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Tripartism in the Nordic labour market models

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Tripartism in the Nordic labour market models

Nordic industrial relations are distinguished by self-regulation (Kjellberg 2017). Bipartite collective agreements are preferred to state regulation. High densities of unions and employers' associations promote high coverage of collective agreements, which legitimises a self-regulated labour market model.

There are, however, variations among the Nordic countries. In Denmark, Finland and Norway, the government plays a more active role in wage formation than in Sweden. Finland's long tradition of peak-level, tripartite collective bargaining – 22 centrally negotiated income-policy agreements from 1968 to 2013 – came to an end with the 2016 Competitiveness Agreement.

The Norwegian state is deeply involved in collective bargaining through two permanent tripartite committees analysing the economic conditions for the bargaining rounds and through tripartite commissions evaluating and proposing reforms of the 'Frontrunner model' (*Frontfagsmodellen*). In the early 1990s, a tripartite commission worked out a strategy for the 'Solidarity Alternative', a five-year social contract between LO-Norway, the employers' confederation NHO (*Næringslivets Hovedorganisasjon*) and the state on exchanging moderate wage increases for increased employment and improved training and education.

In the Danish tripartite Common Declaration (*Fælleserklæringen*) of 1987, the social partners promised wage moderation in exchange

for reforms, which paved the way for a long series of tripartite agreements on non-wage issues.

Apart from the Rehnberg stabilisation agreements in the early 1990s (and a few income-policy deals), Swedish tripartite agreements are not about wage issues. The Swedish Industry Agreement of 1997 is a *bipartite* agreement, in contrast to the Norwegian tripartite Solidarity Alternative of the early 1990s and subsequent tripartite government commissions or the Danish tripartite Common Declaration of 1987 and the likewise tripartite Negotiation Climate Agreement of 1999. In contrast to the Danish and Norwegian agreements and commissions, the Swedish Industry Agreement introduced a wage norm entirely by *self-regulation*. The Rehnberg agreements had required a tripartite arrangement; this was no longer the case. The reinforced National Mediation Office, established in 2000, is instructed to work for the application of the ‘industry norm’ throughout the entire labour market. The Industry Agreement therefore serves as a follow-up to the Industry Agreement.

In the last 10 to 15 years, a series of tripartite, non-wage agreements has been concluded in Sweden. In Denmark, numerous such agreements have been signed during a much longer period. Many of these Danish agreements are indirectly linked to collective bargaining, as compensation for wage restraint.

In this chapter, we take a closer look at the role of tripartite agreements in the Nordic countries from a comparative and historical perspective. A common denominator for these countries is the concept of tripartite labour courts, introduced from 1910 (Denmark) to 1946 (Finland). In Denmark, these courts were established as a result of a proposal from the 1908 tripartite August Committee. In 1926, Sweden’s social democratic government set up a tripartite committee. The subsequent liberal government was in a hurry and appointed civil servants to speed up the continued work, resulting in the enactment of laws on labour courts and collective agreement in 1928.

A tripartite industrial peace conference was arranged in 1928 on the initiative of a Swedish conservative government. The social democratic government of the 1930s expected to lead tripartite negotiations for a basic agreement (*huvudavtal*), but the social partners rejected government participation. In Norway, tripartite negotiations played a prominent role in the process up to the 1935 basic agreement. In the final phase, however, the social partners negotiated on their own in accordance with the self-regulation principle.

Sweden: Tripartite government committees on industrial peace 1905–1927

Several legislative initiatives from 1905 to 1927 to promote industrial peace resulted in *tripartite* government inquiries. The 1906 mediation law was prepared by a tripartite committee representing the government, LO and an association of construction employers, *Centrala Arbetsgivareförbundet* (CA), although the LO and CA representatives were formally appointed as experts (Westerståhl 1945:294–300, Nyström 1990:62–65). The Association of Engineering Employers (*Sveriges Verkstadsförening*, VF) and the Swedish Employers' Confederation (*Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen*, SAF), who were not represented in the committee, opposed the 1906 law. Numerous factors were in play here: SAF and VF were dominated by big companies and the CA by small ones; LO and the social democratic party had a positive attitude to the legislation; the tripartite committee that prepared the 1906 law was appointed in 1905 by a liberal government; and the government bill was based on the committee inquiry stressing the voluntary character of mediation.

The tripartite Labour Contract Committee (*Arbetsavtalskommittén*)¹ was set up in 1907 by a conservative government, but two years

¹ The committee consisted of two lawyers, four employer representatives, two LO representatives, a representative for the 'yellow' Swedish Labour Association (*Svenska Arbetarförbundet*) and an unorganised agricultural worker.

later this committee was still not prepared to submit a report. The 1909 Great Strike made finding a faster legislative process urgent and the committee was dissolved (Göransson 1988:176–181). According to the bill placed before the 1910 parliament, industrial action during contract periods would be banned, except for sympathy measures. The intact right to sympathy action was a key issue for the employers as they wanted to escalate labour conflicts through large lockouts. A liberal proposal on total prohibition of industrial action during contract periods was supported by the social democrats and LO (Westerståhl 1945:315). The parliament rejected a compromise that included the right to sympathy measures. No legislation was passed and a similar bill in 1911 was also rejected.

After the Supreme Court had issued some judgements in 1915 on the legal status of collective agreements, a conservative government appointed a tripartite committee to deal with the industrial peace issue.² The importance of strong trade unions and employers' associations was emphasised (Göransson 1988:182–183). This time, due to resistance from both social partners, the government refrained from submitting a bill (Westerståhl 1945:353). Nevertheless, some of the ideas were realised in 1917 when a liberal-social democratic coalition government revised the mediation law (Westerståhl 1945:357–358).

In 1926, a social democratic government with Gustav Möller as social minister set up a tripartite 'nine-man delegation' (*Niomanna-delegationen*) to investigate the suitability of industrial peace legislation (Göransson 1988:204–206). LO and SAF each had three representatives and the government three 'impartial' representatives. When a liberal government took office in the same year, it forced the work forward. LO protested by leaving the delegation early in 1927. Shortly thereafter, a few civil servants outlined a law proposal on labour courts and collective agreement. The alliance between the social democrats and liberals in labour-law matters was now defini-

² Both LO president Herman Lindqvist and SAF president Hjalmar von Sydow were members of the committee.

tively dissolved. A first break occurred in 1926 when a social democratic government was forced to resign as a result of the Stripa mine conflict; the liberals and other non-socialist parties had opened the way for unemployed workers to replace the strikers. In 1928, the laws on labour courts and collective agreements were enacted after a three-hour political strike with 365,000 participants.³

Tripartite deliberations on industrial peace in Sweden, 1928–1931

The process preceding the basic LO-SAF agreement (known as the Saltsjöbaden Agreement) started with an invitation from a conservative government to the social partners to attend the tripartite Industrial Peace Conference (*Arbetsfredskonferensen*) in 1928. The aim was to create a climate of cooperation between the social partners and within companies (Johansson 1989:63–74). One high-priority issue of conflict – and cooperation – was rationalisation. Increased efficiency risked generating unemployment, and rationalisations' resulting in intensification of work could cause more accidents. The advantages, however, included economic growth (which would create more jobs), shorter working hours and increased wages. In the 1920s, the union movement shifted focus from the negative consequences of rationalisations to the positive (Johansson 1989:396–400).

The first serious steps toward the Swedish model of cooperation occurred between 1928 and 1931. During this period, the Delegation of Industrial Peace (*Arbetsfredsdelegationen* 1929–1931) and the Industrial Peace Committee (*Arbetsfredskommittén* 1930–1931) brought together LO, SAF and government representatives. The presidents of the two confederations were members of these tripartite bodies, as well as the VF president of the Delegation of Industrial Peace.

³ The first great, political general strike in Sweden occurred in 1902 when 120,000 workers participated in the three-day strike for universal suffrage.

This early initiative to build cooperation between the social partners was disrupted by world economic depression, and attention shifted to the negative consequences of rationalisation (Swenson 2009). A contributing factor in this breakdown was a quite unique event in Swedish history: the Ådalen incident of 1931, where the military killed five workers demonstrating against strike-breakers.

Tripartite or bipartite negotiations for a Swedish basic agreement?

In the early years of the depression, the frequency of strikes and lockouts rose sharply. A top priority of the social democratic government taking office in 1932 was to fight Sweden's high unemployment rates and promote economic growth. The government, the unions and the employers all had an interest in gearing down the high frequency of conflicts and pulling the country out of the depression.

In the light of the 11-month construction strike of 1933/1934, which threatened the social democratic crisis programme, the government committee (*Nothinkommittén*) in its 1935 report 'Peoples' supply and industrial peace' (*Folkförsörjning och arbetsfred*) encouraged the social partners to reduce the rate of labour conflicts. In contrast to many government inquiries and delegations referred to above, this committee was not tripartite but consisted of two social democrats and a liberal business executive. Due to discontent among its members, LO protested against the appointment of the committee, but the social democratic prime minister Per Albin Hansson offered compensation in the form of employment protection and social reforms – if the unions disciplined their members to obtain industrial peace (Öberg 1994:61–63, 72–75). To avoid legislation, SAF offered some concessions regarding employment protection in the form of rules for layoffs and furloughs (see below).

Although the social democratic government favoured self-regulation over legislation, it expected *tripartite* negotiations led by government representatives in the same way as in the Industrial Peace Delegation and the Industrial Peace Committee (Johansson 1989:136–137, 141, 404–405).⁴ LO was open to this, but backed down after SAF firmly declared that such negotiations would be best done *without* government representatives. The government was disappointed but accepted its exclusion.

The threat on legislation squeezed agreements

Several times in Swedish industrial relations history, the *threat of legislation* has compelled the social partners to cooperate. The fear that legislation would restrict the right to sympathy lockouts was a conspicuous motive for SAF in 1936 when entering into the negotiations with LO that resulted in the 1938 Saltsjöbaden Agreement (Swenson 2009:45–56, 75–77). Without government participation, the risk of such restrictions was further reduced. The prospects for a long social democratic reign made self-regulation particularly attractive for employers. The fact that the government was still a minority government had a similar impact on LO, as there were no guarantees against anti-union legislation (Johansson 1989:142–144, 405).

Similarly, the threat of legislation was important in connection with the so-called ‘cooperation agreements’ on apprentices (1944), works councils (1946), time and motion studies (1948) and on several additional occasions until the 1970s, when legislation was more a reality than a threat (Johansson 1989:406, 426–428).

The threat of legislation reappeared in the 1990s prior to the 1997 Industry Agreement (wage formation) and again before the 2022 basic agreement (revised employment protection).

⁴ To avoid legislation, the 1935 Nothin Committee proposed that experts appointed by the government should negotiate with the social partners to get them to change their conflict methods. The government experts should also confer with these partners to carry out the necessary centralisation (SOU 1935:65 pp. 123 and 112).

The 1938 Saltsjöbaden Agreement incomplete without 1941 LO centralisation

The 1938 Saltsjöbaden Agreement resulted in the following:

- Creation of the bipartite Labour Market Council (*Arbetsmarknadsnämnden*), which had to consider whether or not a conflict posed a danger to society. According to the agreement, this required a centralisation of LO (Höglund 1979:22). Sympathy conflicts and industrial actions to collect overdue wages (*obetalad lön*) were allowed during contract periods (Edlund 1989:64–65). In the case of any legal disputes, industrial action was forbidden.
- A negotiation procedure (*förhandlingsordning*) regulating central and local negotiations about disputes during contract periods.
- Rules for layoffs and furloughs (*uppsägnings- och permitteringsregler*). Disputes could be submitted to the Labour Market Council.

Industrial peace was not secured, however, based on the Saltsjöbaden Agreement alone. A fundamental restructuring of LO was also required – and a prerequisite for the centralised bargaining LO-SAF introduced in the 1950s. The 1941 revision of LO statutes was a follow-up to the basic agreement. From this point on, industrial action with financial support from LO was impossible without LO approval. The leadership of the LO unions acquired the right to terminate, reject and approve collective agreements; final decisions would not be made through conferences or membership ballots.

During the 1933–1934 construction strike, the government forced LO to exert pressure on the building unions to stop the strike. This required violation of the statutes of the Masons' Union, whose leadership had no veto right against the ballot result. This changed in 1941 (Höglund 1979:28–29, 31–39). The Nothin Committee's 1935 report called for greater centralisation of the union decision-making process (Höglund 1979:41–42). SAF – already centralised – had long advocated the abolishment of union ballots (Swenson 2002:116–118). The Saltsjöbaden Agreement and the new 1941 centralised LO stat-

utes by sociologist Sten Höglund are considered 'two inter-integrating parts' of how the industrial peace issue found a solution in Sweden (Höglund 1979:47).

There is reason to consider the 1938 basic agreement and the 1941 LO centralisation as an integrated package (cf. Öberg 1994:72). The social partners were anxious to avoid state intervention. At any rate, the state would be involved by a political exchange with the union movement. Both the prime minister and the Nothin Committee held out the prospect of social reforms (and employment protection promised by the prime minister)⁵ if LO disciplined its members through centralisation (Öberg 1994:61–63, 69–70, 73–75). Although the 1941 centralisation was a unilateral LO decision, it took place after close *informal* contacts and negotiations with the state and SAF (Öberg 1994:74–75). Thus there is reason to consider the LO centralisation as an informal *tripartite* deal. Both the state and SAF had demanded it; now, LO was carrying it out after informal deliberations with the other two actors.

Sweden did not participate in World War II but was deeply affected economically. All the countries surrounding Sweden were either at war or occupied. There was little room for strikes and lock-outs at the time, but towards the end of the war the five-month metalworkers' strike started. During the war syndicalists and communists had gained ground through dissatisfaction with declining real wages. Intended to be advisory, ballots which in practice were decisive were applied during the strike. Both the Metalworkers' Union and LO refrained from exercising their new veto power in order not to give the communists an advantage. The outcome of the strike was a stinging defeat for the communists; with that, all obstacles for the future of the Saltsjöbaden policy of cooperation had been overcome.

⁵ SAF changed its statutes (paragraph 23) to make some concessions to avoid legislation (Öberg 1994:100–106).

Norwegian and Danish centralisation by linked membership ballots

In contrast to Sweden, the Norwegian state played a considerably more prominent role in the negotiations up to the 1935 basic agreement (*Hovedavtalen*). A liberal government set up the Industrial Peace Committee (*Arbeidsfredskomiteen*) in 1930 to find alternatives to compulsory arbitration (*tvungen voldgift*) to secure industrial peace (Alsos et al. 2016:182). The committee consisted of three liberals; the chairman was Paal Berg, president of the Labour Court. The committee was probably intended to be tripartite (Seim 1972:22–23). From the start, LO-Norway and the employer confederation NAF (*Norsk Arbeidsgiverforening*, now known as NHO) were not represented; LO refused to allow their participation in the committee after the courts handed down verdicts perceived as anti-union based on legislation introduced by a liberal government (Alsos et al. 2016:182–185). Almost a year passed before the social partners participated in the meetings, although not formally as committee members. The weakening of the communists within the union movement paved the way for LO's attitude shift in late 1930, as did the prospects for cooperating with the *Venstre* liberal party to isolate the Farmers' Party (*Bondepartiet*) and the conservative Right Party (*Høyre*), who carried out an anti-union offensive at the same time that the economic crisis deepened (Seim 1973:39–50, 79–81). Furthermore, LO's switch to a more positive attitude to participation was facilitated by the committee's readiness to create industrial peace through a *basic agreement* between the social partners instead of discussing new legislation. After a meeting between the committee and LO/NAF in December 1930, and another four meetings in January 1931, there were no common meetings until in October. The reason for the break was the great 1931 lockout, which ended in a deadlock and therefore probably made LO and NAF even more willing to find a solution favouring industrial peace. In the meantime, the committee drew up an outline to a basic agreement, which was later

discussed with LO and NAF (Seim 1973:74–78). This outline was ‘a direct prerequisite for the basic agreement for which LO and NAF started negotiations in December 1934, and which was signed in 1935’ (Seim 1973:58; author’s translation).

The anti-union Farmers’ Party came into office in May 1931, and in autumn the new government limited the committee’s mandate. Then, in December 1931, it appointed a new parallel committee – dominated by the Farmers’ Party – to prepare a boycott law. In February 1932, LO withdrew from the Industrial Peace Committee, which was dissolved in the same year, but before the LO withdrawal, the committee had important meetings with LO and NAF to discuss the outline to a basic agreement (Seim 1973: 82–92).

The negotiations resumed in the tripartite commission (*Foreningslovkommisjonen*) appointed in autumn 1933 by a new liberal government in office since March. On the agenda was a law proposal on union ballot rules with inspiration from Denmark. LO accepted these rules in a deal with NAF in 1934 (Seim 1973:131–135, 145–152, 166–172). From December 1934, LO and NAF negotiated themselves until they reached the 1935 basic agreement (Seim 1973:202–203). On demand of LO and NAF, the government abolished the legislated ballot rules. A LO proposal on ballot rules was included in the basic agreement. This represented an important step from state regulation to self-regulation.

Denmark still has legislation that gives state mediators the power to combine ballot results from various bargaining areas into a single unit. That means that unions in which the majority votes to strike can be voted down if the *overall* majority votes for the mediation proposal. In this way, a centralisation of collective bargaining is achieved. Norway has a similar centralising mechanism, but through self-regulation.

In Sweden, centralisation was brought about by the LO 1941 decision to *abolish* membership ballots except for advisory voting (this very seldom used). However, this mechanism was used in the 1945 metalworkers’ strike (unilateral self-regulation on the part of LO).

In Denmark and Norway, centralisation took place through linking of voting results, although by state regulation (legislation) in Denmark and bipartite self-regulation (the basic agreement) in Norway.

Tripartite labour courts in the Nordic countries.

Mediation institutes prepared by tripartite committees

The only permanent, tripartite bodies related to collective bargaining common to all Nordic countries are the labour courts: in Denmark since 1910, Norway 1916 (the 1915 Labour Disputes Act), Sweden 1929 (legislation 1928) and Finland 1947 (legislation 1946). In Denmark and Norway, mediation institutes were founded at the same time as labour courts (1910 and 1916). Sweden was the first Nordic country with a mediation institute (1906); Finland was a latecomer (1962).

The Danish August Commission of 1908 is an early example of a tripartite body reforming the collective bargaining system. As a result, 1910, saw the establishment of a labour court and a mediation institute (*Forligsinstitutionen*), introduction of a peace obligation during contract periods, and a distinction between legal and interest conflicts. The aim was not to create a tripartite bargaining system, but to strengthen self-regulation (Due & Madsen 2012:12–14, 2010).

Since 1934, Danish mediators have the power to add ballot results from several bargaining areas into a single unit, thus eliminating majority votes against a proposal in some areas, provided that the overall majority votes for the proposal. This allowed state mediators to acquire a key coordinating role in collective bargaining.

Furthermore, Danish governments sometimes transform mediation proposals into law, as in the 2013 teachers' conflict and the 2021 nurses' conflict. Since World War II, the Swedish government has intervened only once to use coercive measures in wage negotiations. A special law was enacted to stop the 1971 Saco teachers' strike.

The Norwegian Labour Disputes Act of 1915 was also prepared by a tripartite body known as the Arbitration Committee (*Voldgiftskomiteen*). This body had already submitted its report in 1909, but the parliamentary process took time (Alsos et al. 2016:55–58, 78–85). The social partners, who made up a committee minority, accepted compulsory mediation, but not compulsory arbitration in conflicts of interest. At any rate, compulsory arbitration was included in the liberal government's bill of 1913, but LO and NAF prepared a proposal of their own without compulsory arbitration. In its final bill, the Norwegian government omitted both voluntary and compulsory arbitration. The result was the 1915 Labour Disputes Act. After a significant labour conflict, the liberal government enacted a temporary law in 1916 on compulsory arbitration (Alsos et al. 2016:125–133). Since then, there is a Norwegian tradition of state intervention in labour conflicts, today called compulsory wage council – *tvungen lønnsnemnd* (Seip 2018:78–79). In the period 1990–2012, this approach was used in 39 labour conflicts to prevent some unions from getting higher wages than others (Seip 2018:80).

The Swedish mediation institute of 1906 was prepared by a tripartite committee, although not in a formal sense. In contrast, the reinforced mediation institute of 2000 – the National Mediation Office – was preceded by an inquiry led by a sole investigator, Svante Öberg (director-general of the National Institute of Economic Research), with Birgitta Nyström (Lund University) as one of the experts and without participation of the social partners (SOU 1998:141).

The new mediation institute shall 'promote an efficient wage formation process', which is 'the strongest intervention by Swedish legislation thus far in the autonomy of the social partners when it comes to the central issue of wages' (Nyström 2006: 60; author's translation). This means that the mediators will never approve wage increases exceeding the industry norm. The institute is explicitly ordered to foster the wage-leading role of the export sector when

mediating in cases of conflict and to actively promote norms that support this role.

White-collar workers: self-regulation or state regulation?

In the early 1930s, white-collar workers in Swedish manufacturing, commerce and banking had still not entered into negotiations with employers. Eight white-collar unions founded the Confederation of Employees (*De anställdas centralorganisation*, Daco) in 1931 to change this.

In the same year, a tripartite committee (*Kommittén angående privatanställda*) was appointed by a liberal government (Eriksson 2007:66–115). The social partners were represented by SAF, an insurance company, the Union of Bank Employees (represented by Victor von Zeipel, also president of Daco), the Union of Supervisors, the Association of Office Employees (which argued for substantive legislation) and Sigfrid Hansson (LO and active in the Journalists' Union; brother of prime minister Per Albin Hansson). The committee directives were primarily concerned with *substantive* legislation. A highly controversial aspect arose: the division of employees into separate categories with different employment benefits (Eriksson 2007). Of course, it was unthinkable that the social democratic government entering office in 1932 would submit a bill based on such a committee report. The committee was ordered to outline, without delay, a law on rights of association and negotiation. The Law on Rights of Association and Negotiation (*Lagen om förenings- och förhandlingsrätt*) was enacted in 1936. Although this law deviates from the Swedish model of self-regulation, there is a world of difference between negotiated employment conditions (collective bargaining) and *substantive* legislation on employment conditions (Kjellberg 2017:363–370).

In Denmark, events followed a different path, as a *substantive* white-collar law (*funktionærloven*) was introduced in 1938 (Kjellberg 2017:367–369). It included a notice period of three months and sick-

ness benefits. The initiative came from the Conservative Party, which in 1937 proposed legislation on individual employment contracts. The aim was to reinforce the middle-class identity of Danish white-collar workers and provide an alternative to collective agreements.

Sweden: weak tripartism and limited state intervention in wage formation

The strong tripartite tradition in Denmark, Finland and Norway is related to the significantly more interventionist role of the state in *wage formation* compared to Sweden. In Denmark, mediation proposals are often imposed by law; Finland had a long period of tripartite agreements; and compulsory arbitration is a characteristic feature of Norwegian industrial relations (Seip 2018).

Tripartite income-policy deals have been common in Denmark, Finland and Norway for many decades. Wage moderation has usually been compensated by tax cuts, price ceilings and social benefits. In Sweden, income-policy deals are unusual. The Rehnberg ‘stabilisation agreements’ of the early 1990s were tripartite wage agreements, but they were not related to income policy.

Norwegian tripartism in wage formation

Norway has a strong tradition of income-policy cooperation. A tripartite commission appointed by a social democratic government in 1991–1992 developed a strategy for the ‘Solidarity Alternative’, a five-year social contract between LO-Norway, the employers’ confederation NHO, and the state on exchanging moderate wage increases for employment growth and improved training and education. After succeeding in significant slowdown of wage increases in the 1990s, the 1998 bargaining round resulted in a great conflict and high nominal wage increases. The aim of the tripartite 1999–2000 Arntsen Commission was to prepare the 1999 bargaining round and, in

the short run, restore income-policy cooperation. For the first time, all peak organisations, not just LO and NHO, were invited. The tripartite 1999–2013 Holden I–III Commissions and the 2016 tripartite Cappelen Commission had a more long-term focus on evaluating and reforming the Norwegian wage formation model. In 2023, the tripartite Frontrunner Commission led by Steinar Holden delivered a follow-up report on the Norwegian Frontrunner model (*Frontfagsmodellen*).

The Norwegian case is the most far-reaching example of a Nordic state closely cooperating with the social partners on wage formation. Institutionalised in two permanent tripartite bodies, this is quite unique in the Nordic countries:

- The Contact Committee (*Regjeringens kontaktutvalg for inntektsoppgjørene*), founded in 1962 as an informal body in which the government, before each bargaining round, conducts a dialogue with the social partners to moderate inflation and wage growth and informs the partners about its views.
- The Technical Calculation Committee for Wage Settlements (*Det tekniske beregningsutvalget for inntektsoppgjørene*, TBU), founded in 1967, with the aim of creating a shared understanding between the social partners of the economic situation in Norway. The committee submits two reports every year upon which wage negotiations are based (Løken et al. 2013:44).

This brings to mind the seminars and conferences that the Swedish National Mediation Office arranges with the social partners regarding the economic conditions for wage formation aiming at “supporting and maintaining the consensus on the labour market of the normative role of the international competitive sector in wage formation” (<https://www.mi.se/english/about-us/>).

The Norwegian institutionalised income-policy cooperation and the prominent role of the Norwegian state in wage formation is related to the low private-sector union density (less than 40 %) and the low collective bargaining coverage (less than 50 % in the pri-

vate sector). The challenge to increase union density has long been a subject of tripartite discussions (Kjellberg 2025a:145). Part of the explanation for the low Norwegian unionisation rate is the absence of a Ghent system (state-subsidised union unemployment funds) like those in Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

In the Norwegian Frontrunner model, the manufacturing industry is the frontrunner in collective bargaining. The United Federation of Trade Unions (*Fellesforbundet*) and the employers' association Norwegian Industry (*Norsk Industri*) negotiate the norm-setting agreement, known as the Industry Agreement (*Industrioverenskomsten*). This agreement is reminiscent of similar norm-setting industry agreements in Denmark and Sweden. In contrast to the setting of the Swedish industry norm, carried out exclusively by the social partners in manufacturing (they even have their own mediators), the Norwegian state is directly involved in this process:

“Although the government does not enter wage negotiations as a third party, it is still common for the state to contribute to a solution. In practice, this entails the parties in the wage-leading manufacturing sector – or the national mediator, who is always involved in the final stages of these negotiations – sending a letter to the prime minister or the relevant government minister in which the parties jointly request government assistance to reach a solution. This assistance has varied in terms of both content and scope. Pensions, for example, were a core element of several wage settlements in the 1990s and 2000s. Another recurring theme has been reforms in further and continuing education. However, overall, the government’s assistance through reforms could be considered more modest, less formal, and more intentional after 2000 compared to the 1970s and 1990s.” (Rommetvedt & Nergaard 2025:527)

From 1975 to 1977, the Norwegian state participated directly as a third party in collective bargaining together with LO-Norway and NAF (today NHO). Since then, the state has not entered direct wage negotiations with the social partners (Rommetvedt & Nergaard 2025: 522). LO and NAF accepted the wage laws of 1988 and

1989 because they were anxious to break the wage – price spiral. The tripartite Solidarity Alternative of the early 1990s pursued a similar aim.

As mentioned previously, the Norwegian state is directly involved in modelling and remodelling the wage-formation model. The *tripartite* Holden I Commission (NOU 2000:21) drew up the principles of the Frontrunner model. The corresponding Swedish model was designed entirely through the *bipartite* 1997 Industry Agreement.

Danish tripartism: revived since the Common Declaration of 1987

The Danish ‘Holistic solution’ (*Helhedsløsningen*) of 1963 included the introduction of supplementary pension (*Arbejdsmarkedets Tillægspension*, ATP) to compensate for government prolongation of collective agreements. Employer dissatisfaction brought about replacement of most tripartite cooperation with bipartite cooperation between LO and the social democratic ministers in the government (Due & Madsen 2012:29). A tripartite commission was appointed to design ATP, which was preceded by negotiations between the social partners based on a report from the tripartite Economic Council (*Det Økonomiske Råd*), established in 1962. Although ATP was enshrined in law, it was run by a tripartite body dominated by the social partners and consequently primarily governed by self-regulation (Due & Madsen 2012:29–31).

In December 1987, to restore Danish competitiveness, the government and social partners signed a tripartite declaration of intent called the Common Declaration (*Fælleserklæringen*). The unions promised wage moderation in exchange for increased employment and occupational pensions (*Arbejdsmarkedspension*, AMP) although the latter issue was not resolved until in the 1991 bargaining round (Andersen et al. 2014:44, Due et al. 1993:374–375). The 1987 Common Declaration and the introduction of AMP renewed the Dan-

ish collective bargaining system through the inclusion of welfare reforms (pensions and, later, parental leave and competence development and education), resulting in *double regulation* by agreement and law, but with the exception of AMP itself, which is regulated only by collective agreements at industry level (Due & Madsen 2012). The other welfare reforms mentioned here were introduced by tripartite agreements. Over time the interplay of legislation and collective agreements regarding welfare issues has increased (Maidland 2025:11).

In Sweden as well, the double regulation of welfare has grown considerably, but primarily by self-regulation, i.e. through *bipartite* agreements. Sweden has a long history of collective agreements on employment-based insurances and benefits – commonly referred to as *occupational welfare* (Cronert et al. 2025a–b, Johansson 2020). Most employees are covered by such supplementary benefits through collective agreements (occupational pensions and supplementary benefits related to sickness, parental leave, and work-related accidents) or through union membership (supplementary union income insurances). From a financial perspective, there is an interplay between the two welfare systems. Occupational welfare relieves the financial burden of the state by supplementing the public welfare schemes. Conversely, the state supports the supplementary schemes, for example through favourable tax deduction rules (Mörtvik 2024:22–23). Due to the retrenchment of public welfare schemes (such as the successively hollowed-out general pension system) and the stagnation of active labour market policy, the role of occupational welfare schemes has increased. The Swedish Ghent system is a hybrid of self-regulation (union unemployment funds, but with unions and funds organizationally separated) and state regulation (state-supported funds supervised by the Swedish Unemployment Insurance Inspectorate, IAF; Johansson 2020:355).

According to the tripartite 1999 ‘Negotiation Climate Agreement’ between LO-Denmark (now known as *Fagbevægelsens Hovedorganisation*, FA, after a merger with the white-collar confederation

FTF) and the employer confederation DA (*Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening*), the social partners shall, during bargaining rounds, confer with the government about the socio-economic frameworks for wage increases (Jensen et al. 2001:136–138, Due & Madsen 2006:435–451). The 1998 Tripartite Forum was not very successful in this respect, but the tripartite ‘Statistical Committee’ (LO, DA and the government) that was established in conjunction with the 1987 Common Declaration was revived in 1999. Its tasks are to analyse the development of wage costs, prices and real wages, and deliver an annual report. In Sweden, this task is handled by two government agencies – the National Institute of Economic Research (*Konjunkturinstitutet*) and the National Mediation Office – and the Economic Council for Industry connected to the 1997 Industry Agreement.

Sweden: self-regulation, but tripartite bargaining in the early 1990s

The Swedish ‘Haga deliberations’ of 1974–75 between the social democratic government, the liberal parties and the unions failed to prevent wage-cost explosions in the 1975–76 bargaining rounds. The centre-right government entering power in 1976 did not include unions in their income-policy deliberations (Elvander 1988:288). In the run-up to the Great Conflict of 1980, prominent employer representatives were disappointed that the government did not create a low-wage tax package profile to accommodate LO, as raised real wages of its members presupposed economic policy measures (Kjellberg 2011:39). A social democratic government was more successful in bringing about income-policy exchange during the tripartite ‘Rosenbad deliberations’ in 1984, but despite these advances, wages rose by more than 15% during 1984 and 1985 (Forslund 2016:9).

In the early 1990s, *tripartite bargaining rounds* took place under the direction of the government’s Rehnberg Commission. This body coordinated all agreements and ensured that they were concluded

at a level that entailed a radical gear-down of wage increases. These ‘stabilisation agreements’ were concluded with the voluntary participation of the social partners, but only after much persuasion and under ‘a tight rein’, which entailed ‘unusual and harsh interventions in collective bargaining’ (Rehnberg 1999:273).

Finland: the rise and fall of peak-level, tripartite income-policy agreements

Due to historical circumstances, the Finnish variant of the Nordic labour market model emerged relatively late. After the Civil War (1918), Finnish employers resisted collective agreements throughout the interwar period and did not acknowledge the union confederation SAK (Central Organisation of Finnish Trade unions) until 1940, when the war called for national unity (Wuokko et al. 2025). From the late 1960s, with a parliament dominated by Social Democrats and Agrarians, the STK employer confederation preferred to cooperate with SAK and conclude ‘centrally coordinated framework agreements’ to avoid state intervention in labour market issues. According to Wuokko et al. (2025), ‘the prevalence of centre-left cabinets further encouraged the STK to invest in tripartite corporatist decision-making’. In 1968, the first comprehensive income-policy agreement was concluded between all major interest organisations, including STK and SAK. In exchange, the government promised not to raise taxes and public expenditures. The employers expected such tripartite income-policy compromises to secure Finnish competitiveness and ensure social stability and order.

The long period of Finnish peak-level, tripartite income-policy compromises (the so-called TUPO system) ended in 2008 when the employer confederation EK (the Confederation of Finnish Industries; successor to STK) closed its collective-bargaining unit – Sweden’s SAF had already done the same in 1990 – but only temporarily, as a few more TUPOs would be concluded. The door was

thus closed for tripartite, peak-level compromises on wages and other issues. Finnish media reported on ‘the death of corporatism’ (Wuokko et al. 2025). The EK, however, was divided. With new leaders, centralised, tripartite wage agreements were again signed in 2011, 2013 and 2016, with the last of these called the Competitiveness Pact. After internal conflicts in EK, a major employer association – Finnish Forest Industry (including the paper industry) – left EK, and after a long strike, succeeded completely in decentralising collective agreements to the workplace level (Kjellberg 2024a). In other bargaining areas, industry-wide agreements are still applied. EK continues to play an important role by coordinating its affiliated employers’ associations.

The climate of confrontation between the social partners and between the unions and the conservative Orpo government in power since 2023 means that nothing like the 1997 Swedish Industry Agreement is in sight for Finland (Kjellberg 2024b). Compromises are hampered by the government’s ‘eagerness to accept a radical reform agenda initially proposed by employers’ associations’ (Sippola 2024: 22). Despite massive strikes in 2023–2024, involving hundreds of thousands of mainly blue-collar workers, the unions failed to change the government’s position.

The government has introduced legislation that remodels the bargaining system by not allowing the national conciliator to propose wage increases higher than those set by the export sector (in line with the Swedish National Mediation Office) and restricting the right to strike and promote decentralised bargaining. The new legislation gives non-union employee representatives negotiation rights in non-organised companies without union representatives. Prior to January 2025, only workplace union representatives had the right to negotiate locally to improve or derogate from what had been agreed at industry level. Since January 2025, this right has also been given to non-union employee representatives (*luottamusvaltuutettu*), who can be elected at workplaces without elected trade-union representatives.

Although employers, unions and particularly the government all are involved in the process of remodelling the labour market model, Finland is still far from the traditional system of tripartite income-policy agreements and has not come closer to a bipartite collective-bargaining model reminiscent of the Swedish approach.

Still, tripartite negotiations on laws related to work do exist, for example on the earnings-related pension scheme (a pension reform in 2017), occupational safety and social security. Tripartite negotiations on labour and social-policy issues are not as common as before, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, the social partners agreed on temporary changes to labour legislation and social security (Sippola 2024:24).

The recent reform of the Finnish labour market model was prepared by tripartite working groups, but this was hardly a genuine consultation: the government and employer representatives took the same position. Not surprisingly, the EK employer confederation ‘did not take any move toward bipartite negotiations’ such as those preceding the 1997 Swedish Industry Agreement (Sippola 2024:22).

Tripartite agreements on non-wage issues: the Danish case

Most tripartite agreements are about non-wage issues. In Denmark, many tripartite agreements have been concluded since the 1987 tripartite Common Declaration (table 1). Some of these agreements are subjects for both tripartite agreements and collective bargaining. As mentioned, the Danish AMP occupational pension was included in the Common Declaration, but no results were achieved in the private sector until the 1991 bargaining round.

Another prominent Danish example of welfare reforms carried out through a combination of tripartite agreements and collective bargaining is the reinforcement of vocational and continuous vocational education (*voksen- og efteruddannelse*, VEU). A 2006 tri-

partite agreement was followed up in the 2007 bargaining round (Due & Madsen 2008, 2012). Encouraged by a single payment from the government, the social partners promised to introduce such a reform, despite its high cost. After the conclusion of the 2006 tripartite agreement at peak level (LO and DA), the issue was transferred to the sectoral level with CO-Industry and Danish Industry (*Dansk Industri*, DI) at the forefront.

In the 2007 bargaining round, an agreement on creating a fund for industrial competence development was followed by similar agreements in other sectors. Later in 2007, a supplementary tripartite agreement was signed regarding extra government money for VEU and implementation of the reform. Through the tripartite agreements, the government pressured the social partners to reinforce the VEU at the same time that the social partners persuaded the government to increase its economic support. In the public sector, two tripartite agreements were concluded in 2007 to implement the government’s ‘Quality Reform’ for VEU, which blurred the borders between the tripartite and bipartite arenas.

In 2012, bipartite negotiations between the new Danish social democratic government and the unions were followed by failed tripartite negotiations on lifelong learning and increased working-time (Due & Madsen 2014). During the COVID-19 crisis, 20 tripartite agreements directly related to the pandemic were concluded, of which 15 addressed the new wage compensation scheme and short-time work (table 1).

Table 1. Some important tripartite negotiations and agreements in Denmark 1987–2024

Year		
1987	Common Declaration (Fælleserklæringen)	Wage, occupational pension (AMP) and savings
1992–93	Tripartite Zeuthen Commission	Employment policy (Unemployment insurance)

1998	Labour market reform: DA-LO compromise accepted by the government	Employment policy (Unemployment insurance)
1998	Tripartite Forum (failed)	
1999	Negotiation Climate Agreement LO-DA about conferring with the government	Revised in 2003
1999	VEU Reform*	Continuous vocational education (<i>Efteruddannelse</i>)
2003	East Agreement	Labour migration
2005–09	Tripartite Globalisation Council	Strategy for economic growth
2006	VEU Reform* (tripartite declaration of intent)	Continuous vocational education
2007	Tripartite agreement on VEU	
2007	Public sector Quality Reform: two tripartite agreements	Continuous vocational education (working environment, senior policy)
2011–2012	Failed tripartite negotiations on increased labour supply and lifelong learning	Increased working time, continuous vocational education and training, labour migration, employment policy
2013–14	Vocational training reform	Vocational training (<i>Erhvervsuddannelse</i>)
2014–15	Tripartite Unemployment Benefit Commission (<i>Dagpengekommisionen</i>)	Unemployment insurance reform
2016	Tripartite agreement on integration of refugees	Combination of work and education/language courses (Integration basic training, IGU). Renewed in 2019, 2020 and 2022 and extended in 2023.
2016	Tripartite agreement on qualified labour supply	Reformed active labour market policy and vocational education
2017	Tripartite agreement on continuous vocational training (CVT)	Increased remuneration, better tailoring of courses to the needs of companies

2017	Tripartite agreement on reinforced and more flexible adult and continuous vocational education	Reinforced VEU system*. Renewed in 2021 and 2022.
2020	Tripartite agreement on private-sector wage-compensation scheme	Eight additional tripartite agreements on wage compensation scheme and short-time work in 2020, five in 2021 and one in 2022, 15 in all
2020	Tripartite agreement to ensure more apprenticeship placement and skilled workers	
2020	Tripartite agreement to retain jobs and pay in the private sector	In the light of COVID-19 pandemic
2020	Tripartite agreement on working environment (2020–2030)	
2020–21	Another 4 tripartite COVID-19 agreements	
2021	Tripartite agreement on parental leave	A bipartite agreement FH-DA implemented by law
2021	Tripartite agreement on labour supply	
2022	Tripartite agreement on sexual harassment in the workplace	
2022	Tripartite agreement on reinforced VEU system*	
2023	Tripartite agreement on public-sector wages and working conditions	Closely linked tripartite negotiations and collective bargaining in the public sector
2023	Tripartite agreement on adult and continuing education (public sector)	
2023	Tripartite agreement closely linked to the 2024 public sector bargaining round	Extra wage lift for some unions in exchange for increased flexibility etc

2024	Green tripartite agreement	In addition to state and social partners, the agreement was also signed by some other organisations
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* *Reform of Occupation-oriented adult and continuous vocational education, CVT (VEU = Voksen- og Efteruddannelse).*

Source: Ministry of Employment (Trepartsaftaler), Due & Madsen 2012, Ibsen 2022, Mailand 2011, 2024.

In Sweden the social partners have concluded about 15 employment transition agreements on continuous education and transition; these agreements cover around 90% of Sweden's employees. The first Swedish private sector employment transition agreement (*omställningsavtal*) was concluded in 1973 between the white-collar bargaining cartel PTK (*Privattjänstemannakartellen*) and SAF resulting in the creation of the Council of Employment Security/Transition (*Trygghetsrådet*, TRR), which started its operations in 1974 (Jansson & Ottosson 2021; Johansson 2023:120–121). The bipartite 2022 basic agreement is part of a *tripartite deal* on continuous education and transition. A mainly government financed study support scheme for transition and retraining (*omställningsstudiestöd*) combines occupational and public welfare, whereby a government agency manages employees not covered by collective agreements. The traditional employment transition agreements are renegotiated to harmonize better with the 2022 agreement and deal (Johansson 2023:119–120).

Tripartite agreements are often declarations of intent and putting them into practice may require both new legislation and bipartite negotiations between the social partners; in some cases, implementation may require approval from the EU, as in the case of Sweden's jobs designed to help long-term unemployed and newly arrived migrants establish themselves in the labour market (*etableringsjobb*). That makes the process complicated and sometimes lengthy, with a risk of failure.

The Danish model is a hybrid model to some extent, combining self-regulation and tripartite regulation in primarily welfare-related issues where legislation supplements collective agreements (Madsen & Due 2012). While not intended to jeopardise self-regulation, the model presupposes compromises and consensus between the social partners.

Apart from tripartite declarations like the 1987 Common Declaration and income-policy deals, tripartite negotiations are almost never about wages. Two Danish exceptions are (1) the 2007 Quality Reform of the Danish public sector, which included wages, and (2) the tripartite agreement in December 2023, which contained an extraordinary pay rise for some groups of public-sector employees in exchange for increased flexibility to be negotiated in the following bargaining round (Hansen et al. 2024).

Norwegian tripartite agreements on non-wage issues

As we have seen, tripartite cooperation on wage formation enjoys a strong tradition in Norway. An early Norwegian example of non-wage tripartite cooperation is the tripartite 1885 Labour Commission's preparation of the first Worker Protection Act (Alsos et al. 2019:8).

Over the past two decades the tripartite cooperation has expanded to include new issues (Rommetvedt & Nergaard 2025:528). Therefore, new arenas have been created, such as the Council for Working Life and Pension Policy (*Arbeidslivs- og pensjonspolitisk råd*, founded in 2004; pensions have been included from 2008 onward), which is a council under the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion. Several union and employer confederations are represented, and not just LO-Norway and NHO. Since 2001, Norway has a tripartite agreement on a more inclusive working life, renegotiated every fourth year, aimed at reducing sick leave and encouraging a longer working life (Alsos et al. 2019:24). This is understandable, as Norwegian workers receive 100% wage compensation from day one in the sick-

ness period. To fight work-related crime the social partners and the government have established shared, tripartite sectoral programmes, for example in the cleaning sector where, as early as 2016, 67% of the labour force comprised migrant workers (Alsos et al. 2019:30). A Tripartite Council is connected to the Norwegian Labour Inspection authority. In 2017, a tripartite Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017–2021 was signed, to be followed up by a tripartite group (ibid.:32). In the municipal sector, a tripartite agreement on digitalisation was signed in 2017.

As in Denmark, the Norwegian social partners and government cooperated closely on all sorts of crisis measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, but in some cases, when faced with a hesitant Norwegian government, they succeeded in pushing through their demands with support from the parliamentary opposition (Svalund, Bengtsson & Høgedahl 2025).

Recent Swedish tripartite agreements

Sweden did not enforce a lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic and had ‘no tripartite process of negotiations and coordination on the issue as in Denmark or Norway’, but for years preceding the pandemic, the social partners had worked to create the new short-time work concept in a tripartite expert committee (Svalund, Bengtsson & Høgedahl 2025). The social partners were also consulted in March 2020 when the scheme was adjusted.

During the pandemic, the Swedish social partners very rapidly concluded collective agreements on short-time jobs for virtually the entire labour market. A law on short-time jobs for use during deep recessions had already been enacted in 2014. It was based on a proposal from unions and employers’ associations in the manufacturing industry and was followed by tripartite negotiations, as the state was supposed to finance the system. To obtain short-time support, the employer must have an agreement with its employees specifying the reductions of working hours and wages. This is easiest to achieve

with a collective agreement, which also enables a more flexible use of short-time work.

A forerunner for this concept was the 1984 tripartite agreement on furlough pay (*permitteringslön*) between the state, LO and SAF, aiming to reduce wage differences between blue-collar and white-collar workers (Herzfeld Olsson 2021:22; Malmberg 2003:182–183; Edebalk 2012:9–10). The government withdrew from the agreement in 1995 due to cuts in public expenditures during the economic crisis of the 1990s.

The most important tripartite Swedish deal is the 2022 basic agreement between LO, PTK and the SAF employer confederation's successor SN (*Svenskt Näringsliv*, Confederation of Swedish Enterprise) combined with reformed Employment Protection Act (*Lagen om anställningsskydd*, LAS) and improved professional development and transition benefits. The agreement is bipartite but requires legislation and state funding. The unique aspect here was that the social partners 'had a large and decisive influence on the legislative process' (Mörtvik 2024:26; author's translation). The 2019 'January Agreement' between four political parties invited the social partners to conclude an agreement about how LAS should be revised (Herzfeld Olsson 2021:22). As the private-sector social partners concluded an agreement that by law is applied to the entire labour market, the legislation related to the 2022 basic agreement is reminiscent of the extension of collective agreements in many other countries (Selberg & Sjödin 2022).

LO-Sweden invited the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (SN) to negotiations in 2017, but in 2020 the white-collar PTK bargaining cartel was the only union peak organisation that signed the preliminary agreement. This reflects a structural shift within the union movement due to the increase of white-collar workers, their higher union density and disagreements among LO unions.

Other recent tripartite reforms:

- Establishment jobs (*etableringsjobb*) for long-term unemployed and newly arrived migrants who have been in Sweden for up to three years. The initiative came from the social partners through a 2017 frame agreement between LO-Sweden, Unionen and SN. The political process in Sweden and the EU dragged on, so the agreement did not enter into force until 1 January 2023. Collective agreements at sectoral level are required to implement the reform.
- In 2016, LAS was revised to prevent the ‘stacking’ of fixed-term jobs. Sweden was reported to the EU Commission for not applying the EU directive on fixed-term jobs. The social democratic government told the social partners that if they could provide a proposal, the government would make it its own (Wennemo 2020:212–213, Kjellberg 2024a:221–222). That paved the way for revising LAS.
- Restriction of the right to strike where there is already a collective agreement in place. Strikes in the Gothenburg container port by a small, militant union to obtain a collective agreement of its own resulted in a government commission. To forestall its work, the union confederations and SN presented their own proposal on restricted strike rights. The new legislation was based on their proposal.

How can we explain the growth of tripartite agreements?

How can one explain that self-regulation –the most distinctive feature of the Nordic labour market model – is increasingly supplemented by tripartite agreements, above all in Denmark and in the last 10 to 15 years in Sweden?

Most tripartite agreements are related to non-wage issues, but in Finland wages occupied a prominent place during the long period of

national, peak-level tripartite agreements. In Sweden, the Rehnberg 'stabilisation agreements' in the early 1990s were also tripartite.

Related to wages are the efforts of the Norwegian tripartite commissions to renew the Frontrunner model. The reforms of the Norwegian wage-formation model have taken place in a spirit of cooperation. Finland, on the other hand, was a latecomer to the process owing to confrontations between the social partners and between unions and right-wing governments. It was not until the late 1960s that the Finnish system of cooperation – in the form of tripartite income-policy compromises – emerged. Since the mid-2010s, this system has been replaced by a climate of confrontation. The Danish 1987 Common Declaration, the Norwegian Solidarity Alternative of the early 1990s (both tripartite) and the Swedish 1997 Industry Agreement (bipartite) all emerged in a collaborative climate.

The weak Swedish tradition of tripartism in wage formation can be seen in the light of the generally larger government intervention in wage issues in the other Nordic countries: mediation proposals transformed to law (Denmark and Norway), compulsory arbitration (Norway), tripartite income policy (Denmark, Norway and above all Finland) and legislated, extended collective agreements to entire industries (Finland and partly Norway; in Swedish *allmängiltig-förklaring*).

In Denmark and Sweden in particular, tripartite agreements concern non-wage issues such as education (vocational education and training in Denmark, transitional education in Sweden), pensions (Denmark), COVID-19 crisis management (Denmark, short-time jobs in Sweden), labour migration (Denmark, establishment jobs in Sweden), reformed employment protection (Sweden), unemployment insurance (Denmark), sexual harassment (Denmark) and green transition (Denmark). In Denmark there are, however, some tripartite *wage* agreements in the *public* sector.

One explanation for the rise of tripartite agreements is the need for at least partial government financing of reforms (Swedish transitional education) or, conversely, that the government wants co-

financing from the social partners (Danish 2016 reform on labour supply; Mailand 2024:377).

In addition, the parliamentary situation may prevent legislation, and there is always the risk that controversial laws will be torn up by changed parliamentary majorities. Tripartite deals delegating controversial issues to bipartite agreements between the social partners may be a solution when deep disagreements exist between the political parties (the Swedish political January Agreement followed by negotiations between the social partners on employment protection and transition support).

Tripartite agreements may be preferred due to more flexible implementation, particularly if they are supplemented by collective agreements and thus, in contrast to legislation, provide access to workplaces; an example here is Swedish short-term jobs.

Tripartite agreements will also increase the legitimacy of reforms and give governments a channel to influence the social partners and vice versa (Mailand 2024). Another advantage is that tripartism gives access to valuable information and expertise when designing a reform. Supplementary legislation may be necessary to implement bipartite agreements (for example, on restricted strike rules and employment protection in Sweden) and to find solutions for workers not covered by collective agreements. Finally, tripartite arrangements may increase the social partners' ability to gain concessions from the state (Mailand 2024).

Different forms of tripartism

In Sweden, tripartism has increased in the last 10 to 15 years in the form of tripartite deals. The 2022 basic agreement was bipartite (signed by the social partners only), but resided within a wider tripartite deal. Various forms of tripartism include the following:

- Tripartite government committees, for example on industrial peace or wage formation

- Tripartite representation in government agencies
- Tripartite industrial peace delegation (Sweden)
- Tripartite labour courts
- Tripartite negotiations preceding the Norwegian 1935 basic agreement, but bipartite negotiations in the final phase
- Tripartite wage agreements, for example the Rehnberg ‘stabilisation agreements’
- Tripartite agreements on non-wage issues
- Tripartite cooperation without the government formally signing a tripartite agreement: the 2022 Swedish deal on revised LAS and transition support

Some variants of tripartism have declined in Sweden. SAF’s withdrawal from representation in government bodies in 1991 was followed by a general decrease of ‘corporatist’ representation (Johansson & Magnusson 2012:223–225). In some government agencies, the Director-General decides everything (*enråddighetsverk*), although these agencies usually have an advisory board.

As in Norway, where the number of academic experts has surpassed the number of interest group representatives in public committees (Rommetvedt & Nergaard 2025:523–525), Sweden’s social partners are not represented as often as before in government inquiries.⁶ Sometimes the social partners are represented in reference groups (Wennemo 2020:156–164). To speed up the process, sole investigators (*ensamutredare*) have become more common, for example in the 2019–2020 Toijer Inquiry on modernised labour law preceding the 2022 basic agreement. In contrast, the 1971 Labour Law Committee (*Arbetsrättskommittén*) was tripartite, but at that time the result was legislation (the Act on Co-determination in the Workplace,

⁶ In 2025 LO, TCO and Saco accused the conservative-led government for systematically excluding the unions from tripartite councils, government inquiries, and the remittal system, while the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise was invited to participate (Arbetsvärlden 2025-10-20). This problem, however, was said to be concentrated to other ministries, and not to the Labour Market Ministry.

Medbestämmandelagen, MBL), and not an agreement between the social partners. Another government inquiry carried out by a sole investigator in 2025 submitted the report 'A Working Environment Strategy for a Changed Working Life' (SOU 2025:73). The social partners were represented in a reference group. Some months later, the tripartite Working Environment Forum, appointed in 2021 by a social democratic government had its final meeting.

Summary

Sweden has shifted from its position as one of the countries with the highest frequency of industrial action to one with the lowest. During that journey, two bipartite agreements stand out: the 1938 Saltsjöbaden Agreement and the 1997 Industry Agreement. Both aimed to reform wage formation through increased centralisation and coordination to promote industrial peace and prevent inflationary wage increases.

Both the Norwegian and Danish equivalents to the Swedish Industry Agreement are *tripartite*. In December 1987, to restore Danish competitiveness, the government and social partners signed a tripartite declaration of intent, the Common Declaration (*Fälleserklæringen*), corresponding to the Norwegian Solidarity Alternative of the early 1990s. The Danish Common Declaration, in which unions promised wage moderation in exchange for reforms, paved the way for a long series of tripartite agreements on non-wage issues. In 1999, this declaration was supplemented by the tripartite Negotiation Climate Agreement, according to which the social partners shall confer with the government about the socio-economic frameworks for wage increases. In Norway, a series of tripartite government commissions have introduced, evaluated and reformed the wage formation model known as the Frontrunner model (*Frontfagsmodellen*).

Tripartite income-policy deals have been common in Denmark, Finland and Norway for many decades. In Sweden, only a few such agreements have been concluded. The Rehnberg 'stabilisation agree-

ments' in the early 1990s were tripartite wage agreements, but they were not related to income policy. The relative absence of tripartism in Swedish wage formation is related to the generally greater government intervention in wage issues in the other Nordic countries. The prominent role of tripartism in Norwegian wage formation is connected to the country's low private-sector union density and low collective-bargaining coverage. The numerous state interventions in Danish and Norwegian collective bargaining are explained by the historically more fragmented union structure when compared to Sweden's structure, together with the strong tradition of membership ballots that has necessitated centralisation through linking ballots (Elvander 2002).⁷

The Swedish social partners rejected government participation in the negotiations, resulting in the 1938 basic agreement. In contrast, the Norwegian state played an important role in the process preceding the 1935 basic agreement. Furthermore, the Danish and Norwegian governments of the 1930s were deeply involved in the centralisation of collective bargaining – although in Norway this was only temporary, as the linking of union ballot results from different bargaining areas was soon regulated in the basic agreement. In Sweden, the corresponding process took place through the 1941 LO centralisation (unilateral regulation on the part of LO) which included the abolishment of decision-making union ballots.

The negotiations leading to the 2022 basic agreement were also bipartite, but the agreement was part of a larger tripartite deal

7 Today the Danish social partners are more concentrated. In the 1990s, they strongly centralised the bargaining system through the founding of Danish Industry (1991) and the CO-Industry bargaining cartel (1992). Among the members of CO-Industry are the former LO unions (now known as FH unions) United Federation of Danish Workers (3F), Danish Metalworkers' Union, Union of Commercial and Clerical Employees (HK Privat) and Danish Association of Professional Technicians (*Teknisk Landsforbund*). Reinforced by the merger with the Confederation of Danish Commercial, Transportation and Service Industries in 2008, Danish Industry represents about 60% of the votes in the executive committee of the DA employer confederation.

including government assistance for legislative and financial reasons. Several other tripartite agreements/deals have been concluded in the last 10 to 15 years, for example regarding short-term jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, state financial support was required.

In Denmark, a very large number of tripartite agreements on social reforms have been concluded since the tripartite 1987 Common Declaration (*Fælleserklæringen*) in exchange for wage moderation.

The reverse trend concerns Swedish government commissions. Today, not many of these are tripartite. Before 1930, several government committees on industrial peace included union and employer representatives. Similarly, a tripartite committee prepared the 1936 Law on Rights of Association and Negotiation, which encouraged collective bargaining among private-sector white-collar workers. In Finland, the frequency of tripartite agreements has declined; since 2016, no tripartite income-policy agreement has been concluded.

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