

One large, single union

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The best strategy for the trade union movement would be to concentrate our energies into one single union. Old hobbyhorses will have to be put out to pasture.

During the spring of this year the membership of LO-affiliated* unions fell to under one million wage earners. It was a symbolic mile post for a development which has been going on since the middle of the 1990s when membership began to fall after decades of uninterrupted growth. Some have on the basis of this predicted the approaching death of the trade union movement.

But is there a good reason for allowing the bells of doom to ring out over the Danish trade union movement? No, not yet anyway.

Membership figures and union density continue to be very high when applying an international yardstick, and seen with international eyes we have a uniquely powerful influence regarding the development of society.

The Danish model, in which the trade union movement and the employers play a central role, has, through the passage of time, proved to be a brilliant way of regulating the labour market. Those parties which have their fingers on the pulse in relation to the labour market and its challenges have a decisive influence on and a co-responsibility for the area.

But in spite of this powerful point of departure, the development of the trade union movement in a negative direction in recent years is unequivocal – and many unions are feeling the pinch. Union density is declining and membership is falling.

Consequently, to the best of my judgement in the coming years, we will continue to see a range of structural changes in the trade union movement. In my opinion, the union amalgamations which we have already seen between the Danish General Workers Union (SiD) and the Women Workers Union (KAD), to form the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F), will mean that in ten years' time there will be 6-7 unions in the Danish LO.

As trade union leaders, we can choose to allow this development to take place on the principle of laissez-faire, in which structural changes spring up according to some relatively short-term considerations within the individual unions.

Or, we can choose to use the crisis constructively and create a range of long-term changes which can put the Danish trade union movement into line with the enormous changes that have taken place in the working lives of ordinary wage earners and on the labour market in general.

Let us start a debate on the development of the trade union movement. It is my vision that we, in the coming years, should work towards amalgamating the Danish LO-affiliated unions into

one large single union: a modern locally-based union and an effective trade union and political actor.

I know that this for many people sounds dramatic. But when I look at the challenges in the coming years I believe that it will be the best way of ensuring Danish wage earners a powerful, future-oriented trade union movement in a globalized world.

My vision is the conclusion of how we best can address the four central challenges facing the trade union movement in the coming years. I will now attempt to describe these in more detail.

The first major challenge is the change to a far more flexible labour market.

A generation ago, you became a skilled fitter, then you probably worked as a fitter until you were pensioned off.

Globalization has changed this model for ever. Manufacturing moves in and out of the country, workplaces emerge and are closed down at an ever increasing rate, and the individual wage earner has to constantly educate him/herself in order to keep up with the demands in the new job or move to another sector or industry by way of re-training.

At the same time Danish wage earners are changing jobs more frequently. A generation ago you could quite easily be employed at the same workplace during the whole of your working life and retire with a gold watch and a speech from the director for long and faithful service. In the future 25th anniversaries will be very rare. Forecasts show that a young Dane starting work today will, on average, change jobs nine times before retiring.

The big problem is that the Danish LO, with its division into individual trades, is to far too great an extent, geared to the old reality. This is no new insight – it was in actual fact one of the reasons why six LO cartels were set up in the 1990s, based on sectors and industries: manufacturing industries, building and construction, local government, central government, the media and trade, transport and services.

But in my eyes this division is also outdated. Wage earners don't just change jobs more often – they change sectors as well; e.g. many of them who are being made redundant at the moment in traditional manufacturing industries are starting a new working life in the municipal nursing and health care sector.

The sharp division into unions based on trades or sectors is a relic from the labour market of the previous century, and it creates a lot of unnecessary problems for the trade union movement for being locked into this framework. The trade union movement is very inflexible when it comes to working across the organisational divide. Organisationally many resources are spent on transferring members between the different LO unions and every year the movement loses thousands of members in conjunction with change of jobs.

In my opinion, the best answer is to create one powerful LO trade union for wage earners which you can depend upon throughout your working life, irrespective of job, trade or sector.

The second major challenge for the LO trade unions is development of membership, especially flagging recruitment amongst young persons.

A generation ago joining a union was a matter of course. It was a natural part of a young person's entry onto the labour market and part of that set of values related to solidarity and fellowship amongst workers, which were often implanted by the young person's parents who quite naturally were members of a trade union. That's what you did.

Young people today have a far more individualistic attitude to being on the labour market. They think more about their own career and their own opportunities in life – in many ways a quite natural development in keeping with a more individual and flexible labour market.

You can be pleased about it or bewail it, according to your temperament. But it is a fact which the Danish LO will have to address far more actively. Young people no longer become members as a matter of course and do not know much about the trade union movement and the labour market. Much more information can be given by schools and from society in general on the matter, but the main task lies with us. We have to earn every single young LO wage earners' confidence and inform them about the advantages and results achieved by the trade union movement.

The alternative is that the trade union movement will be in competition with the DanAge Association.

Let me use my own union as an example.

Almost half of 3F's members are 50 or over. In 15 years' time these members will have retired, and if the present pattern of membership development amongst young people continues, then 3F in 15 years' time will be reduced by more than a third – corresponding to more than 100,000 members. If this development does not change, then it will not be workers from Eastern Europe who are a major threat to the Danish model, but Danish workers under 40.

In order to address and resolve these issues, I believe we would be stronger having only one united union.

In part we can strengthen our work informing young people about trade union work and undertake special campaigns and offers directed at the young people.

And in part the trade union movement will in this way gear itself to addressing the working lives of young people. Often young people will only be in a trade or job for some few years – e.g. Think about a young person who works as a bartender for a few years, or on the till in a supermarket – and, therefore, will not join a union in the sector in question.

And finally, for many young people trade unions seem to be a Babylonian confusion of unions, local branches, main organisations, unemployment insurance funds, and I don't know what.

Unfortunately this is not without good reason. As an example, it can be difficult to state what it costs to be a member of a union. It all depends upon the local branch and the sector you work in, etc.

In the coming years we have to put every ounce of our energy into strengthening organizing among young people. I believe it is best done in a joint trade union framework, in which we draw up a strong and comprehensible offer.

Thirdly, the Danish LO is facing competition from the so-called “yellow” trade unions, who entice people with cheap offers in the local radio and news bytes. In reality, they are not direct competitors, as none of them can deliver the major trade union product – collective agreements. It is only genuine trade unions that can do that.

But as many wage earners are being enticed by these inane yellow offers, we have to address them. I believe that here too the answer is to create a still-stronger, more effective, service-minded, democratic union.

Our fundamental goal is not to run a business. The foundation of the trade union movement is its local, democratic trade union base, and this base has to be maintained as our strength.

By amalgamating we can get rid of the work duplication which takes place in the unions and in the Danish LO, and there would be considerable large-scale advantages to be gained in trade union methods of working and operating.

It would be completely wrong to turn the trade union movement in the direction of being more business-oriented as a consequence of this new competition. On the contrary. Quite naturally we have to give our members excellent service. No doubt about that. But a strong united trade union has to strengthen internal democracy and emphasize that our movement is a trade union. This applies to the individual workplace, where a shop steward is elected among his/her colleagues, and to the position of General Secretary.

The trade union movement must be a strong and visible actor within local society, with membership centres on the main street of all Danish municipalities and a strong joint unemployment insurance fund. This would be a marked improvement on the service afforded to many Danish LO members today, who live a good distance from their local branch, or work in another place than where they live.

Finally, a united trade union movement would do away with all the demarcation and internal disputes which unfortunately mar the work being done by the Danish LO, and which create a distorted picture in relation to the results achieved.

Let me emphasize that my vision is not to create a bureaucratic colossus managed from the top. It is a decisive factor that an amalgamation of trade unions can create a space to encourage different trade union identities within a common framework. Therefore, an effective, large single union has to have a flexible structure, which ensures close proximity to the individual member’s everyday life, irrespective of his/her job and workplace. It is a balancing act which we are already aware of in the large trade unions.

Fourthly, during the last 5-10 years there have been dramatic structural changes in the organisational structure on the part of the employers. DI (the Confederation of Danish Industries) has, through a series of mergers, expanded considerably and now encompasses a larger area than its traditional manufacturing base. The desire to be all-embracing can be clearly seen in the organisation’s change of name, from the Confederation of Danish Industries to DI – the organisation for business and industry, which embraces persons working in an office environment. Apart from this, DI has expanded its membership to include a wide range of large companies selling services, e.g. ISS and PostDanmark. Today DI is the dominant actor on the employers’ side.

We have still to see the full consequences of this development, but it is quite clear that it will have consequences for political as well as trade union work in the trade union movement.

A strengthened DI has sharpened its political profile and influence on a willing government. A long-lasting campaign to lower taxes for persons at the top of the pyramid was crowned by the tax reform in February, which historically will give marginal tax reductions to the richest members of society.

The strengthening of DI's political work means partly that the Danish Confederation of Employers has died a de facto death as an independent political actor, and partly that the trade union movement must, out of necessity, sharpen its own political work in order to match that of the employers.

A single united LO trade union movement would have the muscle to be one of the most powerful lobby organisations in Copenhagen and Brussels, as well as in the Danish municipalities, for the benefit and interests of wage earners.

Yet another more far-reaching consequence of these employer mergers is the concentration of influence during collective bargaining. DI has for a long time been the most important player on the employers' side of industry, and dominates the trend-setting collective agreements in the manufacturing sector in the so-called 'minimum wage' area. After the merger with the Transport, Commerce and Services Confederation, DI has, however, dominated the other collective agreement area, the standard wage area, which covers the transport sector.

After next year's round of collective bargaining we will have a much better idea of how far-reaching the consequences are of this development. But in fact the situation is that a range of different constellations of trade unions will have to negotiate all these key collective agreements with a unified DI.

It is thought-provoking that a corresponding centralization has taken place in the public sector, where municipalities and The National Association of Local Authorities in Denmark (KL) will, in the future, be the single central actors, with the Ministry of Finance as the puppeteer.

It is here that the predominant part of future "welfare production" will take place, while the central government area will shrink and the regional areas will no longer have any economic independence.

You could ask yourself whether this would mean the creation of two unions – a public sector union and a private sector union. I believe this to be a bad idea. In the first place individual members will, to a greater extent, transfer between the private and the public sector. Take a look at the volatile out-sourcing and buying back of the ambulance services, which at the moment is taking place through regional tendering.

But still more important is preserving the alliance between private sector and public sector wage earners. We would risk creating two Frankenstein monsters which would run amok in a welfare society: a public sector trade union which would quite rashly demand irresponsibly high wages and more of every thinkable service, and a private sector trade union which would always put the conditions in the private sector in pride of place, above the welfare society as a whole. It would be a tragedy for the trade union movement – and for the Danish welfare state.

If the trade union movement is to emerge strengthened from its encounter with the most pressing challenges it faces, the best strategy, in my view, is to join forces into one single union.

I'm quite clear about the fact that the thought of one large single LO union is a drastic vision to place on display. There are many interests at stake – camels which have to be swallowed, and hobbyhorses which have to be put out to pasture, before such a vision becomes reality.

And other people probably have alternative ideas on how the trade union movement can gear itself up for the future. I'm willing to listen to them, but one thing is certain: we cannot just stand by and do nothing.

The crisis in the trade union movement will become a disaster if we, as trade union leaders, close our eyes and ears and muddle through using stop-gap measures. Instead, under the auspices of the Danish LO, we have to start a discussion with one another, and with our trade union representatives and members, about long-term visions for the trade union movement.

I've made a contribution.

*LO: Landsorganisationen i Danmark – the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions. See <http://www.lo.dk/>. Poul Erik Skov Christensen is the General Secretary of LO's largest affiliate: the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F).