

Introduction

In recent years, the need for historical research on work environmental and work safety issues has been emphasised in the international scholarly debate. In the Australian journal *Labour History: a Journal of Labour and Social History* (no 73, 1997), Michael Quinlan maintains that occupational health and safety has been neglected by historians in most countries. Despite an increasing interest in social history and labour history since the 1960s, problems concerning working conditions and work safety have not been acknowledged as an independent field of research. The subject has been treated sporadically, and the studies undertaken have often been limited and descriptive, lacking theoretical perspective. Although there is a developed occupational health and safety research in contemporary social science, historical studies have seldom made use of this research, its theoretical points of departure, methods and results. Nor have problems concerning working conditions, in contrast to gender and ethnicity aspects, been integrated into the mainstream of historical research. According to Quinlan, however, several interesting studies have in fact been done, not least in North America, but not much has been published or reviewed in international historical journals.

As in other countries, Swedish research in this field is a recent phenomenon and as yet not very extensive. Swedish historians have primarily dealt with occupational and environmental safety problems in the industrial society, and they have mainly studied Swedish conditions. There are, however, also some studies on the dramatic development during the latest decades; some of them done by sociologists and psychologists working with a historical perspective. Generally speaking, the Swedish studies have a theoretical point of departure, but an international perspective is less common. Swedish studies have also rarely been integrated into the international scientific discourse concerning occupational health and safety. With a few exceptions, the results have been published only in Swedish. Hence, Swedish research should be made more internationally visible. This is also the main reason for this anthology's coming into being.

In Sweden, labour history and industrial history have a long tradition. For a long time, however, labour history concerned mainly the organisational development, and the authors were often part of the labour movement. Several large companies, on the other hand, have had their histories written by professional economic-historians. As these studies, however, mainly focused on technical and economic development, the problems concerning work and working conditions were rendered invisible. Notwithstanding, it was primarily the economic historians who started to carry out research on industrial work and working conditions. In the 1970s, *the history of working life* developed as an independent and

multidisciplinary research field, and during the following decade this research had its breakthrough. Now, economic historians, historians, sociologists and ethnologists began to study the history of working life, sometimes in cooperation with each other. Several interdisciplinary research projects and networks were begun, mainly on a Swedish or Nordic basis. The long-term development of work, work processes, the social organisation of work and labour market relations, as well as labour culture and class consciousness, were studied from local examples and analysed, generally from a theoretical power-relation perspective focusing on the conflicting interests between the actors in production, in the labour market and in society as the whole. New perspectives, from beneath, were also applied on the development of labour legislation and public policy concerning working life issues. The professionalisation and bureaucratisation processes in working life have developed into an important field of historical research as well. In the 1980s and 1990s, working life issues have increasingly been studied from a gender perspective, and many Swedish scholars are today part of international networks for research in this area.

The general background to this widening of historical research and the change of perspective was the international political radicalisation that saw the light of day in the late 1960s. As is well known, it emerged as a reaction to the rapid rationalisation and structural transformation in industry and the ensuing social consequences, such as new work environmental risks and increased physical and mental stress. Thus, studies on the development of industrial safety became a natural part of historical research on working life. Several important themes have been dealt with within this occupational health and safety research, which this anthology also shows.

The results of this research have generated great interest also outside the scientific community. Much research has also been supported by Swedish authorities, a fact partly due to the Swedish government's strong commitment to the improvement of the work environment during the 1970s and 1980s. In the early 1970s, the Occupational Health and Safety Fund (*Arbetarskyddsfonden*), later the Work Environment Fund (*Arbetsmiljöfonden*), was established by the Swedish government. This agency has, among other things, provided the means for and financed research on historical working life issues, not least the study the long-term development of working conditions and work safety. In addition, the Swedish labour market organisations and voluntary occupational health and safety organisations have initiated historical studies in this field. Consequently, most books and articles have been aimed at a wider audience and thus have been published in Swedish. What has been lacking is therefore an anthology in English.

The purpose of this book is to present Swedish research on the development of the work environment and work safety in Sweden from a historical, sociological and multidisciplinary point of departure. The aim is thus to introduce Swedish historical research on this topic to an international readership and try to integrate

Swedish research in the international discourse. Furthermore, the purpose is to stimulate new research within the field. The articles have been written within various disciplines and from different theoretical points of departure. A common denominator is the treatment of the work environment and work safety as a multifaceted and complex social issue. The focus is on how the state and the parties in the labour market on the national and local levels have dealt with this issue. The articles also reflect the development of gender relations in working life, the disabled in the labour market, the public discourse on work environmental problems and the meaning of the concept “work environment”.

Taken together, the articles cover a long historical period ranging from the pre-industrial society up till today. The emphasis is however on the period following World War II. From the early 1940s, work safety was of major interest for the organised co-operation between the main parties in the Swedish labour market. During the latest decades of growing internationalisation and the dramatic changes in working life connected with this, the centralised Swedish model for negotiation and co-operation has been replaced by a decentralised and deregulated labour market with individualised labour market relations. Flexible production concepts, lean organisations, new management strategies and company cultures, in their turn followed by a weakening of the trade unions, have significantly altered the conditions for dealing with work environment issues. Parallel to this, the social costs for work injuries, above all stress related occupational illness, have increased substantially. Against this background, there is a need for a historical perspective on today’s development. In this respect as well, this anthology may hopefully be of use.

The Content

In the first article in this book, *Proletarian Writers, the Working Environment and the Struggle for Hegemony*, Bill Sund applies an unusual but most fruitful perspective on the development of the work environment issue. He deals with the Swedish proletarian writers’ criticism of the development of industrial working conditions and working life in general during the period 1930–1975, which was the height of the industrial era in Sweden. Their opponents in the debate were intellectuals, who were often affiliated to the actors in the leading historical power bloc – among them men acting in the service of the trade union movement. How did they respond to these critics, who in fictional form portrayed the shifting faces of power in working life? What effects did the proletarian writers have on the development of occupational safety? According to the proletarian writers, factory work was soulless and degrading. The Taylorist work organisation symbolised this lack of well-being and was therefore strongly attacked by such authors as Folke Fridell and Stig Sjödin. These writers initiated an extensive debate concerning problems of working life that took place both within and out-

side the trade unions around 1950. This debate in turn increased the general awareness of how people experienced their workplaces. However, no decisive changes were made until the 1970s, when the industrial society began to fade away. Even if the will to change existed within the labour movement, for a long time the leading forces felt that it would be unwise to jeopardise the survival of the bloc by entering into fundamental discussions on how to change labour legislation and work organisation.

A traditionally strong theme within historical research on working life has been the development of production, work and work processes, and their social implications. Maths Isacson and Annette Thörnquist both link up with this tradition. In his article, *The Work Environment in the Swedish Iron and Steel Industry during the 20th Century* Isacson gives an overview of the work environment, the health problems and the improvements within this trade over the last hundred years. Throughout the ages, iron and steel has been produced under unhealthy conditions. Despite better equipment, new production processes and active safety measures, today's iron and steelworkers are still exposed to considerable health and accident risks. With the help of available statistics, reports and life histories, Isacson both paints a picture of the ever-changing working conditions and health risks faced by those who worked in the iron and steel industry and suggests some plausible explanations for these conditions and changes.

Annette Thörnquist deals with *The Silicosis Problem in the Swedish Iron and Steel Industry during the 20th Century*. The silicosis crisis that appeared in the international iron and steel industry during the 1930s was part of the mechanisation, rationalisation and social segregation processes that had begun in the foundries and steel works around the turn of the 20th century. The purpose of this article is to discuss how the state and the parties in the Swedish labour market dealt with this problem. How did the problem arise and how was it handled over time? How did it affect the social relations at the plants? Which were the determinant factors and driving forces behind the development of worker's protection against silicosis? From the 1930s and up to the early 1960s, when silicosis was most prevalent in the iron and steel industry, the state's control of the dust situation in the plants was still comparatively weak. Therefore, the problem had to be handled mainly at the company level. The silicosis problem was, however, not only a subject of labour-management conflict. It also caused tension between different groups of workers, who due to their position in the production process had different possibilities to shelter themselves from the dangerous dust. In addition, as efforts to solve the silicosis problem often did not benefit all workers, it could create new work environmental risks and increased tension between workers. Among other things the author discusses the role of the unions in the development of industrial safety. She also discusses why it took so long before the silicosis problem could be successfully dealt with within the framework of the Swedish Model.

Several of the authors in this anthology apply a gender perspective on the historical development of the work environment and work safety. In this way, we are better able to understand the segregated division of labour and its development. In his article, *Changing Sex, Changing Gender*, Bo Persson treats one interesting attempt in the inter-war years by the Swedish Forest Labour Inspectorate to change the construction of gender in order to promote occupational safety and workers' health and well-being. The forest work was exclusively male and the working conditions among those who worked as cutters, sleigh-haulers and log drivers in Swedish forestry were rather miserable: bad housing conditions, poor nutrition and a high level of accidents, including those with a fatal end. The Labour Inspectorate found it hard to improve the working conditions since the work was seasonal and organised in subcontracting systems, the unions were weak and the employers hostile to collective bargaining. The Inspectorate therefore tried to convince the workers to join together and hire a female cook who would live with them in the cabin through the working season and prepare their food. Such an arrangement, the Inspectorate thought, would result in warm and clean cabins, warm and nutritious food, and more time for rest and mending clothes, equipment and tools for the workers. This would further their working capacity, as well as give them more self-esteem, carefulness and orderliness, qualities which would make them work more safely and properly and pay more attention to the dangers in the work. This attempt was successful. The diffusion of joint housekeeping with hired female cooks was great and the condition of the cabins and food became better. The introduction of women in forestry changed the old gender order in the forest region. A more modern one took form, with a female professional housekeeper and a new conscientious male worker.

The special treatment and subjugation of women in working life has been thoroughly dealt with in historical working life research. That the basis for this special treatment partly was due to the safety legislation is shown in Lynn Karlsson's and Annika Åkerblom's respective articles. In the article, *Perspectives on Gendered Labour Legislation in Sweden during the 20th Century*, Lynn Karlsson shows that historically, occupational and environmental safety issues have been the subjects of legislation that has been gendered. Since the beginnings of industrialism, where women can work and what kind of work they can do has been regulated in many different ways. In her article, she deals with two aspects of this problem. First how protective legislation has helped to define women and men as "different" types of workers. The foremost argument for protective legislation for women is that women are "family" – which then men by default are not. Men are breadwinners, women secondary wage earners. This has implications for both sexes. Women's position in the labour market is weakened. At the same time, the awareness of men's working conditions and family responsibilities remains low. Lynn Karlsson explores these issues further by looking specifically at the controversial special night work prohibition for women

workers that was in effect between 1911 and 1962. This is the major piece of legislation regulating women's work in Sweden, and it was an issue of controversy throughout its fifty-year history. To some extent, she contrasts this to attempts to introduce a general night work prohibition that would also protect men.

Annika Åkerblom shows in her article, *Female Factory Inspectorate – Protection for Women in Swedish Working Life 1913–1948*, that the Inspectorate was to improve the social conditions of female employees in general, including women workers as mothers and housekeepers. This meant that in reality the more traditional questions regarding the work environment were linked with the women workers' unpaid reproductive work, such as their responsibilities for housekeeping. The author focuses mainly on the activity directly related to the workplace. She also shows that the Female Factory Inspectorate was a paradoxical institution, which on the one hand aimed at decreasing women's subordination in their working life, but on the other hand reproduced this subordination. The work of the Female Factory Inspectorate is still very topical for women as well as men. In many respects, the Inspectorate was ahead of its time and could predict the problems to come. One concrete example of this is what we today denote as musculo-skeletal disorders, which was then called writer's cramp, the importance of which the female factory inspectors clearly realised.

Few Swedish studies within working life history have dealt with the development of work and working conditions for handicapped workers. In *The Outer Boundaries of Wage Work*, Martha Blomqvist shows that the concept work handicap is a social construction, meaning of which is decided by demands within working life and which changes as the working life changes. For persons with a reduced working capacity, the industrial organisation of work was excluding and meant that their possibilities to earn their own livings gradually diminished. Increased demands for timely adaptation and regularity, increased control and discipline and a standardisation of the work process made it difficult for them to establish an employment relationship. Minimum wages negotiated by the trade unions and agreements on rationalisations reached between employers and trade unions further contributed to their exclusion from work. Since the 1940's, the state has intervened increasingly with subsidised employment for "those of reduced working capacity", and gradually a labour market of its own developed, financed by the state. In the post-industrial society, some of the former regulations in time and space are loosening up. New technology is being introduced. For some disability groups, this means that work conditions become less excluding. Nevertheless, today's reorganisation of work and work organisations runs the risk of contributing again to a harsh exclusion from work in Sweden. This exclusion will, however, to a large extent follow newly created boundaries. New criteria for exclusion can be expected to be shortcomings as regards communica-

tive skills and the capacity for abstract thought, creating demands that the current system of employment subsidies seems unable to meet.

During the 1990s, the increasing workload for employees within the health care sector, most of them women, has been much discussed in the public debate. Gerd Lindgren deals with the changing work organisation within health care and its consequences for the work environment in her article *Alone in the Team?* Today employees have to face new demands and working conditions as a result of the market-oriented and downsized public health care sector in Sweden. New forms of effective co-workership have been enforced, and the earlier organisation based on spontaneously developed level-differentiated cultures, such as the collective cultures among assistant nurses, are withering away. The article presents a sociological analysis of the difference between the old group-oriented work and the new multi-professional team organisation, with a view to how the employees can cope with work overload and unlimited demands. During the 1990s, the work organisation has been transformed from being based on concrete groups to abstract teams. The co-workership and its uniform organisation culture have conquered the work cultures built on shared conditions and qualifications. In the teams, the members solely have artificial role affiliations, and their sociality becomes abstract; thus, a process of burn out, together with feelings of guilt, may develop. What is needed is the support of concrete relations with people who share the daily conditions at work, support of those who are familiar with the problems and with whose help the individual can set the necessary limits in relation to management, colleagues and patients.

In the last article in this book, *The Future of Work Environment Reforms*, Michael Allvin and Gunnar Aronsson argue that “work environment”, as a conceptual framework for reforming working life, may not be readily transferred from the tangible conditions of the industrial context in which it was conceived to the more flexible conditions of modern labour. Since the flexible conditions of work generally presuppose an increased responsibility and some sort of personal commitment on behalf of the worker, isolating the environmental conditions from the personal abilities of the worker is becoming more difficult. As a consequence, the problems of modern labour will only to a limited extent be interpreted as work environment issues and subjected to work environment measures. With the propagation of flexible working conditions, the work environment institutions and their reformatory ambition will be passed by. And, rather than being a practical task of co-ordinating the different protective measures at the workplaces, the work environment reforms will be reduced to an argument within the ideologically motivated rejection of an increasingly polarised labour market.

Uppsala, August 2001
Annette Thörnquist