

Sweden: Only 11 individual working days lost to strikes and lockouts in 2021

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Sweden's Mediation Institute, a government agency that mediates labour disputes between unions and employers, released a report February 24 showing that only 11 working days were lost to strikes in 2021.

Working days lost is a common measure that government statistical agencies use to measure the extent and duration of labour conflict. The measure counts the number of working days that individual workers were on strike or locked out by employers. For example, "11 working days lost" can mean that 11 workers were on strike for one day or one worker was on strike for 11 days.

The 11 working days lost in Sweden in 2021 were the result of two strikes—one a sympathy strike—involving seven electrical workers. The Mediation Institute, in a purposefully understated comment accompanying the report, described 2021 as a "quiet year in the Swedish labour market."

Pilots for Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) the Swedish airline, struck for seven days in 2019, an action that was the largest labour conflict in the country that year, contributing to a total of 7,577 working days lost to strikes for 2019. Fifty working days were lost to strikes in 2018. No working days were lost to strikes in Sweden in 2020.

Strikes have dramatically fallen from their peak in 1980, when nearly 4.5 million working days were lost to strikes. Strikes outside of collective bargaining rounds are generally illegal. Wildcat strikes, like those undertaken by teachers in the United States, France, and Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic, have been exceptionally rare in Sweden in recent decades.

The reason for the dramatic decline in strikes in Sweden since the 1980s and their virtual disappearance during the pandemic is the political role played by the trade unions. Close allies of the Social Democrats, the unions have played a key role in supporting a succession of Social Democrat-led governments since the 1980s that have gutted Sweden's once relatively generous social welfare system and turned the country into a paradise for foreign investors and corporate profiteers.

The Social Democrats have held office continuously since

2014 at the head of unstable minority coalitions, and have implemented public spending austerity and a vicious anti-refugee policy. The Social Democrat government is preparing to lead Sweden into the NATO military alliance, lining up fully with the US-led proxy war against Russia. And it has presided over a disastrous COVID-19 policy, enforcing the notorious "herd immunity" strategy that gave Sweden the unenviable distinction of having one of the highest COVID-19 death rates per capita in the world.

The Swedish ruling elite has been able to enforce this right-wing agenda thanks to its corporatist relations with the unions, which have suppressed the class struggle. Sweden's trade unions are effectively institutions of the state, enjoying extensive legally regulated relations with employer associations, and national and local governments. The chief purpose of this extensive network, as the mediation Institute's report demonstrates all too clearly, has been to keep a lid on opposition in the working class under conditions of growing social inequality and wage stagnation.

According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 65.2 percent of workers in Sweden were union members in 2019, the last year of available data. An additional 22.8 percent are not union members but are covered by a union contract.

The high rate of union membership in Sweden and other Nordic countries is generally attributed to the fact that unions administer much of these countries' unemployment insurance systems, which compels workers to join unions. Under the current system, the Swedish government provides the unemployed with a minor additional sum averaging about \$35 a day, while the unions provide the majority of a worker's daily assistance.

The organisation of workers in unions in Sweden is part of a corporatist arrangement also involving industry- and national-level employer associations along with government agencies. The Mediation Institute, an agency which is analogous to the US National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), plays a large role in mediating labour disputes. This union-employer-government arrangement is broadly

conceived of to limit strikes and restrain wage growth.

The Industrial Agreement (Industriavtal) between the employer associations and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (Landsorganisationen), first signed in 1998 and renewed in 2011 and 2016, strives to “strengthen export industries’ competitiveness.”

Employer associations and unions in export industries agree on a “mark,” or target for wage growth, which then applies to wage negotiations in other sectors.

Apart from the near-elimination of strikes, the Swedish unions’ role as enforcers of the ruling elite’s decades-long assault on the living standards and rights of working people is revealed in international wage statistics. Comparative data on wages from the OECD show that, in 2020, Sweden’s median wage was \$46,695 in US dollars, nearly \$20,000 lower than the US median wage of \$65,836. The Mediation Institute estimates that wages grew 2.7 percent in 2021, which was a wage cut in real terms since inflation was 4.1 percent throughout the year.

The effective abolition of strikes in Sweden occurs in the context of the government’s criminal herd immunity policy, by which nearly all COVID-19 mitigation measures were ignored. As neighbouring countries entered lockdowns in early 2020, Sweden kept primary and lower secondary schools open and implemented largely voluntary limits on business capacity and the size of social gatherings. As of March 1, 2022, more than 17,000 Swedes have died from COVID-19, a per-capita rate twice as high as Denmark, four times as high as Finland, and five times as high as Norway.

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with long working hours, rising inflation, and pandemic profiteering, contributed to a mass upsurge of discontent and growing militancy among workers around the world. In Sweden, however, corporations and their corporatist partners have succeeded to date in containing this discontent.

In 2021, there were few strike warnings, which typically precede an actual strike. In the most prominent warning, private sector health care workers threatened to strike after their employers sought an agreement more favourable than the public sector agreement. Kommunal, the workers’ union, said at the outset that they would not agree to substandard conditions, but did just that in mediation. The final private sector agreement omitted the retroactive 2020 wage increases and lump sum payments that the public sector agreement contained.

Notably, one of the most significant strikes in the United States in 2021 was at Volvo’s New River Valley Plant in Virginia. Volvo Trucks is a Sweden-based heavy truck manufacturer. The Volvo struggle had massive reverberations throughout the global economy, even inspiring a walkout from Volvo workers in Belgium in

solidarity.

In Sweden, Volvo workers were kept in the dark about this courageous struggle by their so-called “labour representatives.” These pro-corporate organisations sought to isolate the powerful strike and suppress the workers’ demands.

Volvo workers in Virginia formed the Volvo Workers Rank and File Committee entirely independently of the United Autoworkers (UAW) to organise and give political leadership to their strike. The committee gave workers a rallying point in their two-front war against Volvo and the UAW. The committee urged workers to take up an international struggle, publishing statements on the strike calling for workers “to open up new fronts in [Volvo’s] rear,” including in Sweden itself.

Eventually, the strike was isolated by the UAW, with assistance from its international counterparts like Sweden’s IF Metall. In July 2021, the UAW helped management force through a sellout contract after it had previously been rejected by the workforce.

Democratic Party-affiliated groups and pseudo-left organisations in the United States, such as the Democratic Socialists of America, have long-advocated replicating the “Scandinavian model” of so-called social democracy.

This would entail the United States government implementing corporatist arrangements, particularly the expansion of dues-paying membership among the AFL-CIO, UNITE HERE, and other similar labour organisations. Democratic Party politicians such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have also publicly expressed admiration for the so-called “Scandinavian model.”

Democratic President Joe Biden, as part of his efforts to posture left, has made many public statements encouraging the expansion of the corporatist trade unions. What this means in practice is visible in Sweden, with the organised suppression of class struggle and wage payouts to workers, amid record-setting inflation and a pandemic that has claimed tens of thousands of lives, with many more suffering debilitating after-effects from Long COVID.



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