



A REPORT FROM LO INTERNATIONAL DEPARTMENT

Trade union development assistance – solidarity in action

Mats Erikson



The Swedish Trade Union Confederation

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1. A matter of solidarity

AT THE BEGINNING of the last century LO Sweden was a poor trade union movement in a poor country. In 1909 the employers decided to exploit this and call a lockout, excluding hundreds of thousands of workers from their workplaces without pay. LO countered with a general strike. Then an international solidarity campaign started, in which we received support from trade unions worldwide, including the USA, Bosnia and Zimbabwe, at that time called Rhodesia. Quite simply we received what we now call trade union development assistance. Fundamentally this is all about the trade union vow:

"We do solemnly swear that we will never, under any circumstances, work for lower wages or under worse conditions than we now promise one another. We make this vow in the secure knowledge that if we all are true to our pledge the employer will be forced to meet our demands."

It has nothing to do with charity, it is a matter of solidarity. We therefore prefer to call it development cooperation. We are all part of the same movement and an injury to one is an injury to all . If we allow workers' conditions to deteriorate in any country, it can happen to us in the future. That is why international solidarity is necessary. And why trade union development assistance and development cooperation are necessary. In this short report we explain more about how it works.

Oscar Ernerot

Head of LO's International Department

2. How does it work?

A LARGE PART OF trade union development cooperation goes via Union to Union, the cooperation body set up jointly by LO, TCO (Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees) and Saco (Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations). Some also goes via the labour movement's joint organisation for international solidarity; the Olof Palme International Center. In addition, projects are often carried out together with the Global Union Federations (GUFs).

Union to Union

Through Union to Union, Swedish trade unions support some hundred trade union projects throughout the world. It is a matter of strengthening organisation, educating members on human rights in working life and collective bargaining, as well as supporting advocacy activities. The work is financed both through membership fees and support from the central government aid agency Sida.

“It’s not just about money, it’s also about partnership between trade union organisations in different countries. There are many projects to deal with. Sometimes also fairly complicated processes with applications and evaluations. It’s important to get it right,” says Union to Union’s Secretary General Maria Nyberg.

“At the same time, in a way the basic task is simple: we work to support development and democracy together with partners in Sweden and the rest of the world. The method is quite simply trade union work. Neither more nor less. In countries where there are no free trade unions there is an imbalance in power that affects all of society.”



Olof Palme International Center

The Palme Centre has 27 member organisations, including LO, the LO affiliates, the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Youth of Sweden. As for Union to Union, most of the projects are financed through Sida. A large part also comes from funds raised through the Palme Center's solidarity fund.

Recently the Palme Center has been deeply engaged in democracy issues.

"Unfortunately, the authoritarian trend in the world is continuing. For example, we have devoted much energy to supporting comrades in Belarus and Burma. Now we are increasing focus on Ukraine," says Secretary General of the Palme Center Anna Sundström.

"It is part of the Palme Center's soul to relentlessly continue being a support to the world's courageous opposition, who work with their own lives at stake."



Photo: Karl Nordlund

The Global Union Federations

The Global Union Federations, the GUFs, together represent 200 million workers throughout the world. The GUFs gather national trade unions. A national trade union can be affiliated with several different GUFs, depending on the occupations they organise.

Building and Woodworkers International, BWI

Members from LO: Building Workers' Union, Electricians' Union, Paperworkers' Union, Seko (Union for Service and Communication Employees), Painters' Union and GS (Swedish Union of Forestry, Wood and Graphical workers).



BWI • BHI • BTI • IBB • ICM
www.bwint.org

International Arts and Entertainment Alliance (IAEA)

Member from LO: Musicians' Union.



IndustriALL

Members from LO: IF Metall, Electricians' and Paperworkers' Unions.



International Transport Workers Federation, ITF

Members from LO: Kommunal (Municipal Workers' Union), Seko and Transport Workers' Union.



International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, IUF

Members from LO: Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union, Kommunal and the Food Workers' Union.



Public Services International, PSI

Members from LO: Kommunal, Seko and Transport Workers' Union.



UNI Global Union (UNI)

Members from LO: Building Maintenance Workers' Union, GS, Commercial Employees' Union, Seko and Transport Workers' Union.

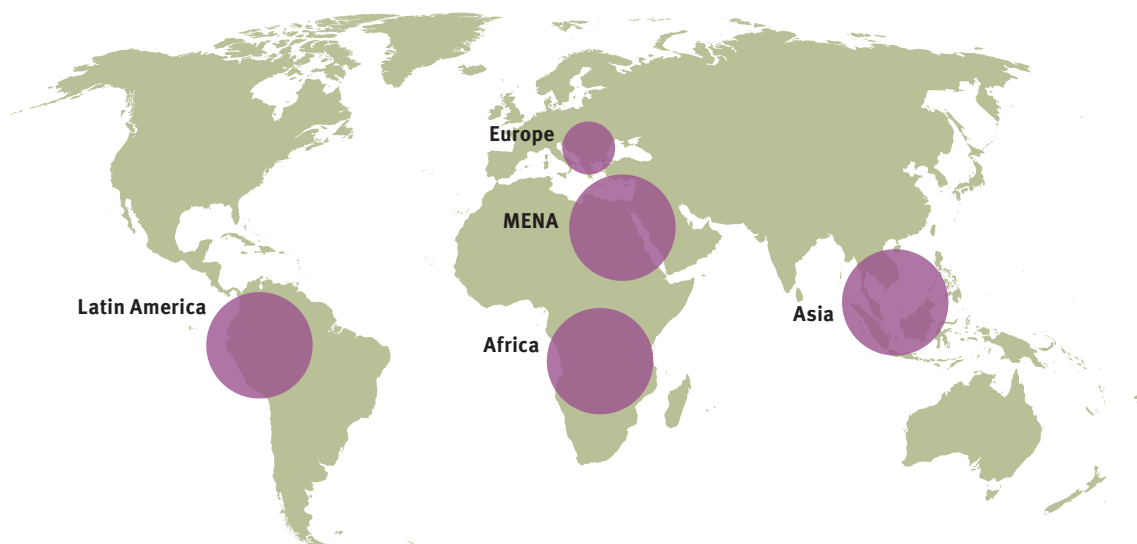


LO is also a member of the International Trade Union Confederation, ITUC, which gathers a total of 331 central organisations in 163 countries. ITUC represents altogether 208 million workers throughout the world.



ITUC CSI IGB

3. Where does the assistance go?



LO and its affiliates are committed to a long series of projects to support our union friends in other countries. Here you can see where trade union development cooperation via Union to Union is taking place just now.¹ “MENA” is an abbreviation for the Middle East and North Africa

Independent and democratic trade unions

To be organised in a trade union is a fundamental human right. We also know that democratic and independent trade unions play a decisive role in the democratic development of a country. Nevertheless, employees’ trade union rights are restricted in many countries. An important objective of trade union development cooperation is therefore to support and strengthen democratic and independent trade union organisations.

LO and TCO, for example, have been involved for many years in an

¹ <https://www.uniontounion.org/projekt>

extensive education programme for trade union members in several African countries. The programme focuses on the members being able to educate themselves in matters concerning trade union and human rights. One of the main tools is study circles. Since the start, more than two million people have participated in the courses.

In Colombia, Guatemala and Cambodia, LO and TCO are working on strengthening the legal capacity of the trade union organisations, both nationally and internationally. This may include representing members in connection with labour law cases, but also advocacy, which can change overall legislation.

Education and training in Palestine

In Palestine LO supports the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, PGFTU, by educating young trade union elected representatives in organisation, collective bargaining and work environment issues. Together with the central trade union organisations in Germany and in Israel, the DGB and Histadrut, LO has also carried out projects for Palestinian workers working in Israel. A consequence of the project was a cooperation agreement between the Palestinian PGFTU and the Israeli Histadrut.

The Transport Workers' Union is involved in a project to support the Palestinian transport unions with recruitment of members and training in such things as negotiation technique.

Since 2015 the Electricians' Union has been running a project for Palestinian electricians, joiners, bricklayers and others from the construction sector working on Israeli territory. The main focus lies on education in work environment issues and collective agreements. The project trains about 300 workers every year.

Success for the commercial workers' unions in Peru

Handels (Swedish Commercial Employees' Union) and the TCO affiliate Unionen have been running a trade union development project in the retail sector in Peru. The purpose is to build stronger trade union organisations both through capacity building and regional skills transfers. In Peru society and the labour market are permeated by a negative attitude to trade union commitment. But when H&M employees in



LO and its affiliates now provide acute humanitarian aid, medicines and other supplies to Ukraine.

Photo: Ivana Khrapko

Peru, with the support of Handels and Unionen among others, formed a trade union they succeeded in getting their first collective agreement. The Peruvian commercial employees' union SUTRAH&M now has trade union representation at fifteen of H&M's eighteen stores in Peru.

Trade union solidarity with Ukraine

LO and its affiliates have long supported the trade unions in Ukraine. For example, the building sector unions, including the Electricians' Union, the Building Workers' Union and the Painters' Union, have been running a long-term solidarity project with Ukraine. The support has covered organisation, mobilisation, education and recruitment of members.

Since Russia started its war of aggression, our trade union support to Ukraine has changed. Now it is mainly a matter of urgent rescue of people's freedom and lives. One of many examples is our support via



Many workers make their living in the so-called informal sector and have no labour rights.

Photo: Gautam Ramuvel

the Palme Center to the *Trade Union Lifeline*, a trade union youth network that has set up a lifeline with trade union comrades throughout the country where help can easily be sent out.

In LO's short report from last year you can read more about our support to Ukraine.²

To organise employees at Amazon, Handels and Seko work together with Unionen and the Saco union Engineers of Sweden, in Brazil and India. The purpose is to increase the number of trade union members at Amazon and also hold Amazon to account for poor working conditions and other shortcomings.

Trade union radio in Malawi

In Malawi Seko has helped trade unions to start a radio station that broadcasts programmes on the theme of gender equality, climate and labour market. Special focus lies on those working in the informal sector³.

Seko also works to strengthen the trade unions in the railway sector in South East Asia. The railways are expanding rapidly in these countries and the objective is to create strategies for trade union work within the extensive and complex network of railways that exist in the region. Together with the Swedish Association of Graduate Engineers and Unionen, Seko also supports Ericsson employees in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Malaysia. The aims of the project include building a network of trade union organisations in the region.

GS works to strengthen trade unions in the graphic sector and the packaging industry in Brazil, Colombia and Peru. In India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand Seko works to help trade unions in the graphic industry to recruit more young people and women. The project includes education and training in leadership, gender equality and climate issues.

Support for collective bargaining

In Indonesia, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand unemployment has increased through the mass lay-offs during the pandemic, which meant

² https://www.lo.se/start/lo_fakta/facklig_solidaritet_med_ukraina

³ The informal sector is the part of the economy that is not registered with authorities and thus not taxed or eligible as a basis for welfare rights for those working there. The sector covers such things as street hawking, handicrafts and domestic services.

that many were forced to accept poorer working conditions. Consequently, IF Metall and the Paperworkers' Union are working together with Unionen to strengthen the countries' trade union organisations. In Brazil and Mexico IF Metall and the Paperworkers' Union work together with Unionen to strengthen trade union expertise regarding trade union rights and collective bargaining.

To organise more people who are working in the informal sector, the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union and the Food Workers' Union work to support trade union organisation in a number of African countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. The project also focuses on environmental issues and tries to reduce the use of hazardous chemicals and pesticides.

Decent working conditions

The right to work should also be the right to decent work. Work that develops people, not that breaks them down. An important part of trade union development cooperation is to ensure better and more secure working conditions. The aim is to have jobs that pay a living wage and that develop people, not that oppress or harm workers.

Building sector unions take a stand against slave labour

The Building Workers' Union, the Painters' Union and the Electricians' Union have worked for a long time against the inhuman working conditions of migrant workers in Qatar and other Gulf States, for example before the football World Cup in Qatar in 2022. The work started already ten years ago, when the building sector unions demanded that Qatar ratify the ILO Conventions on trade union rights ⁴and that the "Kafala system" ⁵, in practice a slave labour system, be abolished. Together with the Building and Woodworkers' International, BWI, the building sector trade unions succeeded in bringing about small but significant changes. The Kafala system has been abolished, the migrants have the right to change jobs and the employers may not confiscate their passports. However, trade unions are still forbidden in Qatar and the work to safeguard the human rights of the migrants continues.

4 https://www.lo.se/start/internationellt/internationella_arbetsorganisationen_ilo

5 <https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kafala-systemet>



A good working environment is an important objective for trade union cooperation.

Photo: Nathan Cima

Nepali immigrant workers received their wages

The pandemic struck quickly and severely against migrant workers. The already often precarious conditions at building sites in Asia and the Middle East, meant that livelihoods disappeared completely. That is why LO and TCO have been working with the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (Gefont) for a long time to safeguard migrant workers' rights. One example is when migrant workers at a construction company in Kuwait were not paid their wages. Gefont helped the workers with food for the day and then contacted the employer. In the end the company paid out all the wages.

With the support of LO and TCO, Gefont now works broadly with trade union education, recruitment and organisation, not least of migrant workers. In more than ten countries Gefont educates and negotiates to strengthen the migrant workers by raising low wages and putting a stop to harassment.

Insecure jobs for musicians

The Swedish Musicians' Union works together with the TCO Affiliate, the Swedish Union of Professional Musicians, SYMF, to improve the conditions for musicians in Latin America and Africa. Many musicians work on short assignments or single concerts. The job opportunities are unregulated and insecure.

An important objective is to help freelance musicians to organise themselves into trade unions, which is very difficult in some countries, as they are not regarded as having the right to organise.

In North Macedonia textile workers' rights are systematically violated. Workers who unionise risk being silenced or having their jobs terminated. The Palme Center and the Commercial Employees' Union in Gävle are therefore working together with the organisation Glasen Tekstilec, which supports employees in the textile sector in various ways. Through the project, 8,359 workers received direct or indirect legal support in 2021. Over three years, Glasen Tekstilec's work has contributed to an increase of 300 per cent in the number of reports to the state labour inspectorate regarding violations of employment rights.

Poor conditions, an insecure work environment and low pay are some of the problems in the cleaning and security industries in Peru and Co-

lombia. The Building Maintenance Workers' Union and the Transport Workers' Union are therefore working to strengthen trade unions in these industries, including through education and training in negotiation and gender equality.

Health work in rural areas of India

In the aviation industry in Latin America outsourcing of jobs is common, i.e. contracting out parts of the operations to other companies. Many such jobs are low-paid and lack security. Consequently, Seko is working on a project in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru to create airport hubs where the trade union work at airports is consolidated.

In India there is a large group of community health workers, often low-paid women, who work with limited resources to provide care and support to the most vulnerable people in the community. Kommunal works to get these employees involved in the trade union and be able to demand better conditions, both for themselves and for those receiving the care. The objective is also to conduct advocacy work so that the workers are recognised as public employees and given the right to sign collective agreements.

Warehouse and transport workers in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka often have very poor working conditions and low wages. The Transport Workers' Union is therefore trying to support the trade union organisations in the industry. The objective is to enable them to develop their internal cooperation and meet the changes that occur in the countries' labour market.

Increased gender equality

The fight against class divisions is the basis of the trade union movement. But class oppression is not the only oppressive structure. We must also see the subordination that exists on grounds of sex. That is why LO is both class based and a feminist organisation.

Rape and murder led to trade union resistance.

In 2012 a woman was raped and murdered on a bus in the state of Maharashtra in India. Unfortunately it is common for women, both passengers and employees, to be subjected to violence and sexual harassment



Hard and strenuous work is commonplace for many women.

Photo: Annie Spratt

on buses in India. Seko therefore works together with the bus-drivers' trade union MSTKS on a project to strengthen women's' position at work, as well as in trade union work. For example, a number of women from Maharashtra have been trained as "Women's advocates", a form of representative that work to combat sexual harassment at work. When they came home the participants in turn trained other women. The outcome was that there are now women's advocates at all bus depots in the state. That means that women who are harassed always have someone they can speak to. The project has also led to a strengthening of the position of women internally in the trade union.

Strengthened rights for domestic employees

Kommunal, together with the Food Workers' Union and the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union, is involved in a project to strengthen African women, both in the trade union and at work.

The aim of the project is that female workers are to have access to the fundamental rights that already exist and have the knowledge to be able to use these rights against all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex. But also that women have the right to decent working conditions, a good work environment free of sexual harassment and a living wage.

Support for gender equality in stores and hotels

In Nigeria and Uganda the Commercial Employees' Union works to achieve gender equality and regeneration in the trade unions in large retail chains. Harassment is common and many trade unions have a high average age and great challenges as regards recruiting younger people. The purpose is also to give the trade unions a stronger voice in negotiations on collective agreements.

The Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union supports its sister unions in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda to increase the number of trade union members in the hotel industry, but also to increase awareness of gender equality and sexual harassment.

Just climate transition

The climate threat is also an important trade union issue. It is the working class who are hardest hit by climate change. In addition, the trade union has a unique role to play in climate work through our links to working life. Climate problems derive largely from shortcomings in our production systems.

Protecting the Amazonas

GS supports a trade union network to combat illegal tree felling in the Amazonas region.

The aim is to achieve sustainable development for the Amazonas, with respect for both the environment and those who live and work in the Amazonas. Consequently the network is working to highlight the significance of sustainable supply chains, where trade union and other



The world's workers are a key in climate adaptation.

Photo: Karl Callwood

human rights are respected, taking into account both decent working conditions and the environment and climate.

Sustainable public transport

To strengthen the trade union organisations in Asia in their work for a just climate transition, the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union, Kommunal and the Food Workers' Union have a project in several Asian countries, including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. The aim is to make the participating trade union organisations stronger actors in sustainability and climate work. A large part of the work is intended to reduce the use of hazardous pesticides. The use of them is forbidden in the EU but they are manufactured in EU countries and exported, for example to countries in Africa, where they are used.

Green transport planning

Kommunal and Seko are engaged in a project that includes contributing to sustainable and green planning of public transport in large African towns. Many towns lack developed public transport systems and instead have many informal jobs. The project is to contribute to making the informal sector formal, and it also works with gender equality. In Ghana many female bus-drivers have been trained.

To develop trade union expertise on climate issues, Kommunal and Seko are working together with the Association of Graduates in Public Administration and Social Work, SSR and the TCO affiliates the Swedish Association of Health Professionals, Vision and the Union of Civil Servants ST, on a project in Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, Tunisia and Zambia. One aim is to make the trade unions a natural party in negotiations concerning climate adaptation, together with governments and employers.

4. The political right don't like trade union solidarity



Photo: Nick Karvounis

AMONG THE FIRST THINGS Sweden's right-wing government, supported by the nationalist Sweden Democrats, did was to cut back international development cooperation. The one per cent target, i.e. that we should invest one hundredth of our gross national income in development assistance, was abandoned. Support to the UN's work will be cut, as will support to civil society, where trade union development cooperation is included. Already now the Food Workers' Union has been forced to discontinue a project in Brazil, which addressed the work environment

in slaughterhouses.⁶ Above all the Government made major cuts in the information appropriation, from SEK 155 million annually to SEK 20 million. That means that a large part of the work of Union to Union and the Palme Center to provide information and spread knowledge about trade union development cooperation will disappear.

In an open letter to the conservative Moderate Party's Minister for International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade, Johan Forssell, Susanne Gideonsson, LO, Therese Svanström, TCO and Göran Arrius, Saco, express strong concern about the consequences of the current policy:

“To support the development of free and independent trade union organisations is an import part of democracy building. The right to organise, express one's opinions and improve working conditions form the basis of all democracies, but are also an important prerequisite for democratic development, reduced poverty, and a long-term sustainable economy”⁷

“The Government's cutbacks are brutal. Of course it is a matter of money, but also of the future progress of development cooperation,” says Maria Nyberg at Union to Union.

“Above all the Government has shown itself unwilling to conduct a dialogue with us and others in civil society. They have not even bothered to listen to us and take note of the experience and knowledge of the area that in fact exists in the trade union movement and other organisations in civil society,” says Anna Sundström at the Palme Centre.

⁶ <https://arbetet.se/2023/05/03/livs-tvingas-avsluta-bistandsprojekt-haft-kort-tid-pa-oss/>

⁷ https://www.lo.se/start/uttalande_av_lo_tco_och_saco_om_svenskt_bistand

5. What can you do?

DO YOU WANT to become involved in trade union development cooperation and international solidarity?

Contact your trade union and for example suggest a study circle, a meeting on trade union development cooperation or on the situation in a country. ABF, the Workers' Educational Association, also offers several study circles with international themes.

Participate in the debate. Write on Facebook and other social media. Perhaps you could write a letter to the local newspaper about the Government's cutbacks?

Choose Fairtrade when you are shopping. That is a simple way in your everyday life to contribute to a world where all workers have decent conditions. Buying fairly produced goods is a specific act for justice and solidarity.

You can also donate to one of the fundraisers for international trade union solidarity. A few examples of these are given below:

Olof Palme International Center: Swish 123 240 60 72

Seko's solidarity fund: Swish 123 630 34 99

**The Building Workers' Union
international solidarity fund:** Swish 123 658 26 47

The Transport Workers' Union solidarity fund: bankgiro 554-3335

The Painters' Union solidarity fund: Swish 123 307 35 41

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In many parts of the world, democracy is now being pushed back. Trade union and other human rights are being violated, poverty is increasing and the number of refugees exceeds 100 million. At the same time, the Swedish right-wing government is now reducing the international development aid, which contributes to make the situation even worse.

LO and the LO affiliates know from long experience that independent and democratic trade unions are important for democracy, but also an important prerequisite for reducing poverty and a long-term sustainable economy. This is why we since many decades are involved in trade union development cooperation to support our comrades in other countries. In this short report we tell you more about why we do this and how we do it.

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