85	83	81	79	79	79	80	79	78	**-14**

Private sector union density less than 50% is marked with green colour: Norway all years and Finland 2021

According to the latest available data, union density in the public sector is about the same in Denmark (82%), Finland (77%), Norway (79%) and Sweden (78%). Marked with orange colour.

** Change from 2000 to the latest available year.*

Denmark: OECD-AIAS-ICTWSS. Note that the source is not the same as in the preceding slide!

Finland: Private/public sector (incl. unemployed). 2005 refers to 2004, 200o refers to 2001: calculations from Ahtiainen 2023:35 and Ahtiannen 2011: 35 . Ahtiainen 2001, 2011, 2023. *Norway and Sweden:* see preceding slide.

Norway: a **considerable gap between public and private sector** union density: 41 percentage points in both 2000 and 2022. Norway is the Nordic country with the largest public sector and Finland together with Iceland with the smallest – see table 4.

The union density gap between Sweden and Norway is concentrated to the private sector: In 2022 public sector union density was 79% in both Norway and Sweden, private sector union density 38% in Norway and 64% in Sweden. **The same when Sweden is compared to Finland.**

In Sweden, the decline of union density is largest in *the public sector* where it includes both white-collar and blue-collar workers, the latter often in low-wage jobs. **In the private sector, mainly blue-collar union density has declined.**

Table 3B. Union density by sector: latest available year (%)

	Denmark 2015	Finland 2021	Norway 2022	Sweden 2023
Private sector	60	46	38	64
Public sector	82	77	79	78
Both sectors	67	55	50	68

Union density less than 50% marked with green colour.

As showed already in table 3A, public union density is almost the same in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

Private sector union density varies from 38-46% in Norway and Finland to 60-64% in Denmark and Sweden.

The fact that the rate of unionization among public sector employees is so similar in the Nordic countries – and that is not lower in Norway than in the other countries – indicates that the Ghent system's impact on union density is largely concentrated in the private sector.

However, it can be noted that the rate of unionization among private sector employees is not much higher in Finland than in Norway. Sweden has by far the smallest gap between the private and public sectors (14 percentage points) and Norway the largest (41 points). The corresponding gap in Finland is 31 percentage points and in Denmark 22 points.

Table 4. Main characteristics of Northern countries (1)

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Population, January 1, 2024 (millions)	6.0	5.6	0.4	5.6	10.6
Foreign-born population, January 1, 2024	13.5%	**8.2%**	**20.6%**	**17.4%**	**20.3%**
Share of employees with fixed-term jobs of total employment 20-64 years, 2023	8.2%	**12.2%**	8.9%	**6.4%**	**10.8%**
Public employment as a share of total employment, 2021 (Iceland 2019)	28.0%	**25.4%**	**25.0%**	**30.9%**	**29.3%**
Ghent system (state-subsidized union unemployment funds)	X	X	-	-	X
Competing unemployment funds	Alternative	YTK	-	-	(Alfa)
'Ideologically alternative' ('yellow') unions	X	-	-	-	-
Supplementary union income insurances	X	-		-	X
Income ceiling in unemployment insurance	X	-		X	X
Tax reduction/deduction for union fee	X	X	(X)	X	-
X = Yes.					

Main characteristics of Northern countries (1) - Text

A. EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS (Sweden is high on all)

- Share of **foreign-born population**: highest in Iceland, Sweden and Norway, lowest in Finland.
- Share of **fixed-term jobs**: highest in Finland and Sweden, lowest in Norway.
- **Public employment** share: highest in Norway and Sweden, lowest in Finland and Iceland.

B. INSTITUTIONAL FEATURES (Denmark fits into all)

- **Ghent systems** (union unemployment funds): Denmark, Finland and Sweden.
- **Supplementary union income insurances**: Denmark and Sweden.
- **Competing unemployment funds**: Denmark and Finland.
- **Alternative/'yellow' unions**: Denmark.
- **Tax reduction/deduction** for union fee: Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway.

Table 5. Main characteristics of Northern countries (2)

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Union density	68% 2023	55% 2021	92% 2019	50% 2022	68% 2023
- in private sector	60% 2015	46% 2021		38% 2022	64% 2023
- in public sector	**82% 2015**	**77% 2021**		**79% 2022**	**78% 2023**
Density of employers' associations	68% 2018	64% 2022	78% 2018	81% 2022	87% 2021
- in private sector	52% 2018		70% 2018	72% 2022	83% 2021
Coverage of collective agreements	82% 2018	89% 2022	90% 2018	64% 2022**	88% 2023
- in private sector	73% 2018	84% 2022*		47% 2022**	83% 2023
Extension of collective agreements	-	X	X	X	-
Required minimum union density at a workplace for a collective agreement	50% HK	-	-	10% blue-collar	-
Bargaining levels (wages)	Two-tiers	Two-tiers + one-tiers	Two-tiers	Two-tiers	Two-tiers
Dominating bargaining level	Industry	Industry	Industry	Industry	Industry
Statutory minimum wage	-	-	-	-	-
Lost conflict days: yearly average, 2014-2023	38 000	203 000		91 000	3 300
First private sector basic agreement	1899	1944	-	1935	1938

*Finland: *including extension of agreements*. Excluding extension 64% in private sector. **Norway: *excluding extension of agreements* . Including extension 58% in private sector (72% including also the public sector). **Union density, density of employers' associations and coverage of collective agreements refer to the share of workers.**

Contrast Norway – Denmark:

Norway: Due to the 10%-rule (blue-collar workers) many organized employers do not have collective agreements. Density of private sector employers' associations = 72%, but bargaining coverage only 47% (58% including extension).

A Danish puzzle: *Despite only 52% density of private sector employers' associations and the 50%-rule in commerce (HK), the private sector coverage of collective agreements is as high as 73% (OECD-AIAS-ICTWSS, DA 2020)*.

Table 5. In-depth analysis of collective bargaining coverage: Denmark and Norway

PRIVATE SECTOR	Denmark 2018	Norway 2022
(1) Density of employers' associations	52%	72%
(2) Coverage of collective agreements	73%	47%
Gap between (1) and (2)	-21*	+25*

* Percentage points. Both (1) and (2) refer to the share of covered employees.

The contrast between Denmark and Norway is striking. In Denmark, 52% of the private sector employees work in companies affiliated to employers' organisations, but as much as 73% are covered by collective agreements. In Norway, employers' associations have a significantly higher rate of organization than in Denmark, 72% and 52% respectively, but only 47% of the Norwegian private sector employees are covered by collective agreements.

Regarding Norway, this is easy to explain. According to the basic agreement between the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, NHO (*Næringslivets Hovedorganisasjon*) and LO-Norway must at least 10% of the workers in the company (and bargaining area) be unionized until the union can demand a collective agreement. In order not to risk falling below the 10%-limit, LO usually does not demand collective agreements if less than 40-50% are union members. In companies with fewer than 25 employees, the union usually applies a 25%-rule. In workplaces with at least 25 employees within the relevant occupations the practice among blue-collar unions is that a workplace union must demand an agreement (Kjellberg & Nergaard 2022: 61). /Information from Kristine Nergaard, Fafo and Harald Dale-Olsen, Institutt for samfunnsforskning/.

Regarding Denmark – see the next two pages.

Table 5. In-depth analysis of collective bargaining coverage: the Danish puzzle (1)

Denmark is a puzzling case. Due to the 50%-rule, which Denmark's second largest union, HK (*Handel og Kontor* – Union of Commercial and Clerical Employees) had to accept in the 1940s, about 50,000 private sector HK *members* in companies affiliated to employers' associations are not covered by collective agreements. As union density is less than 50% in these cases, it means that more than 100,000 employees (members and non-members) due to this rule not are covered ("Hvad betyder 50 %-reglen?" HK 2024-10-30). Since then, the union in several bargaining rounds has tried to convince the employers to abolish the rule that at least 50% of the employees in a company in the HK occupations must be union members for a collective agreement to be signed.

Furthermore, due to the absence of private sector industry/sector agreements for the 'academic' union confederation *AC/Akademikerne* and its affiliates, many academics employed by companies affiliated to DA (*Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening*, the Confederation of Danish Employers) have no collective agreements.* Like other AC unions, *Ingeniørforeningen i Danmark* (IDA) has no national private sector collective agreement, but a few company agreements, of which ten were renewed under OK23, among them the agreements at the railway company DSB, the company running Copenhagen Airport, TXC Technology A/S, Kredsløb A/S and Kalundborg Forsyning A/S.**

* "De lønmodtagere, der ikke er dækket af overenskomst, får de løn- og ansættelsesvilkår, som de selv har aftalt med deres arbejdsgiver i deres ansættelseskontrakt. Det gælder særligt for akademikere og ledere i den private sektor, som ud over deres ansættelseskontrakt også er omfattet af funktionærloven og derfor har rettigheder i forhold til opsigelse, løn under sygdom og andre ting, som ellers ofte vil være indeholdt i en overenskomst." (DA 2020). https://www.da.dk/politik-og-analyser/overenskomst-og-arbejdsret/2018/hoej-overenskomstdaekning-i-danmark/ Read 2024-10-30

** https://ida.dk/raad-og-karriere/overenskomstforhandlinger/ok23/ok23-afstemningen-er-i-gang Read 2024-10-30

Table 5. In-depth analysis of collective bargaining coverage: the Danish puzzle (2)

Despite the 50%-rule in the private sector HK area and the refusal of DA and its member associations to sign collective agreements for academics, as much as 73% of the private sector employees in Denmark are according to OECD covered by collective agreements. But the fact remains that *less than 52%* of the private sector workers are covered by collective agreements *through employers' associations*. Unless not at least 21% (73% minus 52%) of all private sector workers are covered by substitute agreements (*hängavtal*), which is not the case, this does not add up!

The 73% coverage of collective agreements in Denmark is a calculation stemming from DA (*Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening* – the Confederation of Danish Employers) published in December 2020 (DA 2020). It is based on the number of workers converted into full-time units. By that, for example two individuals working parttime 50% are counted as one. As a result, the coverage rate is over-estimated, particularly in commerce where many employees not are covered by collective agreements even if they work in companies affiliated to employers' associations (the HK area). Regarding employees in companies affiliated to other employers' associations than DA (including its affiliates) and *Finans Danmark* (previously *Finanssektorens Arbejdsgiverforening)* plus those in unorganized companies, the coverage of collective agreements is "calculated as the average of the lowest possible and the highest possible coverage." I consider that this approach is associated with great uncertainty. Finally, it is unclear whether the small companies are included in the calculation.

Why so high union density in the Northern countries? (1)

(1) **Combined centralization and decentralization** of industrial relations and trade unions:

- **Central agreements**, that is at sectoral/industry level, implemented at workplace level. Unlike in the UK (private sector), the workplace union has a central agreement to rely on in local negotiations. The dismantling of central agreements considerably weakened British workplace unions.
- **Centralized employers' associations covering high shares of the workers and prepared to negotiate** prevent a fragmentary coverage of collective bargainining and trade unions similar to that in the USA. By that, only a minority of Nordic workers face anti-union employers, although the latter may represent a growing threat to the Nordic model of industrial relations.
- This feature of Nordic industrial relations is promoted by the **tradition of cooperation** between the labour market parties and **few restrictions on the rights to negotiate and take industrial action**.
- **The strong presence of unions at workplaces (decentralization)**: union clubs and union representatives including union safety representatives. Very important for recruitment of members, particularly in non-Ghent countries.
- Both **one-sided decentralization** (as in the UK, USA and Japan) and **one-sided centralization** (the Netherlands) push down the rate of unionization.

Why so high union density in the Northern countries? (2)

2) **Self regulation** preferred to state regulation (Kjellberg 2017a)

- The Nordic model(s) of industrial relations is distinguished by the dominance of self regulation (**collective bargaining**) to state regulation (legislation).

- The opposite is the French model **with its statutory minimium wages and state extension of collective agreements** (98% coverage). When the French government raises the minimum wage, this serves as a norm corresponding to **the industry norm** or 'mark' in the Nordic countries. A related question is: why join a union if the state decides the wage increases and everyone automatially is covered by collective agreements? Union density in France is 9%.

- This does not mean that the state is unimportant in the Nordic countries. **In Sweden there was a wave of new labour legislation in the 1970s**, breaking with the Swedish model of industrial relations. But much later, the Law on employment protection was revised and integrated in the collective bargaining model by the 2022 basic agreement. The revised legislation presupposed a wider tripartite agreement, but the contents of the revised legislation was decided by the labour market parties themselves.

Why so high union density in the Northern countries? (3)

- **Finland** has – or had – a **tripartite tradition** in wage negotiations, and the govermment is still active in the development of the wage formation model. In Sweden did the employers and unions without interference of the government conclude the 1997 Industry Agreement which still is a basic regulatory framework for collective bargaining. Also in **Denmark and Norway** the state has a more active role in wage formation than in Sweden.

3) **Ghent systems** in Denmark, Finland and Sweden

- A bipartite institution (state, trade unions) in Denmark, Finland and Sweden is the Ghent system, which means state-subsidized union unemployment funds. Institutional changes of the Ghent systems have played a major role for the declining union density in these countries. Norway has a no Ghent system but a lower and much more stable union density.

4) **Socio-economically** divided union movements in the Nordic countries

- Unlike the French union movement, the Nordic equivalents are not split along political or religious lines, but distinguished by a far-reaching socio-economic division with **separate blue-collar and white-collar unions and union confederations**.
- This is considered to have promoted in particular **white-collar unionization**.

Why so high union density in the Northern countries? (4)

	Trade union confederations in the Nordic countries		
	Blue-collar	Professional/other white-collar	Professional
Denmark -2018	LO-Denmark	FTF	AC /Akademikerne
Denmark 2019-	FH		AC / Akademikerne
Finland	SAK	STTK	Akava
Iceland	ASÍ	BSRB	BHM, KÍ
Norway	LO-Norway	YS	Unio, Akademikerne
Sweden	LO-Sweden	TCO	Saco

AC/Akademikerne: founded in 1972 (Danish Confederation of Professional Associations)

Akademikerne: founded in 1997 (Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations)

Akava: Akava – Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland, founded in 1950.

ASÍ: Alþýðusamband Íslands, founded in 1916 (Icelandic Confederation of Labour)

BHM: Bandalag Háskólamanna, founded in 1958 (Iceland Confederation of Academics)

BSRB: Bandalag Starfsmanna Ríkis og Bæja, founded in 1942 (Confederation of State and Municipal Employees of Iceland)

FH: Fagbevægelsens Hovedorganisation, founded in 2019 (Danish Trade Union Confederation)

FTF: Funktionærernes og Tjenestemændenes Fællesråd, 1952-2018 (Confederation of Professionals in Denmark)

KÍ: Kennarasamband Íslands, founded in 2000 (Icelandic Teachers´Union)

LO-Denmark: Landsorganisationen i Danmark, 1898-2018 (Danish Confederation of Trade Unions)

LO-Norway: Landsorganisasjonen i Norge, founded in 1899 (Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions)

LO-Sweden: Landsorganisationen i Sverige, founded in 1898 (Swedish Trade Union Confederation)

Saco: Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation, founded in 1947 (Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations)

SAK: Finnish: Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö, SAK; Swedish: Finlands Fackförbunds Centralorganisation, FFC. Founded in 1969 by a merger of two blue-collar confederations (Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions)

STTK: Finnish: Toimihenkilökeskusjärjestö, Swedish: Tjänstemannacentralorganisationen, founded in 1946 (Finnish Confederation of Professionals)

TCO: Tjänstemännens Centralorgaisation, founded in 1944 (Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees)

UHO: Utdanningsgruppenes Hovedorganisasjon, founded in 2001 (Confederation of Higher Education Unions, Norway)

Unio (previously UHO): founded in 2001 (Confederation of Unions for Professionals)

YS: Yrkesorganisasjonenes Sentralforbund, founded in 1977 (Confederation of Vocational Unions)

Why so high union density in the Northern countries? (5)

5) Large shares of **public sector** workers

- Public sector workers in general are distinguished by a higher union density than workers in the private sector.

- **The long expansion of Nordic welfare states resulted in large public sectors** promoted the growth of professional unions and other unions dominated by public sector employees.

- The **confederations of professional associations** (Akava, Akademikerne, Saco, etc) have no equivalents outside the Nordic countries.

- Saco (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations), founded in 1947 has been labelled “the world’s oldest professional peak association” (Heidenheimer 1976: 50).

Reference: Heidenheimer, A (1976) ”Professional Unions, Public Sector Growth and the Swedish Equality Policy”, Comparative Politics 19(1): 49-73.

Have the five factors promoting a high Nordic union density been weakened? (1)

1) Combined centralization and decentralization

- Excepting Finnish forest industry, **sector/industry** still is the dominating level of collective bargaining.

- Increased frequency of **figureless agreements**, but not in the norm-setting export industries.

- **Decentralisation of the concrete contents of the agreements increases the importance of workplace unions**, but the coverage of union clubs and local union representatives has declined, at least in Sweden.

- **The emergence of new globalised industries and companies.** Some of these companies have a negative attitude to unions and collective agreements (Spotify, Google, etc). These companies are often dominated by white-collar workers.

- **Many large established construction companies have outsourced in a massive scale to sub-contractors.** These are not always integrated in the Nordic model of industrial relations. Most exposed are vulnerable blue-collar workers. (Kjellberg 2023a)

Have the five factors promoting a high Nordic union density been weakened? (2)

2) Self regulation preferred to state regulation

- The Finnish government's active role in the remodelling of the wage formation system contrasts sharply with the correponding Swedish process up to the 1997 Industry Agreement. One of the government proposals is about decentralisation of negotiations in unorganized companies covered by extended collective agreements. Most controversial is the plans on local agreements with non-union representatives.

- The Swedish government remodelled the Ghent system radically in the years 2007 and 2008, which had highly negative consequences on the rate of unionization (see next slide).

Have the five factors promoting a high Nordic union density been weakened? (3)

3) **Ghent systems** in Denmark, Finland and Sweden

- Eroding Ghent systems in all Nordic Ghent countries:

- In Finland by the introduction of **the independent YTK unemployment fund** in 1992.

- In Denmark by the introduction of **cross-occupational and cross-industry unemployment funds** in 2002.

- In Sweden by the **growth of directly affiliated** to the union unemployment funds (without being union members) from the late 1980s and by the **remodelling of the Ghent system** in 2007 and 2008.

Since this is one of the main explanations (or the major explanation) of the declining union density in these three countries, we will take a closer look at it below.

Have the five factors promoting a high Nordic union density been weakened? (4)

4) Socio-economically divided union movements in the Nordic countries

- **The strong growth of ideologically alternative or 'yellow' unions** in Denmark has fundamentally changed the union landscape, among other things by accelerating the merger of LO-Denmark and FTF into FH.
- The merger of LO-Denmark with the white-collar confederation FTF is a *consequence* of declining union density, not something causing the decline.

5) Large shares of **public sector** workers

- **Public sector cuts (particularly in the 1990s), privatizations and massive outsourcing through public procurements** have reduced the share of public sector employees.
- The result is a long-term negative effect on the average union density. Many jobs have moved from the public sector to the private service sector, that is from the sector with the highest rate of unionization to the sector with the lowest.
- As **the lowest price** often wins In public procurements, the consequence is that the space for unfair competition and unfair working conditions has increased (Kjellberg 2023a).

Why do people join unions? (1)

According to a Swedish study by Calmfors et al. (2021) the top four reasons for being a union member are:

(1) Assistance in case of dispute with the employer
(2) Access to supplementary union income insurance
(3) Access to union unemployment funds
(4) Increased prospects to keep the job in case of redundancies

- Out of the listed 18 reasons, no less than three of the top four is about the risk of losing the job. **Considering that union membership is not required for membership of a union unemployment fund**, it is remarkable that access to a union unemployment fund is ranked as high as number three.
- As Calmfors et al. note, membership of a union and its unemployment fund is nevertheless still often perceived as a **'union package'**.
- It should be observed that the 18 listed reasons are given by *union members*. The increasing rate of employees **directly affiliated to union unemployment funds (that is without being union members)** shows that *many non-union members* do not consider union and fund membership as a union package. Nevertheless, for many union members the union unemployment fund apparently is a very important motive for union membership.

Why do people join unions? (2)

- **A new 'Ghent effect'** is created by the growing importance of supplementary union income insurances. These require membership of both a union and its unemployment fund.

- Their capacity to recruit union members is largest among white-collar workers as their wages more often than those of blue-collar workers are above the ceiling in the general unemployment insurance.

- This is an important explanation for the diverging union density between blue-collar and white-collar workers in Sweden.

- Contributing to this are also the greater difficulties to organize blue-collar workers due to higher shares of young people, immigrants and employed on fixed-term and part-time contracts. These structural characteristics are often combined.

- White-collar workers are overrepresented in the public sector. But it is remarkable that **in Sweden white-collar union density has declined considerably in the *public sector* – and only in this sector**. A possible explanation is that union income insurances not might be considered very important by public sector white-collar workers due to their lower risk of unemployment.

The erosion of the Ghent systems in Finland, Denmark and Sweden (1)

- The development of union density in the three Nordic Ghent countries illustrates that Ghent systems also may have negative consequences, which Norway has escaped.

- The costs of union membership may appear as more reasonable when it does not involve a comprehensive **union package** which includes an unemployment fund.

- When the costs seem too high for a growing number of people, **direct fund affiliation (above all in Sweden)**, **alternative unions (Denmark)** and **funds unlinked to the traditional unions may appear as an attractive low-cost option (Denmark and Finland)**.

- FINLAND. The Finnish independent cross-occupational unemployment fund YTK was founded in 1992 (Shin & Böckerman 2019: 3). Since then, YTK has expanded considerably at the expense of the union-led unemployment funds. With about **530,000 members**, it comprises every fifth employee. Its competitiveness is strengthened by an association connected to YTK providing insurances and individual services to its members.

The erosion of the Ghent systems in Finland, Denmark and Sweden (2)

- DENMARK. Cross-occupational unemployment funds were introduced in 2002 when the centre-right government changed the law. They accelerated the growth of 'ideologically alternative' or 'yellow' trade unions, weakening above all the LO unions. The large membership losses prompted LO-Denmark to merge in 2019 with the white-collar confederation FTF into FH.
- At the end of 2023, the yellow unions had almost **387,000 members, or every fifth Danish union member**. The cross-occupational unemployment funds were linked to unions in general not signing collective agreements, which therefore could offer **low-cost memberships**.* One of these unions is even called *Bedst og Billigst* ("Best and cheapest").
- The yellow unions have almost no workplace representatives.** They offer individual services as assistance in case of disputes with the employer, membership of their unemployment fund and other insurances, among them voluntary income insurances. The members are found above all in the private sector among younger people at workplaces without collective agreements and without representatives from the traditional unions. In line with their 'yellow' character the alternate unions do not participate in strikes and have no strike funds.

* "In the Danish context, alternative unions refer to unions that offer individual juridical guidance and assistance but rarely contribute to collective bargaining. This means that they are significantly cheaper to join than traditional unions, who invest the majority of their resources in collective bargaining activities. Surveys have demonstrated that the cheaper membership fee is one of the most important reasons why workers make the shift from traditional to alternative unions." (Ilsøe 2013: 85-86).

"Whereas both types of unions offer individual services like juridical guidance and assistance, discounts on various goods, invitations to meetings and courses, and access to supplementary unemployment insurance (that adds on top of the unemployment insurance system), it is only the traditional unions that contribute to the financing and organization of the collective services. The latter include negotiations of collective agreements, resolutions of collective conflicts, social dialogue, and representation of members at the workplace level by local shop stewards." (Ilsøe 2013: 89)

** "The alternative unions rarely elect local employee representatives, and only members of the traditional unions are entitled to representation and support by their local shop steward in case of any individual disagreements with management." (Ilsøe 2013: 90)

The erosion of the Ghent systems in Finland, Denmark and Sweden (3)

- SWEDEN. The centre-right government considerably raised the fees of unemployment funds in 2007. Union membership became quite expensive as union fees generally included fund fees, although many unions subsequently separated them. (Kjellberg 2011)

- In 2007 and 2008, Swedish unions lost 245,000 members and the unemployment funds more than 460,000 members, of which the *union* unemployment funds lost roughly 400,000 members

- The fund fees were linked to the unemployment rate among the members of each fund. From July 2008 this link was further reinforced. As unemployment usually is much higher among blue-collar workers, these had to pay considerably higher fees.

- Diverging blue-collar and white-collar union density. Starting from an equal union density in 2006 at 77%, blue-collar density fell to 66% in 2013, while white-collar density, after dropping to 72% in 2008-09, recovered to 73% in 2010-2013.

- The price of 'the union package' was further raised by the abolishment of tax reduction for fees to unions (corresponding to 25% of the union fee) and unemployment funds (corresponding to 40% of the fee).

The erosion of the Ghent systems in Finland, Denmark and Sweden (4)

- SWEDEN CONTINUED.
- Moreover, the value of the package was hollowed out by the deteriorated unemployment benefits.
- In 2014, the differentiation of fund fees by level of unemployment was abolished by the government, and all fees were restored to about the same level as before 2007.
- The share of employees **'directly' affiliated'** (without being union members) to union unemployment funds has increased considerably since the late 1980s. On average, about **every fourth member** of Swedish union unemployment funds is estimated to be directly affiliated. (Kjellberg 2024a)
- In 2023 43% of the members of the unemployment fund linked to the LO-affiliated Commercial Employees Union were directly affiliated and three fourths of the members of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' fund.
- The proportion of directly affiliated is considerably lower – about 15% – in the funds linked to the blue-collar *IF Metall* and the white-collar *Unionen* (Sweden's largest union).
- Due to higher wages than the members of the Commercial Employees Union and the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union are union income insurances more attractive for the members of *IF Metall* and, in particular, *Unionen*.

Union density and the business cycle

- In Ghent countries, the rate of unionization usually varies with the business cycle. This was particularly evident in Finland and in Sweden in the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1993, the Finnish unemployment rate increased from 3.1% to 16.5% and union density by 7-8 percentage points. Similarly, in Sweden unemployment grew from 2.4% to 10.2% and union density increased by 4 points in the same period.

- In the late 1980s, the Swedish economy was 'overheated' and union density dropped to 81% after a peak at about 85% in the mid-1980s. Some felt that they could do well without a union membership, but for the sake of security many considered it best to be affiliated to an unemployment fund. It was now that **the direct affiliation to union unemployment funds** began to expand among private sector white-collar workers. (Kjellberg 2001/2017)

- In Denmark unemployment rates did not increase as much during the beginning of the 1990s as in Finland and Sweden, although from an already high level, from 9% to 12%. Not surprisingly, from 1990 to 1993 Danish union density hardly grew at all (from 76% to 77%). The development of the Danish union density in the 1990s, however, should be taken with some caution as the figures include unemployed.

Union density, the business cycle and situational factors (1)

- The decreasing unemployment from the mid-1990s further broadened the scope for a more individualistic behaviour. In Sweden direct fund affiliation now spread to blue-collar workers and public sector employees.
- By 2000, union density had declined by 7-10 percentage points in Finland and by four points in Sweden.
- An interview study in 1993 in the Stockholm region showed that in particular young workers weighed the costs of membership against the benefits (Kjellberg 2001/2017).
- In a broader sense, the benefits and costs of being (or not being) a union member also include the reactions from colleagues, union representatives, family and friends. In workplaces with a strong union presence, non-members may pay a price in the form of disapproval. **This is in line with social customs theory.**
- Several studies show that the presence and strength of unions in the workplace plays a key role in recruiting and keeping union members, particularly in non-Ghent countries.

Union density, the business cycle and situational factors (2)

- But it could be argued that Ghent systems have a positive impact on union density in two ways, one of which involves the union at the workplace:

(1) By facilitating membership recruitment.
(2) The increased number of union members will in turn expand the base for setting up union clubs, which will further improve the prospects for recruiting members, and hence create or reinforce social customs of unionization.

- According to a survey by Kristine Nergaard (2020), a majority of the non-unionised Norwegian workers will consider joining due to *situational* factors:

”The majority of the non-unionised workers will consider joining if they can find a suitable union, if they should come to a workplace where this is common, or if the workplace proves to be insecure. Only a minority rejects the possibility of joining outright and irrespective of the situation. Younger workers state more frequently than others that they will consider joining, given certain preconditions.”

- A contributing factor to the unionization decline in Sweden of the 1990s was that **cuts in the public sector** and **privatizations** reduced the share of employees in this sector from 43% to 36% between 1993 and 2000 (excluding full-time students with job. Like in Sweden, private services in Finland increased its employment share at the expense of the manufacturing industry (Böckerman & Uusitalo 2006). Simultaneously, the union recruitment capacity of the Finnish Ghent system began to erode due to the founding of the independent unemployment fund YTK in 1992.

Union density, the business cycle and situational factors (3)

- Despite the considerable drop of Danish unemployment – from 12% to 5% in 1993-2000 – union density in Denmark declined by only 3 percentage points. A possible explanation is that the ”after-pay” scheme (*efterløn*), a voluntary early retirement pension, required several years of membership of an unemployment fund, which at that time meant a *union* unemployment fund.

- In Sweden, the share of employees on fixed-term contracts expanded during the 1990s and continued to do so, as unemployment now was higher than before the 90s crisis. This weakened the bargaining position of the individual worker, above all among young blue-collar workers, which in Sweden make up a large majority of employees aged 16-24 years. Contributing to the growing share of employees with fixed-term contracts were the successive revisions of the 1974 Employment Protection Act, making the Swedish legislation on temporary employment in the 1990s among the most liberal in the EU.

Union density, the business cycle and situational factors (4)

- Contrary to what could be expected, union density did not increase in the Nordic Ghent countries after the financial crisis of 2008. A contributing factor in Sweden, was that the increased unemployment resulted in higher fund fees, particularly among blue-collar workers.
- In contrast, during the covid-19 pandemic starting in 2020, and the economic uncertainty that followed, both union density and density of unemployment funds increased in Sweden. Unlike in the financial crisis, the fund fees did not soar this time as the differentiated fund fees were abolished in 2014. Furthermore, the unemployment benefits were made more generous. Not surprisingly, both blue-collar and white-collar density increased by two percentage points from 2019 to 2021.
- In Denmark, union density increased during the first pandemic year, from 68% in 2019 to 70% in 2020. In the inflation years 2022 and 2023 it was down again to 68%.
- Similarly, Swedish union density turned downwards during the inflation years 2022-2023. The rapidly increasing inflation in 2022 and the accompanying real wage reduction meant that some people did not feel they could afford to join unions when food, electricity, petrol, etc. became much more expensive. After blue-collar union density had increased from 60% to 62% during the pandemic years, it decreased twice as much – from 62% to 58% – during the inflation years.

Newcomers to the labour market: immigrants and young people (1)

- In Norway and Sweden, a large-scale immigration occurred after the millennium. With the enlargement of EU, many labour migrants came to Norway from new Eastern and Central European EU states, especially from Poland and Lithuania.
- The large number of refugees arriving in Sweden, particularly from 2015, changed the composition of the labour force most among **blue-collar workers: from 18% foreign-born in 2010 to 34% in 2023 – in the public sector 41%**. Many came from **non-European countries** with limited knowledge about Nordic trade unions and labour market models. The high inflation in 2022 and 2023 pressed the immigrants' economic margins extra hard due to their **over-representation among low-wage workers in private and public services (cleaning, restaurants, care)**.
- Norwegian research shows that **union density** among both labour migrants and other immigrants **increases considerably with the time of living in Norway** (Nergaard & Ødegård 2024: 20-23, 33). Therefore, it can be expected that the rate of unionization among migrants will decline during periods when many arrive, but that increasing length of residence in the country may counteract this.
- Likewise, the **high share of temporary jobs** among blue-collar migrants and young people has a negative influence on their union density.

Newcomers to the labour market: immigrants and young people (2)

- There are several explanations why there is a union density gap between young and older workers, spanning from more individualistic attitudes and structural characteristics of the young people (low union density jobs) to life course explanations.

- The first explanation refers to generational changes of attitudes and values. An alternative explanation is that low union density can depend on lack of knowledge and lacking experience of unions, due to the absence of unions where many young people work. According to a Danish study, more workers in 2014 than in 2002 think that ”Trade unions are necessary for securing the interests of the workers” (Høgedahl & Møberg 2022). How can this be reconciled with the low union density? The same study shows that ”many young workers are found in parts of the labour market with low trade union density and collective agreement coverage.” Generational differences almost disappear when taking variables related to the job characteristics of young people into account.

- Nergaard & Svarstad (2021) found that young workers in Norway more often join unions if they get jobs at workplaces where it is common to be organized, in other words **a social custom to be a union member**. Here there is a clear parallel with immigrants.

Newcomers to the labour market: immigrants and young people (3)

- Toubøl & Jensen (2014) found that **workplace union density** – in practice correlating with **union presence at workplace level** – is the most important predictor of whether or not an employee in Denmark is going to join a union.

- A Swedish study shows similar results as the Danish study by Høgedahl & Møberg. The union density decline in later age cohorts is not associated to the developments of values over time (Vestin & Vulkan 2022). Within all cohorts, union density increases up to 30 years of age, but in the cohorts born after 1970 the rise is not as steep and does not reach the same levels as in previous cohorts. There are some signs of more individualistic values, but they are not followed by a decline of trust in unions. On the contrary, the later more individualistic cohorts have more trust in unions, but they join unions to a lesser degree. The authors ”suggest the need for a greater focus on structural and institutional factors” like the 2007 reform of the Swedish Ghent system.

- If union density does not increase after the age of 30 and density among the young is lower than before, declining density will by time spread upwards in age. There are indications that this has already happened in Sweden. During the first two years of remodelling of the Ghent system, union density declined by 9-10 percentage points among workers 16-24 and 25-29 years old, almost twice as much as among those aged 30 or older (Kjellberg 2019/2024, table 8). More than one and a half decade later, the decline for the whole period from 2006 to 2023 was about the same in all age groups.

Newcomers to the labour market: immigrants and young people (4)

- In Sweden, the unionization gap between foreign-born and native blue-collar workers arose after 2006 when 77% of each category was affiliated to unions. In 2023 only 50% of the foreign-born were union members, compared to 62% of the Swedish-born - see table on the next slide.

- **The union density decline** among the foreign-born blue-collar works from 2006 to 2023 was **almost as large in the public sector** (minus 25 percentage points) **as in the private sector** (minus 28 points).

- **The decline is almost twice as large** among foreign-born blue-collar workers as among native-born (in the private service sector more than twice as large).

- Among white-collar workers the corresponding gap was 7-8 percentage points in 2006 as well as 2023. In 2023, 67% of the foreign-born white-collar workers were union members compared to 75% of those born in Sweden.

Table 6. Union density of foreign-born and native-born blue-collar workers in Sweden 2006-2023 (% and percentage points)

SWEDEN	2006	2007	2009	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2006-2023
Private sector										
Foreign-born	75	69	63	51	47	48	50	47	47	**-28**
Native-born	74	70	67	62	61	61	62	60	60	-14
All private sector	74	70	66	59	57	57	58	56	55	-19
- of which private services (incl. trade)	66	62	56	51	49	51	52	50	49	-17
Foreign-born	66	60/	55	46	41	43	43	42	42	**-24**
Native-born	65	61/	57	53	53	55	56	54	54	-11
Public sector										
Foreign-born	85	84	79	71	65	64	65	61	60	**-25**
Native-born	87	85	83	78	75	76	79	77	73	-14
All public sector	87	85	82	77	72	72	74	70	68	-19
Both sectors										
Foreign-born	77	73	67	56	51	52	54	51	50	**-27**
Native-born	77	74	71	65	64	64	65	63	62	-15
All blue-collar	77	74	70	63	60	61	62	59	58	-19
Union density less than 50% marked with green colour.										
Labour force surveys (AKU) 16-64 years excluding full-time students with job. Kjellberg 2024a table 38.										

Concluding remarks: policy recommendations (1)

- A conclusion of the paper is that the recruitment of newcomers in the labour market – young and immigrant workers – is considerably facilitated if there is a union at the workplace. Consequently, the relatively low coverage of union representatives in industries where young people and immigrants are overrepresented makes the recruitment of new members more difficult.
- The erosion of the Ghent systems in Denmark, Finland and Sweden gives workplace unions a key role for the recruitment of members. The absence of supplementary union income insurances make increased coverage of union workplace organizations particularly urgent in Finland.
- Although the three Nordic Ghent countries still have a higher – or much higher – union density than Norway – the model is challenged in the long run by declining union density, above all in industries with high shares of low-wage – often foreign-born – workers with a weak individual bargaining position. It is also in these industries that unfair competition, exploitation of vulnerable workers and working life criminality are gaining ground.
- Efforts to unionize immigrants and young workers should be given high priority. It is particularly important to organize immigrants in order for unions to gain access to workplaces dominated by vulnerable workers and to conclude collective agreements and check the compliance of the agreements.

Concluding remarks: policy recommendations (2)

- For the same reason, it is desirable to increase the recruitment of union representatives and increase the share of workers covered by union clubs.
- Not only unions but also the state and employer associations should intensify information about trade unions and the Nordic model of collective agreements, in schools for young people, by state agencies as the Public Employment Service and the Migration Agency for newly arrived immigrants and others.
- The need for more foreign-born union representatives can require government financial support for education and training of trade union and safety representatives.
- A Norwegian study shows that tax deductible union fees slow down or stop declining union density, and that Norwegian union density would be 5 percentage points lower without tax deduction. That is an argument for the re-introduction of tax reduction in Sweden.
- Several reforms should also be implemented to fight the growing working life criminality (Kjellberg 2023a-b, Kjellberg 2024b).

Appendix 1. Union density in Finland: OECD and Ahtiainen
(% and percentage points)

	1990	1993	2000	2005	2009	2010	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2000-*
Finland (1)	76	84	**74**	73	73	71	68	68	63	59		**-15**
Finland (2)	72	79	**71**	69	67/68		65		60		55	**-16**

* *Change from 2000 to the latest available year.*
Finland (1) OECD-AIAS-ICTWSS
Finland (2) Based on questionnaire sent to trade unions. Ahtiainen 2001, 2011, 2023.

Appendix 2. Union density by sector and industry in Norway and Sweden (%)

	2006	2008		2022		2023
	Sweden	Norway	Sweden	Norway	Sweden	Sweden
Manufacturing	82	55	79	53	76	75
Mining	-		-	73	-	-
Agriculture	-		-	**26**	-	-
Construction	79	33	71	**30**	59	58
Private services	66	33	59	35	62	62
- of which						
Trade	63	**23**	57	**26**	59	60
Hotel & restaurant	52	**20**	41	**16**	38	32
Transport	73	47	66	51	61	61
Business services etc	-	**30**	58	**28**	62	63
Finance & insurance	-		64	58	62	64
Information & communication	-		63	38	69	69
Sum private sector	71	38	65	38	64	64
Public sector	88	80	84	79	79	78
All	77	53	71	51	69	68

Union density less than 40% marked with green colour. At most 30% with red figures.

Norway: Register-based data obtained from Kristine Nergaard, Fafo Oslo.
Sweden: Kjellberg 2024a: table 37.

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